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'The Language of Liberality in Britain, c. 1760-c.1815'

Abstract: While the word 'liberalism' only appeared in Britain from the 1820s, this article argues that its prehistory must pay attention to the language of 'liberality'. It suggests that until the 1760s to be 'liberal', and to demonstrate 'liberality', were primarily associated with the exercise of charity, but that thereafter they increasingly came to refer to having an open mind: there were frequent appeals to the 'liberal' and 'enlightened' spirit of the times. Those latitudinarians and dissenters pushing for more toleration in the 1770s were particularly attracted to 'liberal' language, and pioneered the idea that 'liberality of sentiment' was a necessary accompaniment to the pluralism thrown up by the right of private judgment. Only from the mid-1790s did anti-Jacobins start to fixate on this terminology, arguing that liberality was insidious because under the cover of a virtue it nurtured the indifference which enabled the enemies of religion to triumph. These arguments did not appeal beyond orthodox circles, but they indicate how established the language of 'liberality' had become – it provides a framework for understanding the reception of 'liberalism' after 1815.

The Language of Liberality in Britain, c. 1760-c. 1815

What did it mean to be 'liberal' before 'liberalism'? Such a question surely depends on a sensitive reconstruction how those terms have been defined. Until recently, however, intellectual historians tended not to be troubled by the fact that the word 'liberalism' was only normalised in Britain from the 1820s.[1] Their energies have instead concentrated on tracing the deeper ancestry of this political concept. It remains relatively common to write about 'liberal' thinkers and the 'liberal' tradition in the early modern period, and John Locke continues to wear the crown of founding father fairly comfortably.[2] There have, however, been two influential lines of criticism of this thinking. First, J.G.A. Pocock's work downplayed – but did not deny – the significance of 'liberal individualism' in favour of an enduring republican tradition, and this spawned a lively literature on 'republicanism vs liberalism' on both sides of the Atlantic.[3] An instance of this debate can be seen in arguments about whether rational dissenters are best described as 'civic humanists' or 'bourgeois

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[1] An exception is J. Leonhard, *Liberalismus: Zur historischen semantic eines europäischen Deutungsmusters* (Munich, 2001); idem, 'From European liberalism to the languages of liberalisms: the semantics of "liberalism" in European comparison', *Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History* 8 (2004), 17-51. See also J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1993); J. Coohill, *Ideas of the Liberal Party: Perceptions, Agendas and Liberal Politics in the House of Commons, 1832-52* (Oxford, 2011).

[2] See D. Bell, 'What is Liberalism?', *Political Theory* 42 (2014), pp. 682-715 for an account of how Locke was inducted into the 'liberal tradition'.

[3] A. Kalyvas and I. Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns*, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 1-5 offers an overview of the literature.

liberals'.[4] Second, there have been those – pre-eminently J.C.D. Clark – who have argued that neither of these 'isms' is very helpful for understanding the period before c. 1800. Instead, Clark stresses the centrality of theological argument for both defenders and opponents of the church-state establishment. The 'republican' paradigm has been over-stated, he claims, while the 'liberal' paradigm is a consequence and not a cause of the revolutionary era, as shown by the emergence of its terminology in the 1810s.[5] Whether persuasive or not, these historiographies reveal some uncertainty about the desirability and plausibility of investigating liberalism before the word existed.

Raymond Geuss has argued that liberalism was 'born looking backward' and has always claimed for itself a much older history than could possibly be convincing. While one can trawl the past for earlier anticipations, the catch will prove very 'meagre' until at least the eighteenth century.[6] The problem of anachronism is therefore a very real one, and helps explain why the 'liberal tradition' in Britain between the 1770s and 1840s has been reconstituted according to changing historical trends. Once, English utilitarianism was at the core, but that has been largely displaced by a mixture of Whig constitutionalism and Scottish economics, which themselves combine uncertainly with a more Radical commitment to democracy. Accordingly, we have a 'liberal tradition' which might include Smith, Burke, Paine, and Bentham – even though only the last of these called himself a liberal, and even

[4] I. Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth Century England America*, Ithaca, 1990; J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History*, Cambridge, 1985; idem, 'Between Gog and Magog: The Republican Thesis and the *Ideologia Americana*', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987), pp. 338-46.

[5] J.C.D. Clark, *English Society 1688-1832*, Cambridge, 1985; idem, *The Language of Liberty 1660-1832: political discourse and social dynamics in the Anglo-American world*, Cambridge, 1994.

[6] R. Geuss, *History and Illusion in Politics*, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 70, 71.

then only late in life. This need not necessarily matter – Geuss advises we should abandon the search for 'true' or 'real' liberalism as a symptom of the philosopher's obsession with clear definitions and consistent theories. Instead, a genealogical approach shows that a word like liberalism has no natural limits to its use and that it evolves in response to the pressures and demands placed upon it. It has always been a collection of vague 'beliefs, commitments, concerns, and projects' and 'contingent conjunctions of ill-defined concepts and half-unarticulated theoretical fragments', which are variously embodied in social movements and institutional forms. Hence, ultimately, the past (and for that matter, the future) of liberalism is whatever enough people agree is in its spirit or continuous with its supposed tradition.[7]

Geuss is primarily concerned with the leading theoretical aspects of liberalism, but his comments invite the historian to think again about its historical evolution. Typically, intellectual histories of liberalism have traced what are presumed to be its core concepts – liberty, toleration, individualism, the limited state, and so on. But such concept histories – as in *Begriffsgeschichte* – have often been criticised for being historically attenuated, with, as James Schmidt notes, a 'rather Olympian distance' from the 'scruffier history of arguments and counter-arguments'.[8] In addition, there can be the problem of anachronism – the concepts associated with 'liberalism' are much older than the term itself, and so the existence of a range of seemingly liberal ideas in the early modern period may not be sufficient grounds for concluding that 'liberalism' was in fact present. This raises the question of the problematic relationship between words and concepts. Quentin Skinner has argued that one can possess a concept – Milton's understanding of originality, for instance – while not having the word, and

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[7] Ibid., pp. 7-8, 80; idem, *Outside Ethics*, Princeton, 2005, p. 13.

[8] J. Schmidt, 'How historical is *Begriffsgeschichte*?', *History of European Ideas* 25 (1999), p. 13. See also the critical discussion in M. Bevir, '*Begriffsgeschichte*', *History and Theory*, 39 (2000), pp. 273-84.

conversely, one can use a word without knowing about the concepts that may be associated with it.[9] Thomas Dixon contends that while concept histories stipulate the meanings attached to a term, and trace the genealogy of those meanings even in the absence of the term, a word history tracks how it was used over time: 'it starts with the coining of the term and traces its development forwards and outwards from there'.[10] That said, Skinner also argues that in practice it is the 'surest sign' that groups have 'self-conscious possession' of a new concept when a corresponding vocabulary develops to allow them to refer to it consistently.[11] It seems likely, therefore, that a word history can show us when contemporaries started to register shifts in the meanings of 'liberal' language, and what they thought it meant; it can enable us to see when and how particular concepts, institutions and histories were attached to it; and, moreover, it might also offer insight into its place within political struggle – what it legitimated and castigated.[12] This is particularly useful for a period when a new terminology was emerging and where there was considerable uncertainty about what it meant, and hence also opportunities to use it in striking ways.

　　Since historians of liberalism tend to be concerned with *political* thought, it is no surprise that they have focused attention on 'liberty' before 'liberalism' – that is to say, they have looked at the conceptual development of ideas of freedom as the means of understanding the prehistory of liberalism. In one sense this is absolutely correct: a political ideology which is intimately associated with liberty must examine how that concept

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[9] Q. Skinner, *Visions of Politics I: Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 159-60.

[10] T. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (Oxford, 2008), p. 38.

[11] Skinner, *Visions*, p. 160.

[12] For one recent example, see Early Modern Research Group, 'Commonwealth: the social, cultural, and conceptual contexts of an early modern keyword', *Historical Journal 54* (2011), 659-87.

evolved.[13] But, wearing a strictly historical hat, such an approach may risk misinterpreting how contemporaries actually understood these words. Perhaps 'liberal' was not closely identified with 'liberty' in the eighteenth century – perhaps it was not even seen primarily in political terms. After all, Richard Price, who had much to say in other contexts about 'liberal', only used the word twice in his *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*.[14] Instead, we need to understand 'liberal' as it was understood at the time. The key argument made here is that it should be seen in terms of its relationship to a hitherto neglected strand of domestic thought – namely 'liberality'. It is suggested that until the 1760s to be 'liberal', and to demonstrate 'liberality', were primarily associated with the exercise of charity rather than having political implications.

The first major turning point occurred between the 1760s and 1780s. Despite the political crises – in America, India and Ireland – that rocked the state, this was a period of optimism about the possibility of change. There was a vogue for 'improvement' and 'reform' across virtually all aspects of social, economic, religious and political life,[15] and the term 'liberal' needs to be seen in this context. To be 'liberal' was to be open minded about new ideas and new reforms, and in that sense it could be embraced irrespective of political affiliation. However, it was latitudinarians and dissenters in their campaigns for greater toleration that invested the term with strong religious associations, and laid the foundations for a further turning point from the mid-1790s. Just as the word 'reform' became sullied in the post-revolutionary climate, so anti-Jacobins also started to fixate on 'liberal' terminology. They questioned why it was so widely esteemed, and challenged the terms of its reference.

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[13] See, for example, Q. Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998).

[14] R. Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (London, 1776), pp. 32, 69.

[15] See P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1992), chs. 9-10.

While this did not dent the broader appeal of the language, it meant that from now on it was much more consciously debated and contested.

I - Defining 'Liberality'

Until the middle of the eighteenth century this terminology was used in a fairly traditional manner. The words 'liberal' and 'liberality' were anglicisations of Latin terms. The definitions provided by the *New Latin-English Dictionary* of 1756 give a good sense of how the originals were understood. The adjective *liberalis* was defined in these terms: '1. Belonging to freedom. 2. Genteel, gentlemanlike, wellbred, becoming gentlemen. 3. Well favoured, handsome, fashionable, becoming. 4. Liberal, open handed, free-hearted, bountiful, free, frank, generous. 5. also exalted, ample.' Meanwhile, *liberalitas* was '1. Generosity, ingenuity. 2. Bounty, liberality, freedom, kindness, or good nature. 3. Fair means, good usage.'[16] Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* shows how closely the definitions of the English words related to their Latin counterparts, and they were not altered in the seven editions published between 1755 and his death in 1784. The word 'liberal' was defined as '1. Not mean; not low in birth; not low in mind. 2. Becoming a gentleman. 3. Munificent; generous; bountiful; not parsimonious' while 'liberality' meant 'munificence; bounty; generosity; generous profusion'.[17] Interestingly, while the Latin term *libertas* is clearly derived from the same root, it was invariably translated as liberty or freedom, and had

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[16] *A New Latin-English Dictionary* London, 1756, unpaginated.

[17] S. Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 2 vols. (London, 1755), II, unpaginated. There was no difference between this and the earlier definition in J. Kersey, *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum* (London, 1715), unpaginated: liberal was 'free, generous, bountiful: Also honourable, or genteel' and liberality was 'bountifulness, generosity'.

a quite distinct set of associations about the absence of constraint for an individual, and the absence of tyranny and slavery for a state. However, an exploration of the meanings of the word 'liberal' begins not with 'liberty' but with 'liberality', which was, in Johnson's mind at least, the closer counterpart.

While Johnson's first two definitions of 'liberal' refer to its social qualities ('not low in birth ... becoming a gentleman') it is only the third that provides a clue as to what the word meant. To be 'liberal' was to demonstrate 'liberality' – it meant being munificent, generous, and bountiful. This core meaning had very deep roots. In the fourth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle considered the virtues appropriate to social and political behaviour, and alongside magnanimity and friendliness, he described liberality or generosity. This was concerned with the giving and the getting of money, and here, as elsewhere, a middle course was recommended, steering a path between prodigality on the one hand, and meanness on the other. Cicero's *De Offices* offered an extended discussion in which liberality was part of the virtue of justice.[18] While honourable, the exercise of liberality should not do harm – it should not be excessive or extravagant, and its objects should be worthy. Cicero also argued that it was not restricted to giving money, and kindness could be showed instead by offering services to the needy, which also had the advantage of exercising men's virtues rather than merely drawing on their wealth. These arguments were common points of reference into the eighteenth century, as evident in textbooks of moral philosophy.[19] John Hartcliffe adopted a broadly Aristotelian perspective in a chapter on 'liberality'.[20] Like many accounts, it devoted

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[18] Cicero, *On Duties*, ed. M.T. Griffin and E.M. Atkins (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 18-20, 83-9.

[19] See P. N. Miller, *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1994); M. Fox, 'Cicero during the enlightenment' in C. Steel, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Cicero* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 318-36.

[20] J. Hartcliffe, *A compleat treatise of moral and intellectual virtues* (London, 1722), pp. 65-82.

most attention to specifying precisely the forms which giving money should take: the ends, the times, the places, as well as the amount bestowed, the quality of the benefit given, and the intention that accompanied it. A more famous and influential textbook was Francis Hutcheson's *Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy*, which categorised liberality as part of the virtue of justice, but noted that as an imperfect obligation it was also closely aligned to charity. The influence of Aristotle and especially Cicero was clear in this work.[21] Similarly, Adam Ferguson included liberality, along with innocence, piety, friendship, gratitude, charity, civility, politeness, as private duties included under the heading of probity or justice. His brief description – 'the free communication of what is ours, to oblige others' – was closely linked to charity, 'the free communication of what is ours, to relieve the distressed'.[22]

This brief discussion should be sufficient to show that 'liberality' was understood as the virtue which concerned the giving and receiving of benefits – primarily money. As such, these classical maxims could easily be aligned with scriptural teachings about charity and benevolence.[23] Admittedly, there were some dissentient voices – the Nonjuror and leading member of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Robert Nelson, argued that while liberality was simply disinterested giving that lacked any obligation, charity was a duty, the 'express Command of GOD' to restore wealth which did not ultimately belong to the donor. Still, he recognised it was the 'Great Errour' of most Christians to confound the two.[24] As it

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[21] F. Hutcheson, *A short introduction to moral philosophy* 2 vols (Glasgow, 1764), I, pp. 72, 154-5.

[22] A. Ferguson, *Institutes of moral philosophy*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 1773), p. 227.

[23] This is certainly apparent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: I.K. Ben-Amos, *The Culture of Giving: Informal Support and Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2008), ch. 7.

[24] R. Nelson, *An Address to Persons of Quality and Estate* (London, 1715), pp. 220, 219. The relationship of charity to distributive justice is examined in J. Schmidt, 'Charity and the Government of the Poor in the English Charity-School Movement, c. 1700-1730', *Journal of British Studies* 49

happens, in the King James Bible, there are only eight separate verses which use 'liberal' or 'liberality', and two of these come from the same chapter of Isaiah. In particular 32:8 – 'The liberal deviseth liberal things, and by liberal things he shall stand' – was the subject of a number of expository sermons. These preachers were well aware of the classical ancestry of the terminology, and references to Aristotle, Cicero and Aquinas can readily be found.[25] They discussed traditional themes such as the distinctions between liberality and magnificence (a key point for Aristotle), the understanding of liberality as an aspect of the cardinal virtue of justice, and the need for careful consideration of the appropriate objects of liberality. A further point was the way this verse was used to show that liberality was effectively a synonym for charity. By 'deviseth liberal things' the importance of extensive philanthropy was urged, and specific objects – for example, relieving the widows and orphans of deceased dissenting ministers – were instanced. Most important, however, was the way preachers dwelt on the character of the 'liberal man'. The Baptist Joseph Stennett stated that such a person was marked by a 'kind, compassionate, benevolent disposition'. He wished well to mankind and expressed tenderness at the sight of human suffering. He was constantly driven to charity, and his motives were of the purest spiritual kind – 'he that is truly *liberal*, is so on higher and nobler principles' than the man who expected some kind of reward in return.[26] For the Presbyterian Samuel Wright, the liberal man had a 'bountiful and good Mind': he was an impartial advocate for what was right and was deeply opposed to hypocrisy and slander. 'The

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(2010), pp. 783-7. See also D.T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1989), ch. 1.

[25] e.g. J. Matthews, *The Energy of Liberality represented and recommended in a sermon* (Worcester, 1712), pp. 13, 15; J. Thomas, *Liberality in Promoting the Trade and Interest of the Publick displayed. A Sermon*, (Chester, 1733), pp. 6-7, 8, 11-13.

[26] J. Stennett, *The Nature and Reward of True Liberality*, (London, 1741), pp. 12, 17.

truly liberal or generous Man cannot enter into such Measures as appear to him a Prejudice to Truth.' The 'churl' mentioned in Isaiah was concerned only with advancing his own narrow interests, or those of party, while the 'Liberal or Bountiful Man is not *partially kind*, but quite benevolent and generous throughout his whole Conduct' – he '*says* and *does* kind things with great *Freedom* and *Pleasure*.'[27] Interestingly, it was not fortune or family or even a 'liberal education' that set one man above another. Instead 'it is the generosity of the mind which truly elevates a man, and renders him worthy of honour; and that he only can be properly said to be *rich*, who is so *in good works*.'[28] For these religious – and often dissenting – writers it was the integrity of religious character that ultimately marked a 'liberal man'.

So, despite a common etymological root, the way 'liberal' language could be used by the eighteenth century was quite diverse. There was 'liberal' as generous and bountiful – this was closely related to classical discussions of the virtue of liberality and could easily be linked to religious arguments about charity. Often there was no obvious tension between the two: a short essay in 1780 quoted Marcus Aurelius and Cicero in order to affirm an essentially Christian message – that liberality was the proper use of those benefits which God gave to us for 'the succour of many', and that – in the tradition set by Aristotle – it should be guided by 'prudence and moderation'. 'He is properly called a liberal man, who, according to his income, giveth freely, when, where, and to whom he should.'[29] But at this point it is worth recalling Johnson's first two definitions – that liberal was neither mean nor low, and that it was appropriate to a gentleman. This social understanding of 'liberal' also had a long history. The Greek term used by Aristotle that is commonly translated as liberality was *eleutheriotēs*,

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[27] S. Wright, *Prosperity and Establishment promised to them that deviseth liberal things* (London, 1737), p. 9, 11.

[28] Stennett, *Nature and Reward*, p. 11. See also pp. 45-6

[29] 'Of Liberality', *Weekly Miscellany* 14 (10 Apr 1780), p. 38.

which literally means 'being in a free condition'. In other words a central aspect of being a free citizen rather than a slave was that one was not constrained by concerns about one's possessions – one could be 'liberal' with them.[30] Hence the virtue of liberality was aligned with the condition of freedom which itself was associated with an elite of citizens as opposed to slaves. This is most fully reflected in the Latin congeries of phrases which have 'liber' as their core – hence in Roman thought to be generous, to be noble and to be free were virtual synonyms. The legacy of this thinking can be seen in the history of the 'liberal arts' – this was traditionally the education most appropriate to forming a citizen (or, later, a gentleman), and into the eighteenth century was contrasted with the so-called 'mechanical' or 'servile' arts. Ferguson captured the point nicely: 'We look for elevation of sentiment, and liberality of mind, among those orders of citizens, who, by their condition, and their fortunes, are relieved from sordid cares and attentions'.[31] However, the content of 'liberal education' and its relevance for the professional classes was increasingly discussed from mid-century, and there was growing recognition that the world of literature and learning was not the exclusive preserve of a gentlemanly elite. Moreover, the injunction to be 'liberal' applied to all Christians, not just a leisured elite.[32] Hence the word carried with it a number of unresolved ambiguities: what was one liberal about? did it just mean providing charitable relief? or did it refer to a broader state of mind? and if so, what then were its objects? and, in addition, were there any social or educational restrictions on who could be liberal?

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[30] See M. Pakaluk, *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics: an Introduction* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 173.

[31] A. Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. D. Forbes, Edinburgh, 1966, p. 186.

[32] e.g. 'that there is no station or rank from the king to the beggar, where there is any propensity to benevolence, that excludes a man from exercising, some time or other, the godlike virtue of LIBERALITY': 'Essay on Liberality', *Westminster Magazine* May 1774, p. 234.

II –The 'Liberal Mind'

From the 1760s the term 'liberal' started to acquire a new range of associations that depended on an expanded understanding of 'generosity'. The more traditional meanings about charity and philanthropy certainly endured, but they were joined by a new stress on the 'liberal' nature of a person's character. Phrases such as 'liberal mind', 'liberal opinions', 'liberal sentiments', and 'liberal principles' were becoming widespread: while infrequently used before 1760, an electronic search of eighteenth-century printed material shows an increase from 133 'hits' in the 1760s, through to 515 in the 1770s, 928 in the 1780s, and 1297 in the 1790s.[33] The significant point is the way that the adjective was now being applied as a way of appraising the 'generous' mind of a person – this had some relationship to the traditional gentlemanly connotations of 'liberal', but it was now not so much class as character that mattered.

The broader context for understanding this growth of 'liberal' language is a marked cultural shift in the period between the 1760s and 80s. Contemporaries were aware they were living through a period of change – the transformation of communication and travel, the acceleration of urbanisation, and the vogue for 'improvement' in agriculture were all clear markers of this. The imperial crisis that became apparent in the aftermath of the Seven Years War raised central questions about the ideas and institutions of rule both abroad and at home, and there was a growing sense that moral and perhaps even political reform was needed throughout society.[34] Indeed, recent historians – pre-eminently Arthur Burns and Joanna Innes – have argued that this period saw the beginnings of the 'age of reform', and have

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[33] Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

[34] P.J. Marshall, *The Making and Unmaking of Empires: Britain, India, and America, c. 1750-1783* (Oxford, 2005); S. Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford, 2000).

shown how the word came into new prominence. While 'reform' had a long ancestry and a broad set of associations – sometimes focused on moral questions, at other times concerned with institutional change – from the 1780s it was increasingly linked to measures of parliamentary reform, and as a result acquired negative connotations in the 1790s.[35] But 'reform' was not the only word affected by the new perception of change.

The growing number of 'liberal' minds was clearly linked to the sense that commentators had that they were living in an 'enlightened' age. While historians have established that the term 'enlightenment' was only coined and developed at the turn of the century, by contrast the word 'enlightened' was extremely common.[36] Sometimes the two words were conjoined: David Williams spoke of the times as a period of 'enlightened and liberal philosophy' while Josiah Tucker wrote of Edward III as having a 'liberal Mind' which was much more 'enlightened' than one might expect for the times in which he lived.[37] Many writers spoke of the 'liberality of the present times'.[38] While, as we shall see, dissenters were

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[35] J. Innes, '"Reform" in English Public Life: the Fortunes of a Word' and A. Burns, 'English "Church Reform" Revisited, 1780-1840' in Burns and Innes, eds., *Rethinking the Age of Reform: Britain 1780-1840* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 71-97, 136-162. See also T.C.W. Blanning and P. Wende, eds., *Reform in Great Britain and Germany, 1750-1850* (Oxford, 1999).

[36] See J. Schmidt, 'Inventing the Enlightenment: Anti-Jacobins, British Hegelians and the *Oxford English Dictionary*', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 64 (2003), 421-43.

[37] D. Williams, *The Philosopher: in Three Conversations, Part III* (London, 1771), p. 54; J. Tucker, *A Treatise Concerning Civil Government, in three parts. Part I* (London, 1781), p. 325.

[38] J. Priestley, *The Conduct to be Observed by Dissenters in order to procure the repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts* (Birmingham, 1789), p. 4; R. Price, *The Evidence for a Future Period of Improvement in the State of Mankind* (London, 1787), p. 33; idem, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (London, 1789), p. 17.

particularly keen on this language, there is not, until the 1790s, any sense of repulsion among other writers. There seemed to be a widespread and uncontentious agreement that liberal sentiments were spreading and that this was a sign of a growing enlightened age. Take Edmund Burke for example: he attacked the government in 1774 for not having 'liberal ideas' in the management of affairs, welcomed the support of men of 'liberal principles' in Bristol in 1775, and in 1780 defended the Rockinghamites for their 'known liberal principles in government, in commerce, in religion, in every thing' as well as commending the 'liberal mind and enlarged understanding' of Charles James Fox.[39] Hence, it seems that the language of 'liberal' was increasingly on people's lips. It was being used in a new way, but drawing on well-established meanings. Partly for that reason, it had a positive appraisive force – few if any yet thought to be called 'liberal' might be a term of abuse.

It should be noted that this terminology was used in very general terms – to be 'liberal' was to have an open or generous mind. It did not so much refer to specific principles, as rather to indicate a style of thinking. That said, it did come to be used frequently in connection with arguments for religious toleration, and dissenters and latitudinarians were particularly attracted to it as a way of articulating and legitimating their aims. There were two periods of intense organisational and political activity. The first from 1770 to 1774 began with a petitioning campaign to loosen the requirement of Anglicans to subscribe to the Thirty Nine Articles, and was followed by an attempt to amend the Toleration Act. Both failed. During the second period of activity from 1787 to 1790 many dissenters wanted to go further. They were no longer content with ironing out the compromises of the existing Toleration Act,

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[39] *Speech of Edmund Burke, Esq. on American Taxation, April 19, 1774* (London, 1775), p. 17; *Mr Edmund Burke's speeches at his arrival at Bristol, and at the conclusion of the poll* London 1775, p. 25; *A Letter from Edmund Burke, Esq. in Vindication of his Conduct, with regard to the affairs of Ireland, addressed to Thomas Burgh* London, 1781, p. 26.

but now advocated a more complete toleration of other religious groups, and also argued for the removal of the legal disabilities for Dissenters to participate in civic and political life. They accordingly pressed for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Despite a narrowing of the majority against this by 1789, the final attempt in 1790 was lost in the reaction to the French Revolution.[40] Nevertheless, during these two decades, there was in public commentary a broad sense of a link between supporting religious reform and having a liberal mind. Rockingham and Shelburne, for instance, were commended for endorsing a 'liberal toleration of religion' – what was key here was that since 'liberal' meant being generous, in this context it meant being generous not about money but about toleration.[41] A close association between 'liberality' and belief was being forged.

But there was a more precise way in which these debates affected the language of liberality, and which would have implications for its future development. A central theme was the way increased toleration was linked to ideas about the inviolability of the conscience. There was fundamental agreement with Locke's arguments in the *Letter on Toleration*, and with Lord Mansfield's 1767 judgment that 'Conscience is not controulable by human laws, nor amenable to human tribunals'.[42] Indeed this theme was repeatedly stressed by numerous writers. To Joseph Fownes the right of thinking for ourselves 'and following the conviction of our judgment in relation to the object of our faith' was the most 'sacred' of inherent rights.

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[40] See R. Barlow, *Citizenship and Conscience: A Study in the Theory and Practice of Religious Toleration in England during the Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia, 1962); G.M. Ditchfield, 'The Subscription Issue in British Parliamentary Politics, 1771-1779', *Parliamentary History* 7 (1988), 45-80; idem, 'The parliamentary struggle over the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, 1787-1790', *English Historical Review* 89 (1974), 551-77.

[41] Cited in Barlow, *Citizenship and Conscience*, pp. 204-5. See also pp. 165, 172, 178, 199, 204.

[42] *The Speech of the Right Honourable Lord Mansfield in the House of Lords*, (Belfast, 1774), p. 21.

Such a right could not be given up on entering society.[43] It was to Philip Furneaux a right 'essential to our nature' which we cannot resign if we wanted to.[44] It was inalienable, wrote Robert Robinson: 'No man, can any more divest himself of private judging than of thinking ... no man ever gave up his right, nor ever can. It is con-natural, deprive him of this, and you deprive him of existence'.[45] As a result it could be no part of the magistrate's brief to control the conscience in matters of religion – and it was, in any case, counter-productive to repress opinion. For Furneaux, a particularly influential advocate of extended toleration, the continuing existence of persecuting statutes was a reproach to the 'boasted freedom and liberality of sentiment of the present age'.[46]

One important area of disagreement, however, was the scope of the right of conscience. Traditionally this was restricted to the sphere of religion. As John Dunn has argued, 'there was no sense whatever in which Locke recognized any such general right to think whatever one happens to think'.[47] Hence even the acceptance of religious toleration still preserved a large space for 'the logic of prudence and utility' to be exercised.[48] It was this which advanced dissenters challenged in the 1770s. The Unitarian Joseph Priestley had in

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[43] J. Fownes, *An Enquiry into the Principles of Toleration* (London, 1772), pp. 15, 17.

[44] P. Furneaux, *An Essay on Toleration* (London, 1773), p. 13.

[45] R. Robinson, *Arcana: or the principles of the late petitioners to Parliament for relief in the matter of subscription* (Cambridge, 1774), p. 46. See G. Walker, ' "Brief Encounter": Robert Robinson and the right to private judgment', *Enlightenment and Dissent* 24 (2008), pp. 54-70.

[46] P. Furneaux, *Letters to the Honourable Mr Justice Blackstone* (London, 1771), p. vi, also p. iv.

[47] J. Dunn, 'The claim to freedom of conscience: freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of worship?', in O.P. Grell, J.I. Israel and N. Tyacke, eds., *From Persecution to Toleration: The Glorious Revolution and Religion in England* (Oxford, 1991), p. 181.

[48] Miller, *Defining the common good*, p. 312.

1768 bemoaned those dissenters who restricted their arguments only to Trinitarians, and who had little to say for Unitarians, let alone Catholics. They pressed for 'the rights of conscience, of private judgment, and of free inquiry' only insofar as they themselves were affected. What was really needed was 'universal toleration'.[49] David Williams agreed, and criticised the relief proposals of 1773 for being too weak – what was required was a plan on 'the most liberal principles'.[50] As Peter Miller has argued, there was shift from the right to judge privately the truth of scripture to the right to 'think and judge freely on all issues'.[51] Hence for Williams writing in 1777 the pursuit of private judgment was 'inalienable' in 'all subjects of knowledge, morality, and religion.'[52]

Nor was this simply an abstract right – it was, instead, a fundamental principle of scientific enquiry and the very basis of an enlightened society. Priestley was the most vocal of such advocates, but he was not alone. Robinson argued that the right of private judgment was central to the progress of all arts and sciences. Once, all of these – 'music, astronomy, physic' – had simply been private opinions, but because they had been allowed to circulate they had spawned further developments and discoveries: 'And what follows? What might be expected; The perfection of science'.[53] Nearly everything Priestley wrote rested on such assumptions. In his *Essay on the First Principles of Government* he explained that opponents of free inquiry always wished to control the press, and that this stymied intellectual enquiry. Why would someone embark on a quest for knowledge if they could not share their findings?

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[49] J. Priestley, *An Essay on the first principles of government* Dublin, 1768, pp. 182-3, 211.

[50] D. Williams, *Essays on public worship, patriotism, and projects of reformation*, London, 1774, p. 60.

[51] Miller, *Defining the common good*, p. 312.

[52] Cited in Barlow, *Citizenship*, p. 294.

[53] Robinson, *Arcana*, pp. 37-8

While 'unbounded free inquiry upon all kinds of subjects' might bring some inconvenience, its restraint was infinitely worse.[54] In a 1785 sermon, he explained himself even more clearly. Just as free inquiry in natural science uncovered the truths of the universe, so too could it unearth truths in the realms of morality, religion, history and politics. The science of man required unlimited freedom of inquiry: anyone who assumed that all such truths had been discovered – whether churchman or dissenter – was in danger of attaching themselves to a system blindly, a position which eventually hardened into bigotry. Moreover, free inquiry was part of the providential plan – it was through the continual exercise and discipline of the understanding that new knowledge was acquired, and the perfection of reason was revealed.

Importantly, Priestley saw nothing to fear from this. Those critics who denounced free inquiry because it threatened Christianity were confused: if such inquiries ultimately showed this religion to be false, that would be no cause for concern, because it was only as truth that Christianity had any appeal in the first place. As it happened, Priestley confidently claimed, no serious believer doubted its truth. Furthermore, the diversity of opinion created by free inquiry was not in itself an endpoint to be feared: he was not defending pluralism for its own sake. Instead, it was only a 'temporary inconvenience' – this was the only way at arriving at the ultimate goal of 'a permanent and useful uniformity'. Any field of knowledge emerged stronger from being exposed to scrutiny, and truth will eventually emerge from such challenges. 'By promoting discussion, therefore, we really accelerate this progress, and are bringing forward the period of *uniformity*; while those who are the enemies of free inquiry, and who hate all controversy, are prolonging that state of suspense and diversity of opinion, which they so much dislike, and pushing back that very uniformity of opinion for which they sigh'. But, to try to force such uniformity was 'narrow and illiberal', and, besides, ultimately

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[54] Priestley, *Essay*, p. 176.

unsuccessful. Hence Priestley's vision of a wide scope of toleration and conscience was a mechanism or 'methodological principle' by which natural and moral truth could be uncovered.[55]

The implications this had for 'liberality' can be clarified by dwelling briefly on the role of a related concept within dissent: candour. As one historian has remarked, this idea became 'almost an idol' for dissenters for whom it meant 'open-mindedness' and 'freedom from prejudice'.[56] Price and Priestley regularly invoked the idea – it was about integrity, a reasonable disposition, a belief that ideas should be subjected to reason, and that this was the only form of legitimate persuasion. It also increasingly meant a commitment to openly avowing the fruits of intellectual enquiry. Its closeness to 'liberality' is evident in Johnson's definition: 'sweetness of temper; purity of mind; openness; ingenuity; kindness'.[57] These concepts provided polite rules for scientific controversy – candour was a 'quality of behaviour that mediates between people' and enabled strangers to engage in civilised conversation about issues over which they might disagree.[58] Liberality was the way that a person should react to the candour of others. The closeness between the two – and the relationship of both to true religion – was nicely brought out by Robinson's 'Essay on Candour and Liberality of Spirit' of 1784 which recommended 'generosity of heart' towards

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[55] J. Priestley, *The Importance and Extent of Free Inquiry in Matters of Religion* (Birmingham, 1785), pp. 5, 7, 14-16, 23, 55, 56. See A. Saunders, 'The State as highwayman: from candour to rights' in K. Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 270.

[56] R. Richey, 'From Puritanism to Unitarianism in England: A Study in Candour', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (1973), 378.

[57] Johnson, *Dictionary*, vol I.

[58] Saunders, 'The State as highwayman', p. 255.

those who did not share our sentiments. This was especially important in matters of religion – each person found a different way to God, and who was to say which was right? Toleration was essential: 'The wisest and best way then is, to render the present life happy by agreeing where we can, and, where we cannot by agreeing, to differ.' This, he stressed, was not to be confused with simple indifference, which was by contrast a 'specious pretence of liberality of sentiment'. Robinson's point was to show how a man of liberal sentiments was truly the religious man – like Christ he was generous and tolerant to those who disagreed with him. This was in sharp contrast to the 'bigots' who adopted a continual tone of 'censure, slander, and persecution' to their intellectual opponents. Christianity did not require any support from such 'illiberality'.[59] This toleration – even embrace – of diversity which marked 'liberality of sentiment' was an integral aspect of the religious and scientific culture of dissenters, and did much to shape the way they approached the broader language associated with the 'liberal mind'.

Richard Price, for instance, was keenly interested in the experiment of separating religion from politics in the new United States of America. He lamented the continual intervention of the state in Europe in 'matters of speculation', and hoped that 'such fetters on reason' would not be established in America. 'In this respect the governments of the United States are liberal to a degree unparalleled.' The constitutions established by the new states were 'liberal beyond all example' but they could have been even 'MORE liberal' if religious

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[59] R. Robinson, *The Necessity of Inculcating Candour and Liberality of Sentiment* (Cambridge, 1800), pp. 4, 7, 5, 6, 10. This essay first appeared in the *Theological Miscellany*, was republished in 1800, and was used to define 'liberality of sentiment' in Charles Buck's influential *Theological Dictionary*, which went through five editions between 1802 and 1851.

freedom had been extended even beyond Christianity.[60] A few years later he noted that toleration was spreading fast, and so it was the task of the 'enlightened part of mankind' to keep open the channels of free communication by ensuring that the religious and political establishment did not overawe them. He looked forward to the impending downfall of all religious hierarchies and believed that the 'liberality of the times has already loosened their foundations'. However much ignorance and intolerance might clamour, the 'liberal temper of the times must overpower them'. Ultimately the increase in knowledge of the world – natural and moral – was bringing more 'enlarged views and liberal sentiments' in matters of religion.[61]

These assumptions were not just restricted to advanced dissenters like Price and Priestley. The movement to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts which developed during the late 1780s was steeped in similar language. In 1787 the Dissenting Deputies issued *An Appeal to the Candor, Magnanimity, and Justice of those in Power* which stated their case that toleration should not be seen as a favour, but as a right – indeed the word itself should no longer be used for it was self-evident that there should be no legal penalties inflicted on citizens because of their religious opinions. It invoked the example of France – there 'all the enlightened sentiments of refined liberality' were starting to be felt, and since England prided itself on being more 'illumined' than the rest of mankind, it ought also to be 'just and liberal'. Surely it would not wish to lose its status as an 'enlightened nation' or be accused of lacking 'judgment and liberality'?[62] A few weeks later these arguments were set out more fully

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[60] R. Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* (London, 1784), pp. 20, 48. See also his comments on Pennsylvania in *The General Introduction and Supplement to the Two Tracts on Civil Liberty* London, 1788), p. xvii.

[61] Price, *Evidence*, pp. 21, 22, 31-2, 32-3, 53.

[62]*An Appeal to the Candor, Magnanimity, and Justice of those in Power*, London, 1787, pp. 7-9.

another pamphlet which made abundant use of 'liberal' language. Again, it played on a fear of losing in the game of international progressivism: the nation was losing out to countries 'more liberal than us'. The age of persecution was over, and legislation must keep up with 'the enlightened and liberal spirit of the times'. Unsurprisingly, dissenters themselves claimed a good deal of credit for such progress: they had helped 'liberalize' even the established church, because their institutions, 'being formed in a more enlightened age, are more liberal'.[63] Such assumptions, couched in such language, were widespread.

The French Revolution entrenched this language further. Initially it was characterised as a stepping stone on the path to liberality, but even once this belief was abandoned, the wider attachment to 'liberal principles' persisted. Charles Stanhope, Benjamin Bousfield, and James Mackintosh all commended the National Assembly for being 'liberal', and Helen Maria Williams saw 'liberal opinions of philosophy, liberty, and truth' bursting forth like leaves in spring and looked forward to a time when all the nations of Europe would follow 'the liberal system which France has adopted'.[64] In all these cases, reformers were simply commending France for its embrace of the spirit of liberality, and for being generous, free, and frank in its proceedings. As the 1790s developed – even as the revolution soured, and repression accelerated – reformers continued to endorse 'liberal principles' and 'liberal opinions'. These phrases were essentially a shorthand for civil and religious liberty, and they did not point to any specific measures. The *Monthly Review* in 1792 noted that it had been

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[63] *The Right of the Protestant Dissenters to a Compleat Toleration, Asserted* London, 1787, pp. 170, 207, 185; J. Priestley, *A Letter to the Right Honourable William Pitt* (London, 1787), p. 32.

[64] C. Stanhope, *A Letter from Earl Stanhope to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (Dublin, 1790), p. 14; B. Bousfield, *Observations on the Right Honourable Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* (London, 1791), p. 5; J. Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, London 1791, p. 37; H. M. Williams, *Letters written in France* (London, 1790), p. 46; idem, *Letters from France*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1794), I, p. 214.

accused of the 'sin' of holding 'latitudinarian or liberal principles', while in 1796 the *Monthly Magazine* committed itself to 'the propagation of those liberal principles respecting some of the most important concerns of mankind' which other periodicals and publications had abandoned.[65] The most common use of 'liberal' was now in the context of free inquiry. Thomas Paine noted that the Reformation had ushered in the revival of the sciences and with it 'liberality, their natural associate' also appeared. John Thelwall believed the encouragement of 'free and liberal enquiry' was the basis of improvement, and even conceded that pre-revolutionary France had something 'liberal' about it because of the diffusion of knowledge, cultivation of science, and improvement of literature.[66] Hence, while 'liberal' language saturated reformed publications, the word was used adjectivally to commend viewpoints: it did not denote what would now be called an ideology but rather a broader mindset.

This is borne out when considering two of the more substantial discussions of liberality in this period, those by John Aikin in 1793 and William Burdon in 1801. Aikin, a central literary figure of the decade, was a fervent supporter of the rights of dissenters, and commended them for their spirit of free inquiry. He argued that this 'very essence' of their nature had enabled them to become 'the *Philosophers of the Christian Religion*'.[67] In his *Letters from a Father to his Son*, he explored the inter-related themes of 'prejudice, bigotry, candour, and liberality'. Bigotry, he explained, was a form of unreasoning prejudice combined with malignity while candour, by contrast, was a 'disposition to form a fair and impartial judgment on opinions and actions'. In the case of liberality, while it appeared at

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[65] *Monthly Review* 8 (Jun 1792), p. 231; *Monthly Magazine* 1 (Feb 1796), preface, unpaginated.

[66] T. Paine, *The Age of Reason: Part the First* London, 1794, p. 34; J. Thelwall, *The Tribune* 3 vols (London, 1795), I, p. 149; III, p. 193.

[67] J. Aikin, *An Address to the Dissidents of England on their late defeat* (London, 1790), pp. 28-9.

times to have an 'indeterminate' meaning, it referred to 'that generous expansion of mind which enables it to look beyond all petty distinctions of party and system, and in the estimate of men and things, to rise superior to narrow prejudices'. The stress here on disdain for all forms of narrow attachment is striking, and fits also with the cosmopolitanism that Aikin praised. 'The liberal man ... is fond of largely extending the relation of fellow-citizenship, and loves to admit all mankind to a fraternal share of the regard of their common Parent'. As with Robinson, Aikin insisted that this stance should not be confused with being indifferent to principles, although he understood why approaching a subject with a 'liberal spirit' might appear so to some observers. In any event, the important contrast was with those bigots – he largely had intolerant churchmen in mind – who could not recognise that in allotting 'different portions of light and knowledge' to mankind, God 'has certainly not expected from them uniformity of belief and practice'.[68] Once again, as with Priestley and Robinson, the spirit of free inquiry and liberality of sentiment was central to the search for truth.

Burdon was a Fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge until 1796, and familiar with the works of Robinson, Aikin, Priestley and especially Godwin. He, too, was an enthusiastic defender of the right of private judgment.[69] The first essay in *Materials for Thinking* – which went through five editions between 1801 and 1820 – focused on 'Liberality of Sentiment'. The argument was a bold defence of intellectual independence: freedom of opinion was justified on its own terms, and also because of the consequences that flowed from it. Since no one could force others to be convinced it seemed pointless to try, whether by violence and punishment, or even through the subtler influences of authority, wealth, and the passions. He asked: 'Why should any man dislike another merely because he thinks differently from him'.

[68] J. Aikin, *Letters from a Father to his Son, on Various Topics* (London, 1793), pp. 91, 94-5, 96-7.

[69] See W. Burdon, *Various Thoughts on Politics, Morality, and Literature* (Newcastle, 1800), pp. 6-10.

In his relations with others 'the liberal man' could advise but never dictate, because he respected their judgment even when he strongly disagreed with them. What made someone liberal was not what 'we think or believe, but what we think of others'. Again, as with Aikin and Robinson, this was not to be confused with indifference – true liberality of sentiment was a principled exercise of reason which was not unduly swayed by the partial sentiments of others. The liberal man 'will never be a party man', nor will he allow his opinions to be biased by local or national attachments; indeed an excessive love of country was deeply offensive. By contrast, illiberality of sentiment was driven by all the vicious passions of the self: ambition, envy, pride, malice, hatred, jealousy, revenge and avarice. As with Priestley, Burdon argued that liberality did not hinder but helped the ultimate progress of truth, which was uniform and consistent. But it could not be directed by force. Indeed, while in important matters similarity of opinion was ultimately desirable, in other matters diversity was a positive good. Burdon argued that liberality was crucial because it 'softens all the harshness arising from difference of opinion' and enables 'the Jew, the Christian, and the Infidel' to live in peace with each other'. It would bring great benefits if it were extended to all aspects of religion and politics. Hence the liberality which leaves 'every man to think and act as he pleases, is the best remedy for difference of opinion, and the surest promoter of harmony among all parties'.[70]

The significance of Burdon's essay is not that its ideas were radically new, for they were part and parcel of the advanced wing of dissent. Rather, it is in the way that the language of liberality was being attached to them. Whereas liberality had once meant almost solely the largesse that could be offered to the poor, now it also referred to a domain of

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[70] W. Burdon, *Materials for Thinking* 2 vols (London, 1820), I, pp. 3-4, 6, 15, 19, 20, 9, 1, 5. The essay was cited by the Carlilean John Clark at his trial for blasphemy in 1824: *The Republican* 16 July 1824, pp. 45-6.

questions about the rights of the conscience, the pursuit of truth, and the extensive toleration needed in order to hold together the plurality of views that resulted. Of course, these ideas existed – and were debated – without necessarily requiring use of 'liberal' language.[71] What is being charted is the way a word with certain earlier conceptual associations began – admittedly in some circles more than others – to acquire new connotations about debate and discussion. 'Liberal opinions' were not yet linked to specific positions on what would come to be a 'political spectrum' – a wide variety of moderates, reformers, and radicals could happily endorse 'liberal opinions' without providing much specificity about what they were committed to. Similarly, liberality was not so much a set idea as a willingness to consider all opinions on their merits wherever they came from, and wherever they might lead. In that respect the 'liberal man' could not easily be a partisan for any creed, country or group. And it was in this respect that 'liberality' would start to become suspect in the 1790s.

III – Criticising 'Liberality'

The language of liberality was a strongly positive language. In both classical and religious literature it was clearly a virtue. Even as the terminology evolved in the 1770s and 80s, the idea of having a 'liberal mind' was deeply and widely shared – it was linked both to older, gentlemanly associations, and to newer, enlightened convictions. In other words it would have been very hard for anyone to attack someone for being 'liberal'. Nevertheless changes towards progressive language do start to become evident in the 1790s. In the case of 'reform', Innes has shown how its opponents tried to link it to the more suspect terminology of 'innovation' and spoke of 'pretended reform', causing advocates of reform to devise

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[71] E.g. Godwin's *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, 1793 did not have recourse to liberal language.

strategies to resist this – some defined parliamentary reform in restorative terms, and many articulated a distinction between 'radical' and 'moderate' reform.[72] The term 'liberal' also came under sustained scrutiny. Unsurprisingly, it has been suggested that Burke's reaction to the French Revolution marks the beginning of that process.[73] In fact, this is misleading in two ways. First, Burke's aversion to liberal language is inconclusive. Even in the *Reflections* he praised the 'idea of a liberal descent' as part of the spirit of freedom, the need for assemblies to be composed of propertied men who can 'enlarge and liberalize the understanding', and criticised the French because 'their liberty is not liberal'. There was, however, a striking footnote which did register some emerging unease about the associations of this language. An English dissenter who happened to be in Paris had written to Price about how the French had abolished the 'proud *distinctions*' between king and nobles, and that he was everywhere hearing ideas that resembled 'the most *enlightened and liberal amongst the English*'. Burke commented that the statement was not true of England as a whole, but that if it was meant to confine 'the terms *enlightened and liberal* to one set of men' – meaning dissenters – then perhaps it was. Elsewhere, he noted in passing that 'four technical terms' had become a sort of incantation: 'Philosophy, Light, Liberality, the Rights of Men'.[74] Here Burke had a sense that liberality was becoming a radical slogan, but this suggestion was not followed up and his subsequent publications give little sense of further concern about the language of liberality.

The second way in which this argument is misleading is that it tends to encourage focus on the reaction to the Revolution, whereas in fact – as Burke's concern with dissenters suggests – we need to look closer to home to detect the beginnings of a shift in usage. While the Revolution did become a factor from the mid 1790s, it was the obsession with dissent and

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[72] Innes, '"Reform" in English Public Life', pp. 89-91.

[73] Leonhard, *Liberalismus*, pp. xx-xx

[74] E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1790), pp. xx, xx.

reform that was to be key even to that. Earlier, however, warning signs were evident in the writings of high churchmen irked by the campaign to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts. Samuel Horsley, Bishop of St Davids, noted in 1789 that there was much talk of 'the freedom and liberality of thinking and enquiry', and, the following year, criticised Anglican clerics who aped the criticisms of authority made by dissenters because they were 'ambitious of the fame of *Liberality of sentiment* (for under that specious name, a profane indifference is made to pass for an accomplishment)'.[75] George Horne, Bishop of Norwich, had in 1786 shown the way that opponents of the Trinity adopted the epithets 'LIBERAL' and 'RATIONAL', and in 1790 he opposed the renewal of the repeal campaign, commenting that the Revolution had been added as 'a reinforcement of *reasons for laying all things open*' and that opponents were reproached with 'falling so far short of the *liberality of sentiment* displayed in that kingdom'.[76] Such comments reveal the close connection between liberality and dissent, and the attempt, on the part of high church critics, to use the Revolution to discredit both.

But it was not just Anglicans who were concerned about this language. Andrew Fuller was an orthodox Baptist minister and, from 1792, Secretary to the newly formed Baptist Missionary Society. While opposed to 'hyper-Calvinism', his polemical writings were fixated with rooting out Unitarian heterodoxy and Painite infidelity. In *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Compared*, he argued that most dissenters were sound Trinitarians, but that

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[75] S. Horsley, *Tracts in Controversy with Dr Priestley upon the historical question of the belief of the first ages in our Lord's Divinity* (Gloucester, 1789), p. 282; *The Charge of Samuel, Lord Bishop of St David's, to the clergy of his diocese* (Gloucester, 1791), p. 37.

[76] G. Horne, *The Duty of Contending for the Faith. A Sermon* (Oxford, 1786), p. 17; G. Horne, *Observations on the case of the Protestant Dissenters with reference to the Corporation and Test Acts* (Oxford, 1790), p. 19. See N. Aston, 'Horne and Heterodoxy: the defence of Anglican beliefs in the late enlightenment', *English Historical Review* 108 (1993), 895-919.

Socinianism was inflaming animosity to dissent as a whole. It so elevated the '*social virtues*'

that duty to God seemed to fall by the wayside. 'Under the specious name of *liberality of*

sentiment they dispense with that part of the will of God which requires every thought to be

in subjection to the obedience of Christ; and under those of *candor and charity* excuse those

who fall under the divine censure.' Much of what passed for candour and benevolence was

simply indifference to all religion, and he feared that increasingly 'what has been called a

liberality of mind' was an excuse to ignore the growth of deism and infidelity. Indeed, pre-

empting what would become a familiar theme among critics, he thought that beguiling

phrases such as '*liberality, candor* and *charity*' were disguises by which irreligion preyed on

men of speculative minds, and flattered their worldly pride. While Priestley – the chief target

– might claim that unbelief would disappear as truth progressed, Fuller countered that a

general disregard for religion always paved the way for deism. Instead, one should be

prepared boldly – but fairly and generously – to expose error when one found it without being

accused of bigotry.[77]

Up to the mid 1790s, then, there were increasing signs of concern about the growing

appeal to liberality. Critics tended to believe it was closely linked to advanced dissent, and

worried that its extreme toleration encouraged religious indifference and threatened the

ultimate triumph of irreligion. At this point, however, the terms of the debate were narrowly

confined to religious discourse – but a change started to become evident from the middle of

the decade as part of the 'anti-Jacobin' reaction. There was a growing sense that a sect of

'modern philosophers' – led by Godwin – were united in trying to tear down the whole

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[77] A. Fuller, *The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems Examined and Compared* (Market Harborough,

1793), pp. 69, 202, 315. See also the debate between J. Kentish, *The Moral Tendency of the Genuine*

Christian Doctrine (London, 1796), pp. 29-31 and A. Fuller, *Socinianism Indefensible, on the ground*

of its moral tendency (London, 1797), pp. 99-101.

moral, social and political fabric. The author of the *Pursuits of Literature* described the

Enquiry Concerning Political Justice as 'the great code of improved modern ethics, morality

and legislation' which in its cold-blooded dismissal of all honourable feelings was typical of

'the new sect'.[78] This characterisation made it possible to roll together a wide variety of

intellectuals into a single school. This was given an enormous boost with the development of

the idea of 'Jacobin conspiracy'. The Abbé Barruel's *Memoirs Illustrating the History of*

Jacobinism was translated into English in 1797 and 1798, and other works of the same years

– such as John Robison's *Proofs of a Conspiracy against all the Religions and Governments*

of Europe and William Playfair's *History of Jacobinism* – contributed to the paranoia.[79] No

doubt this was amplified further by the financial panics, domestic unrest, and invasion scares

of these years. The main point taken from these works was that what had happened in France

could happen in Britain, and that infidel ideology was the common cause. As *The Pursuits of*

Literature put it, Barruel had shown that 'LITERATURE has the power to kill' especially

when conducted by 'an exterminating philosophy'.[80] The *British Critic*, similarly, thought it

'blindness and stupidity' to continue to ignore the enemies of all religion and all

government.[81] In such a febrile environment the rights of the conscience were bound to look

suspect. Burdon went to the heart of the matter when he insisted that the aim of the author of

The Pursuits of Literature was to 'destroy the right of private judgment' and to 'prevent the

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[78] [T. Mathias], *The Pursuits of Literature, or What you Will. Part the Third*, (London, 1796), pp. 24-5.

[79] See A. Hofman, 'Opinion, Illusion, and the Illusion of Opinion: Barruel's Theory of Conspiracy', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27 (1993), 27-60.

[80] [T. Mathias], *The Pursuits of Literature: a satirical poem in dialogue, part the fourth and last* (London, 1797), p. 100.

[81] *British Critic* 10 (Aug. 1797), p. 157.

propagation of religious enquiry' by boosting the powers of church and state – 'such is his liberality'.[82]

The *Anti-Jacobin Magazine* was established in the immediate wake of reviews of Barruel's volumes, and appeared in weekly instalments from November 1797 to July 1798. Its stated aim was to prevent Britain from following the calamitous path of France. It disdained the 'wild' and 'unshackled' freedom of thought which rejected habit, wisdom, and restraint in favour of judging everything by its own light. That liberality and candour were an integral part of the problem is clear from this confession: 'that we have not so far gotten the better of the influence of long habits and early education, not so far imbibed that spirit of liberal indifference, of diffused and comprehensive philanthropy, which distinguishes the candid character of the present age'. The ironic tone signalled that the author was casting himself as a lone prophet, warning against the prevailing culture. The danger of liberality now was not just religious but also national indifference. 'It may be thought a narrow and illiberal distinction – but We avow ourselves to be *partial* to the COUNTRY *in which we live*. ... We are *prejudiced* in favour of *her* Establishments, civil and religious'. The aim of the 'new and liberal system of ETHICS' was to loosen the social order and to unravel the reciprocal ties and bonds that held it together by proposing the supremacy of the rights of 'unconnected' individuals.[83] Here, 'liberal' language was now being connected to the radical social and political ideology of the Revolution. Under the name of 'Jacobinism' this ideology was contemptuous of all religious orthodoxy, and used the idea of free inquiry to smuggle in theories which would bring about the end of the existing order.

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[82] W. Burdon, *An Examination of the Merits and Tendency of the Pursuits of Literature* (Newcastle, 1799), pp. 51, 85.

[83] *Prospectus of the Anti-Jacobin; or Weekly Examiner* London, 1797, p. [1, 2]

Over the following months these arguments were frequently restated, and a series of binary opposites elaborated – the chief of which was 'religion' versus 'philosophy'. While there were some positive uses of 'liberality' – the 'liberality and patriotism' of English soldiers – the enduring feeling was that the terminology had now become contestable.[84] The paper wrote of 'Republican Liberality', and contrasted the slogans of philosophy, equality, and liberality with freedom, happiness, dignity, peace and honour.[85] Many of these slogans were the subject of the well-known poem by George Canning which singled out philanthropy, sensibility, justice, and, interestingly, candour. 'Much may be said on both sides' – it is the voice of candour, a 'drivelling Virtue' which softened our commitments and attachments because it was 'Convinc'd that *all* men's motives are the same' and that 'Black no *so* black; *nor* WHITE *so very* white'. Canning preferred 'the manly Foe | Bold I can meet, - perhaps may turn his blow | But of all plagues, good Heav'n, thy wrath can send, | Save, save, oh! save me from the *Candid's Friend!*'.[86] Candour was weak and vacillating when compared with the strength of fixed principles. While Canning did not mention liberality, this attack on candour was directed at the same target – the idea that a sincere search for truth required listening carefully to opponents was in reality little more than a disguise for indifference and a precursor for infidelity.

One author not at all reticent in attacking liberality was John Bowles. A contributor to the *Anti-Jacobin*, he had been a fervent loyalist pamphleteer and hard-line opponent of France throughout the decade.[87] He was also particularly concerned about moral and religious

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[84] *Anti-Jacobin; or Weekly Examiner*, 12 Feb 1798, p. 466.

[85] Ibid., 18 Dec. 1797, p. 187; 14 May 1798, p. 299.

[86] Ibid., 9 July 1798, pp. 629, 630.

[87] See E. Vincent, '"The real grounds of the present war": John Bowles and the French Revolutionary Wars, 1792-1802', *History* 78 (1993), 393-420.

degeneration, but while he persistently denounced this it was only from early 1797 that he linked it to 'liberal' language.[88] Writing in March he warned that letting the Whigs into office would unleash licentious manners and profligate passions. The public needed to be roused from its docility, the cause of which was 'a false and mistaken liberality, the spawn of the frivolous philosophy of the age, which renders us unwilling to impose the least restraint upon the language and actions of men'.[89] In the guise of 'Cato' he developed these themes in the *Anti-Jacobin*. Noting a recent speech by Sheridan which had commended the 'increased amiability' and 'conciliating' feelings of the times, Bowles instead argued that it was a period of infidelity and profligacy, caused by indifference and selfishness. This in turn was partially caused by a long period of prosperity and luxury which had eased the need for exertion and vigour, and set the stage for the Jacobinism which was now insinuating itself into national life under the names of philosophy, philanthropy, and freedom. The well-disposed must waken themselves and recognise that an 'absurd and ruinous affectation of liberality' should not replace 'manly decision and energy'. 'Then let us hear no more', he pleaded, 'at such a time, of amiability and gentleness – of candour, liberality, and moderation – of conciliating, mild, and generous feelings. Such qualities are now not virtue, but vices. They tend only to stifle energy, to frustrate exertion, and to accelerate ruin.'[90] Here, for the first time, was a clear and bold statement that liberality was a negative force – what had once been acclaimed as a virtue was in reality a vice.

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[88] For earlier and conventional uses see J. Bowles, *The Real Grounds of the Present War with France*, London, 1793, p. 5, 55; idem, *Two Letters Addressed to a British Merchant*, London, 1796, pp. 29, 68.

[89] J. Bowles, *A Third Letter to a British Merchant*, London, 1797, p. 104.

[90] *Anti-Jacobin; or Weekly Examiner*, 2 July 1798, pp. 565, 569, 571, 572.

These anti-Jacobin anxieties were to continue long after the weekly paper ceased publication. A new periodical – the *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* – was founded in 1798 to continue the exposure, joining the *British Critic* and *Orthodox Churchman's Magazines* as the voices of religious and political orthodoxy. Bowles himself continued to reiterate and amplify these thoughts in various pamphlets.[91] He was also instrumental in founding the Society for the Suppression of Vice in 1802 as an agent of the 'vigour' for which he clamoured.[92] A new generation of high churchmen also joined the attack. Charles Daubeny's *Guide to the Church* was first published in 1798, and bemoaned the 'general indifference for all religious opinions' that passed under the name of '*liberality of sentiment*'. In the 1804 edition he commented on the falsely named 'present liberal mode of thinking', noted that the desire of not giving offence was a '*misnomer*' called liberality, and again attacked 'liberality of sentiment' as typical of 'this enlightened age'.[93] Similarly, William Van Mildert, future Bishop of Durham, was so inspired by the writings of Barruel and Robison that he devoted his Boyle lectures to attacking rational Christians, as well as Paine and Godwin, for assisting the rise of Jacobinism, and to exposing 'liberality of sentiment and freedom of religious opinion' as false and fashionable ideas.[94]

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[91] J. Bowles, *Reflections on the Political and Moral State of Society at the Close of the Eighteenth Century* London, 1800, pp. 137-8; idem, *A View of the Moral State of Society*, London, 1805, pp. 37-9.

[92] M.J.D. Roberts, 'The Society for the Suppression of Vice and its early critics', *Historical Journal* 26 (1983), 159-76.

[93] C. Daubeny, *A Guide to the Church in Several Discourses*, London, 1798, p. 160, and second edition, London, 1804, pp. xliv, xlvii, 419.

[94] W. Van Mildert, *An Historical View of the Rise and Progress of Infidelity*, fourth edn, 2 vols (London, 1831), I, p. 500. See also p. 168, II, pp. 432-3, 461. These lectures were given between 1802

The attack on liberality was not confined to such isolated publications. The *British Critic*, and especially the *Anti-Jacobin Review* hammered the point home month after month such that it became a virtual article of faith among the clerical classes. The seriousness they attached to this concept was signalled very early on. The *Monthly Review* had praised the translations of biblical texts by the Roman Catholic scholar Alexander Geddes as something to be hailed 'by every liberal advocate for Revealed Religion: for the age of enlightened criticism is at hand'.[95] The *Anti-Jacobin Review* angrily responded that 'the epithet *liberal* is frequently misapplied'. While liberality in its true form was an estimable quality, the 'pioneers of sedition' were deliberately corrupting language by describing ideas hostile to church and state as 'liberal'. This was nothing new: the reviewer referred to Cato's speech from Sallust's *Catilline Conspiracy* which argued that the degeneracy of language always preceded the ruin of a state, and which had cited abuse of terms such as liberality and moderation as instances of this. In the same way, the reviewer continued, the modern enemies of politics and religion were degrading honourable qualities into '*cant terms*'. 'This process which begins with daubing out some vice in false colours, terminates in discountenancing that virtue, the name of which is so abused. For when a virtue has only a polluted name to be called by, one of its attractions, and that of no little general power, becomes negative; and all that many of the best men dare to do, is, to exercise it timidly and by stealth.'[96] This was a classic instance of the form of rhetoric known as paradiastole, and the *Anti-Jacobin* took

and 1805, and went through five editions between 1806 and 1839. See E.A. Varley, *The Last of the Prince Bishop's: William Van Mildert and the High Church movement of the early nineteenth century*, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 39-45.

[95] *Monthly Review* 25 (Apr 1798), p. 405.

[96] *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 1 (Oct 1798), pp. 440-1, 443.

every available opportunity to expose the innovative meanings given to terms such as 'liberality' and 'moderation' in an effort to restore to them their original sense.[97]

One strategy was simply to highlight these new meanings, as in a sermon which dwelt on the differences between 'genuine' and 'spurious' liberality. The former was loved by all, and its proper exercise was the cause of many blessings, but 'when under the plea of candor and liberality' licence was demanded to spread subversive principles, to attack pure religion, and to encourage conspiracies, and all this was to be 'tolerated without control under pretence of liberality', then it was high time to expose it for what it was.[98] Another strategy was satire. At the end of 1803 the *Anti-Jacobin Review* published a short essay called 'A modest proposal for conciliation of all parties, political, moral, and religious, on the broad basis of *liberality of sentiment*'.[99] This proposed that in these enlightened times establishing liberality of sentiment was the perfect solution to political and religious strife. Not, however, the 'almost exploded' notion of Christian charity which sought unanimity through inculcating true principles, but through the 'banishing of all invidious distinctions arising from *principles* of whatever kind'. The problem was that people had convictions – that adultery was wrong, that monarchy was right, and so on – but if instead they abandoned them, then everyone could live happily together. If 'moderation and candour' were given free reign, it would soon be realised that 'nothing is so amiable or praise-worthy as to leave every man in the unmolested possession of his opinions, and to suffer him to act upon them, without any

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[97] See Q. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Cambridge, 1996, ch. 4.

[98] L. Richmond, *A Sermon, preached in the parish church of Brading, in the Isle of Wight* (Newport, 1799), p. 37, endorsed in *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 6 (June 1800), pp. 194-5.

[99] This may have been inspired by Burdon's *Materials for Thinking*, the subject of a hostile review in the *British Critic* 22 (Oct 1803), p. 450 which defined modern 'liberality of sentiment' as 'an entire indifference to Religion'.

restraint, whatever may be their tendency!'[100] Ironically, this was largely a restatement of Burdon's very arguments, but the *Anti-Jacobin Review* felt that they were almost sufficiently parodic on their own terms.

Many more examples could be given – again and again it was stressed that a new meaning had been given to 'liberality'. To distinguish this from its traditional and laudable counterpart, adjectives were attached to it – 'specious', 'false', 'canting', 'pretended', 'supposed', 'modern', and so on. Often the words were italicised for ironic effect: 'the *liberal* Christian', '*liberal minded* Professors', '*liberal minded divines*' and so on.[101] These writers also tended to draw attention, again ironically, to 'these *most* enlightened days': they spoke of 'new fangled creeds of *liberality*'; 'the "age" of unbounded liberality', 'that magic phrase *liberality of mind*'; the 'distemper' of 'false liberality', and many other variations.[102] At times, those who were identified as proponents of this new philosophy were described as a group. The '*liberalists* ... like modern philanthropists, are confined to no country', stated the *Anti-Jacobin*, which craved pardon for coining a new word when it denounced the 'modern science of *liberalism*'.[103] The writer here was being playfully neologistic, and there is no sense that this very early use of 'liberalism' gained traction. The important point is that the *Review* felt a need for such nouns – they provided a convenient label under which to subsume a whole range of actually rather different antagonists from militant infidels to rational dissenters to cautious latitudinarians.

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[100] *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 16 (Dec 1803), pp. 431-2, 433-4.

[101] *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 3 (July 1799), p. 340; 4 (Sept 1799), p. viii; 19 (Oct 1804), p. 208.

[102] Ibid., 10 (Dec 1801), p. 519; 2 (Mar 1799), p. 339; 11 (Jan 1802), p. 87; 12 (July 1802), p. 316; *British Critic* (Mar 1805), p. 325

[103] *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 16 (Nov 1803), p. 297; 14 (Apr 1803), p. 399.

This concern about the growth of liberality also shaped the more practical controversies that bothered the 'anti-Jacobins'. The 'liberal' writers at the *Monthly Review* were lambasted for their 'illiberal' attack on Lord Redesdale's *Thoughts on the Catholic Question* – a work which defended the constitution while they, 'under the mask of *liberality*', were trying to subvert it. Similarly, those who congratulated Henry Grattan for his moderation and liberality were criticised, and told to stand up for 'right principles', stated on 'true and solid grounds', and expressed in 'firm, manly, and decisive language'.[104] Unsurprisingly, the education of the poor was a particularly contentious issue, with advocates of ecumenism accused of peddling 'mistaken notions of liberality'.[105] Bowles was hostile to Whitbread's proposed reforms in 1807, again complaining about the corrupted state of morals in 'this *liberal* age'.[106] With the formation of the Royal Lancastrian Society in 1810, orthodox critics went into overdrive. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* mocked its exclusion of religious creeds: 'Such is the *liberality* of the age, that it is deemed insolent and illiberal to enquire into a man's religious principles and moral conduct'.[107] Herbert Marsh campaigned actively to ensure that the national religion was central to any system of education, and complained about the seductive power of an 'apparent *liberality*' that was deluding the people into a belief that teaching Anglicanism was unnecessary.[108] The *Anti-Jacobin* was incensed that politicians were not doing enough to support the establishment because they were actuated by the 'dangerous spirit of *liberality*'. In former times, the author went on, our ancestors boldly

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[104] Ibid., 28 (Oct 1807), p. 203; 34 (Dec 1809), pp. 406, 407.

[105] *British Critic* (Dec 1805), p. 701.

[106] J. Bowles, *Education of the Lower Orders: A Second Letter to Samuel Whitbread* (London, 1808), p. 59. See also pp. 16, 20, 43, 82-3.

[107] *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 38 (Jan 1811), p. 91

[108] H. Marsh, *The National Religion the Foundation of National Education* (London, 1811), pp. 9, 23.

and openly defended the principles they believed in – 'There was no metaphysical refinement in those days; *truth* was the standard round which churchmen rallied; the bastard *liberality* was then unborn.'[109] What these orthodox critics particularly disliked was how extensive the vogue for liberality had become – 'the liberal philanthropists and free-thinkers', they believed, were increasingly shaping the terms of debate and the outcome of legislation. The fate of Sidmouth's Bill to restrict itinerancy in 1811 was an indication of the latter, while the altered meaning of toleration suggested the former. Anyone who now defended the established order risked being tarred with the abusive terminology of bigotry, intolerance and persecution.[110]

In many respects the anti-Jacobins were right – the appeal to the language of liberality was widespread at the opening of the nineteenth century. This was very evident in dissenting publications such as the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review*, and helps explain why dissenters have frequently been described as 'liberals' even though it was only from the 1820s that the word began to be used as a noun. But this language was not restricted to them – the Whig *Edinburgh Review* endorsed 'liberal opinions' and 'liberal views', and even the Tory *Quarterly Review* seemed unperturbed by these terms. In other words, appeals to 'liberal sentiments' remained widespread and common at the start of the nineteenth century, although as yet the phrase remained frustratingly vague – it had no stipulative definition. The exception to this widespread endorsement was the orthodox religious press, and even within this sphere it was largely high churchmen who were hypersensitive. The fact that they could not yet rouse wider opposition to this language did not prevent them from trying, and there

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[109] *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* 41 (Jan 1812), p. 53.

[110] Ibid., 42 (Sept 1812), p. 22, and 10-28 generally.

was no cessation of their attacks on the 'modern school of liberality'. Even as new sects of 'liberals' were emerging in Spain and France in the 1810s, the anti-Jacobins continued the task of exposing the '*liberalists*' in Britain who they believed had come to prominence in the 1780s and 90s.

How do word histories help us to understand the broader history of liberalism? One advantage is that they force the historian to attend to the terminology used by historical actors. While this is hardly a new insight in the history of ideas, nevertheless liberalism has perhaps attracted more than its fair share of anachronistic histories, where the concerns of contemporaries are shuffled aside in favour of tracing traditions and concepts more congenial to the present. The recent excavations of 'reform', 'democracy', and 'aristocracy' in this period show the immense value of listening carefully to what was said, and the same is true of 'liberality'.[111] In the case of Britain, it has been argued that this language was being politicised domestically even before the arrival of new meanings from Europe in the 1820s, and that this occurred because of its evolution between the 1760s and 80s from an older – and largely apolitical – concern with monetary generosity to an insistence that a tolerant mind was open to 'liberal opinions' and 'liberal sentiments'. The politicisation occurred because this language was eagerly propounded by dissenters who proselytised for the right of private judgment, and were unconcerned by the inevitable pluralism this threw up. All this became deeply suspect as the intellectual fallout of the French Revolution became apparent, and it also helps explain the intimate association between liberal terminology and questions of religion, truth, and toleration.

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[111] In addition to the items indicated in notes x and x, see A. Goodrich, 'Understanding a language of "aristocracy", 1700-1850', *Historical Journal* 56 (2013), pp. 369-98.

In addition, word histories may also contribute to comparative understanding. This has been an important area of growth in recent intellectual history: the pleas for global and international 'turns' help to move the subject away from traditional fixations with the nation-state and to show how ideas travelled across, and were transformed by, trans-national exchange.[112] The recent efflorescence of interest in the relationship between liberalism and empire has been a striking instance of this, although these studies have not tended to concern themselves with liberal language in the manner explored here.[113] But what about exchange across rather than within linguistic barriers? Certainly, Britain was by no means intellectually closed in this period – newspapers and periodicals reported extensively on developments across the channel and, similarly, travellers to Britain were keenly interested in what they observed.[114] The scope for word histories is amply borne out in an ongoing comparative project on the development of 'democracy' led by Joanna Innes and Mark Philp. They chart the changing references of the term, but they also situate it within appropriate institutional

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[112] See S. Moyn and A. Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013) and D. Armitage, 'The International Turn in Intellectual History' in his *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge, 2013), pp. 17-32.

[113] See especially J. Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: the Rise of Liberal Imperialism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), C. Bayly, *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire* (Cambridge, 2012), and D. Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2016). See also Uday Singh. Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999) and A. Sartori, *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History* (Berkeley, 2014).

[114] Innes and Burns, 'Introduction' to Burns and Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform*, pp. 11-16; P. Langford, 'The English as Reformers: Foreign Visitors' Impressions, 1750-1850' in Blanning and Wende, *Reform*, pp. 101-20.

contexts. This means both recognising when there was a 'shared democratic heritage' across the European world, but also 'that there can be no one history of the re-imagining of democracy … such a history must take the form of a series of adjacent (though interconnecting) local histories'.[115] This may mean that different national and even provincial cultures generated their own peculiarities. Philp has criticised the 'linguistic turn' for decoupling the meanings of terms from their local sites of performance, suggesting that while there certainly needs to be investigation of discursive interaction and exchange beyond the nation-state, this should not preclude recognition of the situated creation of meanings beneath it.[116] Jonathan Sperber, for instance, has argued that Britain and continental Europe – at least before 1830 – inhabited 'two quite different political universes' when it came to reform.[117] The chief socio-economic ambition on the continent was the emancipation of agriculture, and politically the focus was on abolishing the rights and privileges of the *ancien régime* and eventually – so 'liberals' and 'constitutionalists' hoped – establishing some form of parliamentary representation. This had all largely been achieved in Britain – indeed, in the latter case, the agenda had moved onto making parliament much more representative. Unlike 'reform' and 'democracy', however, there has as yet been comparatively little attention to the wider discursive development of 'liberal' language, so we do not know whether its use in

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[115] J. Innes and M. Philp, eds., *Re-imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland 1750-1860* (Oxford, 2013), p. 7. They are now engaged in two successor projects: Re-imagining Democracy in the Mediterranean 1750-1860' and 'Re-imagining Democracy: the Wider Project – Latin America and the Caribbean'

[116] M. Philp, 'Time to Talk' in his *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution 1789-1815* (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 287-311.

[117] J. Sperber, 'Reforms, Movements for Reform, and Possibilities of Reform: Comparing Britain and Continental Europe' in Burns and Innes, *Rethinking the Age of Reform*, p. 313.

Britain was typical or not. In any case, by the time Napoleon was defeated, even though the language of 'liberalism' had not yet been articulated, the language of 'liberality' was widely understood and provided the lens through which it would be read.