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CHAPTER FOUR

Modernism as Constitutional Conservatism

The modernization of the ideally disinterested constitution might be traced as far back as the Charter Act 1853 (India) and the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms (1854), as steps were taken towards examination in the disciplined and universal (but as yet unnamed) canon of vernacular greats. The social need for a new canon had been taken up by prominent supporters of the aesthetic elite including Matthew Arnold,¹ as the old aristocracy was joined in government by a literary-cultural aristocracy. The Education (Scotland) Act of 1872 would reconfirm this standardization across the British Union,² after which the canon was increasingly pressed in secondary education, initially via a strengthening network of English public schools.³ Official or institutionalized stories of English Literature – the semi-formalized canon – became common around the turn of the century, and the English Association was founded in 1906, but a reinforcement came as the war revealed the extent of illiteracy among the rank and file of soldiers (an illiteracy upon which, as I have suggested, English in fact paradoxically depended), the subject of some hand-wringing after the war, and a sign that questions of citizenship and literacy could no longer be put off.⁴ This would feed into the disciplining and disciplinary moment which later came to be known as the 1910s–20s ‘rise of English’ – but which might be seen less as the beginning of something new than as a modernist reinvention of the organic, anti-formal, whig constitutional tradition.

Modernism may seem a strange description for this, but modernism is an increasingly contested term. Once taken to connote formal experiment by a few privileged figures within a set period, it has more recently been recontextualized in terms of a range of local contexts around the world, particularly via World Literature.⁵ In the Anglo-British situation it might also be understood as a bolstering of a natural ‘national’ sovereignty in a diminished empire – indeed, a redress of the thorough contextualization of British modernism as a fetishizing of formal innovation in a few authors within a strong canon is probably overdue. It is true that the formally experimental aspect of British modernism had an easy target in the poetic Georgianism concerned with trauma, nostalgia, and convalescence during

and after the First World War, but a binding principle of the canonical literary movements of the time was a conservatism relative to the constitution.

This can be seen from the late 1910s in terms of the many challenges to the integrity of the 'British national', taking in not only imperial rivalries, including the ongoing Irish Home Rule crisis (and the Easter 1916 uprisings, as well as the trials of partial independence from 1922), but also the influence of the Soviet Revolution on growing and unpredictable collectives from 1917, particularly in that most dangerous area for popular sovereignty, Glasgow, and the related labour disturbances which would reach through to the General Strike of 1926, itself partly triggered by unpredictable credit markets after the war. The era of diminished empire and increasingly explicit class conflict reaches a new British ground, after much difficulty, with the strengthening of the state against a new fear of invasion in 1940–2, a moment which echoes the threat of French invasion in the mid-1790s. If the new settlement of 1940–2 does indeed represent a new whiggish moment of regrouping, then British modernism, especially within the newly named discipline of English, had been working towards this moment throughout the inter-war years.

This renewed whig conservatism in British literary modernism should also be placed in proximity to growing related authorities, specifically the BBC, the state's most significant cultural organ throughout the twentieth century, and the economic orthodoxy which was often described as Keynesian. In both financial and cultural-canonical senses, these organs helped return the state to its Hanoverian role as a manager of debt. The 1914–20 years saw a previously unimaginable national debt come to seem normal, recalling the post-1688 'credit revolution'.⁶ The spectre of collectivity also forced a return to 'the land' – to a contestation of the Romantic definition of soil beyond the alienation forced by commodity relations – albeit a land compromised by the troubled imagery of war.⁷ In sovereignty terms, the road to the post-1942 technocracy was paved by modernist 'clerical' whig conservatives: F. R. Leavis, whose influence on canonical standards remained into the mid-century; John Reith, whose BBC softened the fall of empire by reinventing a language of commonwealth impartiality; and J. M. Keynes, whose state-capitalism fed into the totalizing parliamentary orthodoxy of consensus.

One effect of the First World War, of course, was to concentrate a sense of participation in British-national effort and so in a centralized state,

particularly after Lloyd George's measures of 1917.⁸ Modern wartime political economy demanded a strengthened relationship between working collectives and conservatives, leading to an attrition of laissez-faire or what George Dangerfield later described as the *Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935).⁹ A new concentration and grasping of labour, galvanized by the war, also had to be accounted for by a modernized mission for the cultural continuation of franchise. And if the lack of basic literacy among British soldiers was in part the product of the long history of political suspicion of reading, once needed to protect Britain's constitutional informality, it now had to be recast as a problem of modern logistics.¹⁰ The linguistic standardization demanded by the Newbolt Report of 1921 (*The Teaching of English in England*) called for a renewed role for an English Literature made rigorous and objective – or radically disinterested – and now with a discrete institutional place, able to feed out teachers to schools to manage literary excess.¹¹ Right through to the early welfare state, the Leavisism which resulted from this would exert a strong and often casually accepted influence.

In these inter-war years George Sampson was particularly forthright about the need to use the new university subject as a weapon against working-class enfranchisement and the dangers of the massed poor who might take literacy into their own hands (a class who now constituted, as Chris Baldick tellingly paraphrases it, an enemy within).¹² F. R. Leavis's stress on the sensibilities of the great authors revised the line-up, but more importantly strengthened the structure, of the literary canon – repeating the anti-formalist adjustment-and-strengthening which characterized the constitution. Leavis's story of the individuals who make up the canon culminates in those few contemporary figures he sees as stressing continuity, localist organicism, and immutable value – particularly the D. H. Lawrence who reinvents Burkean time as an instinctual form of 'Life', a mode of being vital precisely because it is not dependent on history. Lawrence's sense of immanent timeless tradition makes him particularly valuable for Leavis's reinvention of the progressive conservatism which has survived from Burke all the way through the 'divine state' metaphysics of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold, and Dicey. So Lawrence

can truly say that what he writes must be from the depth of his religious experience, [and] that makes him, in my opinion, so much more truly

creative as a technical inventor, an innovator, a master of language, than James Joyce . . . [in Joyce] there is no organic principle determining, informing and controlling the vital whole, the elaborate analogical structure, the extraordinary variety of technical devices, the attempts at an exhaustive rendering of consciousness.¹³

Again this gives the lie to the idea of modernism as a set of formal experiments: there is certainly something being made anew here, but in the ahistorical tradition of British constitutional circularity, central to the reinvention is a reinvigorated version of an organic wholeness which is always already there. Innovation then belongs in the service of a protean vitalism standing in opposition to the decadent formal play of writers like Joyce who lack a structure of tradition within which to arrange the elements of a whole consciousness, as seen in the disciplining of emotion in late Romanticism. Leavis's Lawrence certainly signals the revival of a native guardian elite, and of an ideal Tudor tradition, as more visibly do T. S. Eliot and Leavis's own ideal English local community.

And just as importantly, Leavis influentially presses into the centre of the strengthened modern canon both the Austen who had saved the 'English' estate from Romantic excesses, and the George Eliot who had followed Wordsworth and Mill to carry on the most fundamental characteristic of modern organic English, its realist moral seriousness.¹⁴ If this lineage is most fully depicted in Leavis's later *The Great Tradition* (1948), it is established as early as 1932 in the pages of *Scrutiny*, the journal which the Leavises (F. R. and Q. D.) would come to dominate, and which would eventually itself become important in Cambridge thought. F. R. Leavis would also later declare an interest in neo-Romantic continuant liberal conservatism by editing an edition of Mill's essays on Bentham and Coleridge – judging their worth relative to the syllabus of the Cambridge English Tripos,¹⁵ and especially in terms of their influence on George Eliot.¹⁶

Scrutiny as a whole clearly marks a return to and re-strengthening of the anti-Jacobin norms which had become part of the literary life of the middle class between the 1780s and the 1830s, and led to the anti-sceptical realist novel. As Scott, Austen, and Coleridge had domesticated Burkean Romanticism within the literary mainstream, keeping the baser passions in check, so Leavis, along with Denys Thompson and others, would in turn domesticate the settled permanence seen in Dicey for a new turbulent age.

If there was a general, post-Newbolt admission that mass illiteracy was no longer desirable or practical (though Q. D. Leavis makes a good attempt at arguing for it in 1932),¹⁷ nevertheless high culture (culture appealing to the increasingly discrete middle class), or literature's metaphysics, was now charged with the constitutional responsibility to manage an emerging mass culture through strident new assertions of canonical value. Again the Tudor Eden resettled by the 1688 Restoration becomes central as an antidote to mechanization and the threat of social systems – and so also for Virginia Woolf in *The Common Reader* (1925), at times sounding much like *Scrutiny* (by which she was nevertheless not favoured), the Elizabethan age was an age of fire in comparison with the present pallid age of newspaper.¹⁸ In 1932 Woolf would also argue for the kind of self-control in reading which can only come from education by an aesthetically elite clerisy.¹⁹ And as the title of Woolf's collections suggests, her primer-type critical essays are at base an Arnoldian attempt to capture the key ground of the middle class, working to extend the aesthetic constitution much as did the Leavises and T. S. Eliot.²⁰

One of the most aggressive early reinventions of English for an aesthetic elite is F. R. Leavis's *For Continuity* (1933), a book which draws on the instinctual conception of canonicity expounded in the first number of *Scrutiny*, before Leavis himself had joined.²¹ The continuity of *For Continuity* is ideally artisanal in the organic sense of the ideal village, pre-capitalist, and rejecting a class-based solution by rejecting the technologies which have led to it. The mechanization which is seen to have given rise to social classes must for Leavis become the target of the new aesthetic elite able to foreclose the need for class conflict. In what might now be read as an antique form of radical conservatism, for Leavis the world of the machine should be disavowed: capitalism and socialism imply a cultural levelling, and levelling means a destruction of heritage to leave a morass of decadent lived-experience.

Only a critical guardian class can stave off the governance implications of the cultural dumbing-down threatened by the machine and the mass, a situation which finds its ideal in the pre-Civil War era before the dissociation of language – helping explain the Tudor fetish passed on from organicist 'English' writers like Hunt and Cobbett to these modernists, who also draw in a Seeleyan 'national' consciousness which extends throughout a wide Anglosphere.²² In this desire, Leavisism would have a more lasting success than many working in English today would like to admit, 'codifying' the

discipline in a way which would secure for it a global cachet within a declining empire. T. S. Eliot's reading of the restoration moreover has much in common with the Seeleyan periodization of the spread of Anglophone informal constitution, and is even more forthright in its pre-Civil War longings.

However, the tone of loss in the modernist reinvention of English is hard to overcome: despite what the Leavises and Eliot agree is a crisis of the organic community in the enclosures of common land (not, of course, seen as a problem of capitalism as such, but of a greater need for an Arnoldian tempering of commercialism), both are bound to uphold, to 'restore', a parliamentary establishment whose upper chamber is defined by inheritance and whose franchise is carefully limited. This is a contradictory, if influential, form of 'English nationalism' which in fact favours British parliament and *blocks* the national, leaving a problem which would only begin to be unpicked in English at the end of the twentieth century and relative to the process of devolution.²³ As the ideal of aesthetic disinterestedness is staged anew in I. A. Richards,²⁴ Eliot, the Leavises, and *Scrutiny*, the vigour of the literary elite is seen to have to work with Anglo-British landed parliamentary elites to preserve value. Of course, this is only part of the story of British modernism: the relatively genteel tendencies of *Scrutiny* were only the more acceptable side of a wider radical-conservative tendency which would go as far as the cutting edge of the avant-garde magazine *Blast!* (1914), in which Wyndham Lewis provocatively re-invents England as the best location for a re-disciplining of cultural standards – because, by implication, it is the space most dedicated to unaccountable ahistorical time, the Greenwich Meridian, Greenwich, against the woolly egalitarian talk endemic in constitutional Europe.²⁵

In any case, the combination of meritocratic minority and 'traditional' establishment or heritage, the new liberal conservatism, was highly successful in reinvigorating English Literature as a shared culture ideally allowing for mobility beyond social class.²⁶ The aspirational power of the new university discipline would filter through schoolteachers, lecturers, and cultural managers to various extents until at least the 1970s, often placing aspirants in competition for enfranchisement. Leavis's *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (1930) speaks vigorously for a disinterested elite aesthetic minority which would later be reinvented as a 'meritocracy' – as a cure for the damage done to language by the machine, again addressing itself to the aspiring middle-class managers of literacy. The problem for this elite

is the apparent rise of the 'wrong' kind of temporal alienation, the alienation of the assembly line rather than the right and proper alienation of Burkean time, a loyalty to a 'past' which exists outside experience. There is certainly a wilful localism to this, and a commitment to a kind of ongoing hermeneutic investigation.²⁷ But the result is a new aesthetic order which protects and bolsters the ahistorical constitution: among others, Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), F. R. Leavis's *For Continuity* (1933), F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson's *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930), and in its own way T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943), all take on the need to limit and individualize literacy, imagined in its worst form as pulp fiction and advertising, and to confirm that the real enemy is the material experience of the present.

Many of the essays of Eliot's *The Sacred Wood* (1920) amplify Burkean temporality to locate tradition quite candidly outside of experienced time altogether.²⁸ Most iconically in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), Eliot stresses that there is no point at which literary value can be seen to originate – either it must, in Burkean terms, be a timeless restoration, or in Wordsworthian terms, must arise from an idea of nature which ideally and paradoxically refuses to admit of any alienation. Unalienated nature – and by extension, realism as the instinctual registration of nature – remains the power behind the renewal of the traditional community which offers an escape from the evils of modern life. Eliot's later widely anthologized call here is quite explicitly for a return to a form of tradition which is *not* the past, but an ideal of the past existing outside of the past – making it one of the clearest expressions of an aesthetics of Burkean time during the whole modern period of English.²⁹

Eliot's later 'Burnt Norton' (1936) presents an even stronger and more nuanced version of Burkean time, dramatizing a struggle with temporal immanence, the way the present can never be recovered because it floods the consciousness with *too much* experience to be viewed with any meaningful perspective, making it inaccessible. In 'Burnt Norton', direct experience must be submitted to ordering principles which can only be glimpsed in moments of epiphany – which for Coleridge had been arranged in a lay religion, and for Eliot were arranged in the figure of the Anglican Christ of the established church. Eliot's Christ then becomes the backdrop to the timeless customs of the English village, and the ruralism of writers like George Sturt from the 1900s onwards.³⁰ The elimination of the experience of the present, and

of all the pasts which may possibly once have been a present, can certainly be understood as an aggressive reassertion of Burke's instinctual value as a principle of civilization. However, the dangers of economies of scale have now been apprehended, as have the proletarian delusions of mass franchise and the everyday attrition being visited on Western society as a whole.

And so, the silent fulcrum of Burkean time spreading experience into an impossible continuity becomes Eliot's 'still point of the turning world': history is meaningless without access to time's 'outside', which is visible in traces in poetic form, but which themselves never add up to the possibility of a socially active writing.³¹ The eternal is immanent in the flux of actions (like Lawrence's 'Life' in Leavis), but it is pointless to look at the flux for meaning precisely because it is active, as had been Arnold's 'rush and roar' of events.³² So in 'Burnt Norton', although people do in a sense 'inhabit' time, experience can never be measured according to any temporality which is historical,³³ or which for Eliot is lost to the 'metalled ways' of the timepiece.³⁴ The self-deception in trying to register historical experience is imaged in 'Burnt Norton' in the need to counter the song of the tempting thrush, whose decadent stimulus is a distraction from the authority of the undeceiving bird offering moments of privileged epiphany, even if these moments only serve to remind us that experience is outside of historical time.³⁵ The twittering of the thrush in Eliot, like the twittering of mass advertising in the Leavises, can then only gesture towards a more mature and moral management of the linguistic order.

Of course, there is a degree of ambivalence in the Leavises' and Eliot's Diceyan calls for perpetual permanence: relentlessly modernist in terms of their adaptation, they are also, like the discipline itself, incurably elegiac over the loss of organic order – an order which has always already been lost, just as within Britain England itself had always already been lost.³⁶ Their fascination with the registration of the everyday as they understand it is picked up by Jed Esty's persuasive link to the later, left-leaning, and more determinedly 'everyday' movement surrounding figures like Richard Hoggart and E. P. Thompson.³⁷ On some level both periods' 'Englishes' show the marks of what would later be called Cultural Studies – albeit more wilfully in the latter case. Esty argues therefore that the two periods form part of a longer and ambivalent movement of English: '[m]odernism's nativist and culturalist turn represents the first part of the decolonizing dialectic in which the tropes and modes of colonial knowledge came home to roost at the end of empire'.³⁸

The organicism revived in the 1920s–30s can indeed be seen as provoking a popular ‘national’ thinking and a return to a concern with a ‘way of life’ to be taken up and politically reworked later by Cultural Studies, for Esty a ‘second-order universalism based on English cultural integrity’.³⁹ This model is persuasive, but not without problems, not least that Esty’s ‘shrinking’ England imagines a constitutionally solid political body through all the phases of empire, whereas what characterizes the informal constitution is precisely its need, using phantasmic images of England in empire, to cohere across incommensurate sovereignty forms. We can certainly see, though, the constitutional conservative modernism trailblazed by Leavis, Eliot, Woolf, and others in the 1920s and ’30s, as being taken up by state cultural agencies after 1940–2, a quasi-revolution which would in turn be seen as at best incomplete, at worst duplicitous, by constitutional sceptics from the end of the 1950s (particularly the New Left), after which the difficulty of overturning the established franchise was sometimes perceived as something like a neo-Jacobin problem.⁴⁰

To the Leavises’ version of modernization should be added the closely related, and in many ways more powerful, disciplining force of John Reith’s BBC.⁴¹ From its inception in 1922, a year after the Newbolt Report, the BBC acted as an agent of ‘discursive’ state censorship or literacy management, working along similar informal lines of allegiance, understood in terms of continuity and exemplary language, and investing in a patrician and Seeleyan vision of the cultural value of the Anglosphere. Traditionally taking many of its staff from Arts and Humanities departments of ancient universities, from the outset the BBC’s outlook was realist in Leavis’s sense of being empiricist and moral, and relied on a version of the transparent, disinterested ideal running through Coleridge and Arnold. Always open to technological modification, the BBC’s method nevertheless still belongs in this tradition of the clerisy, or, in the post-1942 term which made the progressive elite generally acceptable, the meritocracy.

The Corporation’s unifying role can still be seen clearly today on prime-time slots in the predominance of phrases like ‘throughout the nation’ and ‘the UK as a nation’, to a degree quite disproportionate to how people experience their own nationality.⁴² And this is underscored in the way that, as in the public of public transport, the organization still often claims public status despite all evidence to the contrary – charging for use and making an opt-out de facto compulsory, adopting aggressive outsourced tactics for collection, and

holding on to an entirely unaccountable managerial structure. For almost a century the Corporation has in various forms represented the perennial needs of constitutional culture, as well promoting Standard English broadly in line with the ideas of Leavisite modernism. (It would later partially forgive 'regional accents' – under the sign of multiculturalism – as acceptable deviations from an assumed default, repeating for a mass audience the sociolinguistic fantasy that the ideal dialect is without place, just as the British national is somehow beyond nationalism.)

Growing rapidly from 1922, the BBC began simultaneous broadcasting the following year, a move readable in terms of Benedict Anderson's celebrated description of national unification through the shared time of mass media – mere newspapers, in Anderson's account – to become one of the world's great state-unifying media, and the UK's most important hedge against popular sovereignty.⁴³ The service covered most of the mainland by the end of the decade, and by the late 1930s was describing the need to reinvent the empire as an extended family, as a 'multinational', monarchical, Commonwealth 'community of British listeners', via numerous anthropological documentations of empire including *Edges of the World*, *Gordon of Khartoum*, *Responsibilities of Empire*, *Lines on the Map*, and *Brush Up Your Empire*, as well as Empire Day celebrations and Royal anniversaries, and a stream of Edwardian dramatic adaptations.⁴⁴ The constitutional order here remained one of centrifugal cultural dissipation counterweighed by centralization – and, as in English Literature, a largely imaginary England was still the default centre for the BBC's global family: on Empire Day 1924, for example, England fulsomely summoned Scotland, Ireland, and Wales to join the celebrations (much as it did during the first sequences of the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympics, near the Greenwich Meridian). In the same year, the Wembley Empire Exhibition speeches and the direct address of King George V solidified the understanding between monarch-in-parliament and state broadcaster.⁴⁵

The BBC's strong ideological alignment of 'nation', monarch, empire, and commonwealth therefore itself had an important modernizing function in bolstering the whig constitution. Set up in the same year as the Irish Free State, the Corporation stressed a combination of discrete ethno-nationalities for constituent regions *plus* enthusiastic participation in commonwealth – meaning that it could incorporate and foreclose not only Diceyan worries over Ireland but also Home Rule claims which sometimes shaded into the

Marxist, and which linked to the Miners' and 1926 General Strikes in the Scottish Literary Renaissance of 1925–35 (and thus the argument, still sometimes used, that Scottish nationalism is a product of British civility).⁴⁶ Moreover, the premonition of war throughout the late 1930s accelerated the BBC's constitutional mission:⁴⁷ for a few years before 1940, popular fiction and film explicitly recalled the 1790s in imagining foreign attacks, this time on London from the air, most famously in dramatization of the vision of H. G. Wells, but also in the kind of propaganda film in which the BBC took an increasing stake.⁴⁸

For example the J. B. Priestley-narrated *Britain at Bay* (1940) put protection of the homeland to the soundtrack of a patriotic poetic canon,⁴⁹ and Priestley's series of BBC talks *Postscripts* (1940) stressed the natural ascendancy of a way of life and described its armed forces as having a 'conscious, social purpose'.⁵⁰ English Literature heritage was also pressed into service by the Crown Film Unit, with Humphrey Jennings's *Words for Battle* (1941) tracing a line through Browning and Kipling.⁵¹ And the Ministry of Information which ran state propaganda operations was headed by Reith from January to May 1940, and as Robert Mackay has shown, took on wide powers to regulate information.⁵² The unifying role of the Blitz has been much debated since, but the familiar spectre of illiberal European 'systems' certainly proved a springboard for the BBC to rapidly expand and to represent a modernized version of anti-formal homeliness.⁵³ Parliamentary sovereignty could then by cultural means become more durable than the governments of European systems (and it is hard not to call to terms the Diceyan contrast with French *droit administratif* in this case).⁵⁴ The propaganda function of the BBC's remaking of the public was widely understood by the establishment: in 1937 in 'Art and the State', Keynes argues that the Corporation should remain centralized and under direct control of the government, rather than becoming an optional or subscription service.⁵⁵ (Though as it happens, in the same Clough William-Ellis-edited collection, H. J. Massingham, an important but largely forgotten radical ecologist, draws on Richard Tawney to note that the enclosures, with their reduced conception of enfranchisement and their binding to British governance through the upper chamber, ruined the nation as they made the empire:⁵⁶ '[i]t was the landowner, not the villager, who profited by the Napoleonic wars'.)⁵⁷

So although the early motifs of monarch, empire, and ideal-universal England had already represented an obvious form of 'homing' for the BBC,

the Second World War further ‘domesticated’ its role, as well as allowing for amalgamation with organizations including the British Council, set up in 1934.⁵⁸ Originally addressing those affected by the Blitz, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts was merged with the Board of Education in 1942, to be chaired by the Keynes who had seen the BBC as a key organ of state.⁵⁹ During the war the BBC doubled its staff, and, as Jörn Weingärtner has argued, the consolidation of arts agencies made a modern unified British cultural policy possible.⁶⁰ The early BBC’s somewhat Arnoldian status as sovereignty insurance also saw its board of governors being appointed directly by the prime minister, a condition later defended by Reith, who also steered the BBC’s monopoly through the report of the Beveridge Committee on Broadcasting (1949) to cover the iconic moment of the Queen’s coronation in 1953. And the entirely closed and business-oriented status of BBC guardians which grew in the early welfare state remains in place today, though this is more or less unregistered among those who still describe the organization as public.⁶¹

From the late 1930s then the BBC further honed its modernized policy of centralization plus regionalization, and the suspension of the autonomy of regional networks during the war rationalized the presentation of a national-multinational family of peoples, a situation which remains in today’s near-compulsory use of British terms even when referring to England, as still often happens to highly misleading effect with education.⁶² Reith’s broadcasting devolution helped solidify the linguistic and universalizing ‘nation’ – British nationalism pumped into living rooms *en masse* through the perpetual Seeleyan recreation of the peripheries as discrete but conjoined: so as Thomas Hajkowski puts it, ‘the BBC, perhaps the most powerful institution for the dissemination of information and entertainment in Scotland, constructed a powerful sense of “Scottishness” through its organizational structure, policy, and programs’ (especially true after the Westerglen transmitter, 1932), a situation which ‘allowed BBC Scotland to foster a [British] sense of Scottish national identity for its listeners’.⁶³ A diffuse BBC could then unfold its mission of a modernized, diversified form of consensus,⁶⁴ ideally plurinational and yet itself ‘invisibly’ national, and increasingly ‘progressive’, enclosed, and bureaucratic.⁶⁵ The BBC also understood that the participation of the imperial territories in the war underscored the single temporality of the universalist constitution – and the United States’s dark hints about the outmodedness of empire were duly met

by a Diceyan-Reithian projection of empire as responsibility or patronage, and the post-Beveridge (1942) Report rapprochement of imperialism, business, and a parliamentary 'state socialism'.⁶⁶

Modernized English Literature remained a unifying central thread for the Corporation: the Newbolt Report-inspired 'BBC English' is an obvious example, becoming a sociolinguistic phenomenon unto itself. But so also is the fixed identitarian sovereignty which fed into the consensual era, which again has retained a deeply entrenched presentation of shared constitutional culture, such that, typically, the BBC either simplifies constitutional debate out of the picture (it is a problem for Scottish Nationalists, and often tied up with the personal ambitions of the leader of one of their political parties), or it channels participation into a consumer democracy, at its worst a quasi-interactive control feedback in shows like the 'National' Lottery.⁶⁷ As has often been noted, the tightening spiral between what would become known as reality TV and 'news itself' is itself a form of realism which exists alongside but never touches personal experience, the impossible time of the spectral train taking over the whole horizon of understanding.⁶⁸ As suggested above, standing out in this realism is its centrality to the Tripes English for which *Robinson Crusoe* was the first novel and *Middlemarch* the most central. The state broadcaster's 'social mission' is also the mission of English Literature – as was accepted by the Reithian ideal which found its greatest opportunities with the large-scale state intervention of the turn of the 1940s.

If these two British modernist movements shared a liberal-conservative and Romantic commitment to tradition adapted to the prevailing sovereignty form, the same was true of the last leg of the modern triad, the state adaptation of Keynesian economics. Like the BBC, state-Keynesianism found its moment with the start of the Second World War, when government money ('public funds') was made available on an unprecedented scale. As many have pointed out, Keynes's work itself, with scattered hankerings for a post-capitalist future, often differs from the state-Keynesianism which would follow it – and yet, there are many qualities common to both. Along with a desire to ameliorate the damage caused by market cycles and so to formulate an apologia for state-capitalism, Keynes shows strong support for a whig sovereignty model increasingly reliant on credit markets as a unifying mechanism. And credit is canonicity: the two are faces of the same coin of temporal alienation, as concretized in the Burke for whom experience and

history were mutually exclusive. It is perhaps not surprising that Keynes's undergraduate prize essay of 1904 describes Burke's 'political wisdom' in supporting anti-formal policy.⁶⁹

Keynes's key modernist work, the *Treatise on Money* (1930), correspondingly echoes the constitutional demand to reform-and-retrench, asking for a revision, rather than a rewriting, of the agreement between the 'living' and the 'dead', and stressing that contractual fundamentalism can only lead to revolution.⁷⁰ Although the *Treatise* underscores government power in control over money flow, enterprise, and consumption, this does not simply mean that Keynes supported more spending (or more *public* spending) – rather, the normalization of 'national' credit after the Depression had the effect of confirming consensus.⁷¹ Despite Keynes's apparent damascene journey towards responsible investment as described by Robert Skidelsky and others, even for the post-Depression Keynes, government-supported credit-based markets are still a basis of the civilized life, and are often projected through a subject understood in terms of consumption – so that in some ways, as has occasionally been suggested, this most British figure might be seen as the first neoliberal.⁷² Neoliberalism may only commonly have taken on its name after the 1970s crisis and radical right, but a turn of the lens reveals it to be readable as the result of a state-capitalist constitutional modernization of the inter-war years – as taken on by Labour progressives after the Blitz.

Keynes's demand to invest 'nationally' was also underlined by a pull away from gold towards a fiat currency whose debt levels were newly subject to government control. So his *General Theory* (1936) discourages 'holding' money while encouraging 'a large extension of the traditional functions of government'.⁷³ A 'national' struggle for cheap money then becomes an ethical duty, and Keynes's attacks on Churchill's return to gold from 1925 onwards can be seen as criticizing not only the exchange rate at the point of entry, as has usually been assumed – and a criticism vindicated in terms of the British industrial relations which led to the Miners' Strike – but also of the demand for fiat currency as modernized national power, with any resort to the explicit functions of state described by Keynes in Arnoldian terms as barbarous.⁷⁴

Although conscientiously progressive, Keynes, hedge fund manager for the Bloomsbury literati,⁷⁵ also showed a prescient concern with 'risk management' – and not only in the way usually assumed, in the insight that no economic circumstance is finally decidable, but also in the authoritative

way which has much in common with neoliberalism. His early *Treatise on Probability* (1921) at one point distinguishes propositions from events, the former imagined to exist independently from their context⁷⁶ – something of a standard in Keynes's Cambridge, at the time of early university English: the context-free proposition could exist on its own, allowing for a presentation of ideological truths as if they had arisen from nature (the 'unfortunately' clause which adorns almost every business letter in the neoliberal era).⁷⁷ Keynes's radicalism in stressing the ultimate uncertainty of markets is now widely appreciated,⁷⁸ but this disguises the way that information control would also become a key principle of modern government, yielding the ability to legislate over mass debt. Keynes claims that markets are bound to elements that are finally unknowable – and yet, access to experience would be the means by which to measure power, a combination which recalls the combination of positivism and metaphysics we have seen in constitutional culture from Coleridge to Dicey.⁷⁹

Although, as Robert Skidelsky rightly notes, Keynes's own economic morality never looked anything like Tory self-interest,⁸⁰ and there were indeed scattered hints of the post-capitalist 'good life', state-Keynesianism nevertheless paved the way for the strengthening of sovereignty in the name of progressive credit management.⁸¹ Despite the aim of 'public' spending during recession, Keynes's claim of unknowable outcomes involves two related sovereignty problems: first, this unknowability in large part belongs with an alienation from the present which takes its place in a whig lineage going right back to Burke; or, maintenance and management of markets acts as another sovereignty hedge. Second, the spending described is only problematically public, since, as we have seen, the public as commons is precisely what is subsumed by the para-national, financial structure of the British state – into whose service Keynesian economics was comfortably drawn after 1940–1.

Although Keynesianism only really took hold as an orthodoxy from the turn of the 1940s, when the executive could draw on the whole financial resources of the government, state-capitalists had already recognized the 'national'-authoritarian potential of Keynesian economics since the 1929–30 Depression and the *Treatise*. The naturalization of debt used to mould the business cycle can be seen as a modernization of Burkean time just as much as can Leavisism or the BBC, alienating experience and forcing a perpetual 'lateness' to personal action – magnified in an environment in which the financial City of London increasingly took on the macroeconomic burden.

Credit money made normative at state level helps bind the population to constitutional culture: the apparent necessity of financial growth means that 'national' inflation and deficit can be described in Burkean-Wordsworthian terms as a natural balance.⁸²

The sovereignty power of this modernised state binding helps explain why ideas leading to the *Treatise* were seized on by state socialists in the Labour Party, in which realm they remain popular today. Oswald Mosley's pamphlet *Revolution by Reason* (1925),⁸³ published before he left Labour to found the British Union of Fascists, represents one of the earliest calls to apply Keynes's 'nationalizing' ideas – and one of the earliest and most embarrassing recognitions of their totalizing potential – praising the acceptance of fiat debt and inflation as a corollary of submission to the state.⁸⁴ And as Christopher Harvie has suggested, Keynesian centralization belongs to a wider economic centralization of the post-Depression years, an assumption of unitary authority which would pass through G. M. Young's *Early-Victorian England: The Portrait of an Age* (1932) and Joseph Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942).⁸⁵ State-Keynesianism not only pioneered the presentation of the organs of the welfare state as public bodies even as the constitution was held out of reach, it also fed into a Croslandite acceptance of corporate capital management as streamlined or franchised by government policy, becoming the economic common sense of the Labour Party's amplification of parliamentary sovereignty.⁸⁶

The latest, and still more or less living, incarnation of the everyday acceptance of indebtedness to the state as a condition of the 'public' might then be traced through the consensual era of the 1940s to the combination of over-leveraging and surveillance which characterized the 2000s.⁸⁷ This modern economics is about as 'disinterested' as is modern English, and also takes up an ideal managerial place imagined to be beyond political bias, a 'science' of economics or ecocracy which would be accepted even right up to and through the noughties crash.⁸⁸ The 'national' ecocracy should be seen relative to Keynes's struggle to leave gold,⁸⁹ to some an ethical protection from global financial storms – but also a 'nationalization of finance' which has been widely understood as fantasizing a new British global hegemony after the high era of empire.⁹⁰

So, retrospective looks at the Golden Age of welfarism from the 1940s to 1970s might do well to remember the underscoring of sovereignty it revived, and the ideological promotion of indebtedness which kept action

out of reach. The consensual post-war settlement was levelling in a sense, but in another it underscored the possibility of a perpetual procrastination of a democratic reckoning, and the cross-translation between imperial cultural debt (the canon) and personal financial debt. But, helped by the memory of shared struggle in war, state-Keynsianism helped give rise to an ideology of the public so powerful that even today criticism of it is more or less taboo on the British left, however attenuated that public becomes. Correspondingly, although from the 1940s to the 1960 some kind of public sector ethos grew, the new public was only likely have a cosmetic effect on the makeup of the Establishment, and came at the price of making constitutional change unthinkable.⁹¹ Nikolas Rose's Foucauldian account of the post-war years extensively describes the 1940s disciplining of the whole person's experience – leisure as well as work – in terms of labour and consumption.⁹² Sceptical thinking of the 1950s–70s confirms that as the official ideal of shared service grew, those who had public services acting in their name in fact had a decreasing understanding of the aims of those organizations, or of who managed them – as is registered by the New Left and the nascent discipline of Cultural Studies.⁹³ The modern form of citizenship-as-debt demanded a simultaneous continuous inflation of the economy and contraction of imperial markets, or stagflation.

Although a stagflationary Britain was famously acknowledged in James Callaghan's 1976 Labour Conference speech, delivered with the IMF gun to his head,⁹⁴ the career from Lockean money and Hanoverian succession suggests that 'empty', credit-based growth and imperial markets have gone hand in hand ever since the establishment of unified credit at the end of the seventeenth century. However, this may only have reached crisis when empire then Union were thrown back on themselves, the moment with whose fallout we are now living. As uncomfortable as it may be for the British left, the 1951–73 Golden Age which brought real socioeconomic advances also represented a final reinvention of the sovereignty power of a 'clerical' political class, or meritocracy, who magnified the old British standard of perpetual alienation through debt.⁹⁵ The welfare-consensual Golden Age is indeed foreseen as the 'Golden Country' in which Orwell's Winston Smith is promised a meeting with Inner Party member O'Brien – a land of plenty and total state control.

That is, the state-Keynesian idea of growth, as much as the civilizing mission of liberal-conservative literary criticism, helped underscore a modernized constitutional culture after 1942, just as the threat of European

invasion which gave the government sudden new scope made parallel the 'states of emergency' of 1939–45 and 1789–1815. Understood through Burke as an alienation of experience, debt (as 'public spending') could now be presented as a 'national' good even despite its anti-commons and anti-national implications (and, for that matter, Keynes's own personal concerns about inflation). Of course, despite the prevailing wisdom promoted by the media, state spending and public spending are not the same thing, and it was surely difficult to miss this in the 2008 panic, which emptied out a huge amount of 'public funds' into those institutions with the least public interest – banks. The year 2008 forced state-Keynesianism to declare itself outright, threatening a constitutional 'train crash' as the government had to be seen to step in to guarantee profit for unproductive markets in the name of stability – so that what British capitalism had called *risk* was seen to have been always informally but determinedly managed.

The moment of state-Keynesianism has been a difficult one to pass: from the Golden Age right through to the present, it has been common for Labour think tanks to argue for the public good of state services whose status as public bodies is plainly defunct.⁹⁶ In Keynesian Britain, markets may seem to have accepted the uncertainties concerning rational expectations, but the state always manages the correctives which allow markets to 'work'. In contrast to the Marxian description of crises of markets as threatening the integrity of the state, state-Keynesianism understood the role of 'public' investment as guaranteeing the state's continuant authority. So in his post-2008 autopsy of the banking crisis, Andrew Gamble bypasses the hoary Golden Age assumptions of a British Keynesian left, to find overlaps in the Marxian and Austrian analyses usually held to have defined opposite attitudes in the twentieth century – but which both regard market collapses as phenomena which do not merit support by public debt for the ideological needs of the executive.⁹⁷ In whig Britain, indebtedness to the state has been the price for what the *General Theory* called a 'permanent quasi-boom',⁹⁸ causing a perpetual thinning-out of national services understood in terms of shared ownership.⁹⁹ So rather than presenting political stability as a necessary condition for economic growth, on the contrary the *performance* of economic growth has been seen to have become a condition for political stability.¹⁰⁰

It is not surprising then that, as Chris Thornhill describes, the period after the Second World War also saw a falling off of contextual studies

of constitutions, as the economic settlement once more demanded that the informal codification of franchise be taken for granted.¹⁰¹ Certainly, the modernized informal influences as they inflected on the welfare state fed into a 'constitutional Keynesianism', perhaps most signally seen in Ivor Jennings, sometimes imagined to be a maverick in opposing Dicey's subjection of discretionary powers in the name of a mandarin class.¹⁰² Jennings's 1941 *The British Constitution* describes a modernized and strengthened parliamentary sovereignty, idealizing what it sees as more participation in an expanded franchise now incorporating a sophisticated balancing rationale.¹⁰³ This description of course begs the question of how successfully parliamentary sovereignty really does transmit personal desires, which have to pass through the media-driven and backward machinery of British elections.

Jennings's 1941 commentary might moreover be seen as offering an apologia for a managerial class ameliorating the parliamentary prerogative over law, as well as a modernized gloss on, rather than a criticism of, a Diceyan 'constitutional morality' which further clears the road for a clerical bureaucracy acting in terms of a precedent now spread throughout the whole of social life.¹⁰⁴ The assumption of universal mandate through informal routes expressed less by the Diceyan general will than the established vicissitudes of psephology and identity, and the victory of the circularity of precedent as the everyday, meant that for Lord Atkin in 1962 *Common Law*, the everyday self-disciplining at work throughout Anglo-Britain could be seen as acting in a way which was more executive than the executive itself.¹⁰⁵ The whiggish crypto-Diceyanism of Jennings then sets a tone for the post-war constitutional wisdom of state socialism, especially in his progressive faith in British public services, as well as for a belief in psephology and electoral processes as the master-discourses of political participation – and the assumption as natural, if eccentric and imperfect, of the signs of an evolving system of representation. The insistence on received psephology as politics can of course be seen as a near ancestor of the Moreno question for national identity (do you feel more x than y?), a narrow invitation to self-ownership which still appeals to many positivist Political Scientists. For Jennings, as for the long line of conservative whigs before him, the alienated British form of parliamentary sovereignty is to be celebrated as the best possible because it is anti-formal, gesturing back to Seeleyan culture, and helping explain why even during the war, Churchill was signalling a move back towards 'Oceanic'

thinking, famously declaring a preference for the culture of the 'open sea' over Europe to French allies during key campaigns.¹⁰⁶

And despite nominal criticisms of Dicey on the reach of law, Jennings's influential sense of 'public opinion' is Diceyan in its reliance on an ability to adapt to an ideal shared opinion, and so to be 'flexible'.¹⁰⁷ Perpetual evolution, and perpetual expansion of the legislative or bureaucratic class is imagined to make parliamentary procedure ever more democratic – though Jennings does recognize that corporations blur the boundaries between government and enterprise – as in the BBC.¹⁰⁸ Still, some form of 'public opinion', in the spirit of Coleridge and Mill, creates an overall balance outweighing any slight corrective which might be provided by a written constitution.¹⁰⁹ Inconsistencies are to be evened out by checks and balances, and MPs will tend to be trustworthy since they are only modestly remunerated (though this misses both the privilege of the amateur patrician and the social capital allowed to the aspiring careerist).¹¹⁰ 'Public opinion' then guarantees that parties do not correspond to social class even and especially through the co-opting of 'labour'. For Jennings, even the Lords are in touch with the 'spirit' of the law.¹¹¹

But by 2007 (a key year for sovereignty debates, since it saw a nationalist minority government in Edinburgh overlap with the onset of financial crisis), the constitutional commentator Anthony King felt able to look back on the era of Jennings (and Harold Laski) to suggest that a result of the consensual era had been a 'power-hoarding constitution' based on 'pathological adversarialism'.¹¹² A 'total' version of the constitution had left itself able only to argue over changes which *forestalled* general overhaul,¹¹³ so that constitutional change, like the over-specialized Humanities, could only ever be particularist and technical rather than general and critical, and so unable to question the bases of its own legitimacy. For King devolution, in part arising through the appearance of stagflation in the mid-1970s, really did bring rapid constitutional change, but only in an 'invisible' sense aiming to present itself as a perpetual gradualism.¹¹⁴ The train crash would never be seen under present constitutional conditions, under the watch of reformist Labour.

King's account, like others of the time, allows for a historicization of the era dominated by Jennings's modernized consensual evolution,¹¹⁵ suggesting that, rather than fundamentally threatening the Diceyan constitution, a greater bureaucratic machinery could absorb and neutralize action within

parliamentary contest, as parties occupied the entire field of the political, competing for the progressive ground.¹¹⁶ Coupled with the palliative consumerism of the 'permanent semi-boom', the Jennings constitution then allowed for the emergence of 'catch-all' political parties whose power lay in marketing specific policies at specific groups, a model similar to that described at about the same time by Karl Polanyi and Joseph Schumpeter.¹¹⁷ The 1940s reincarnation of ideal disinterestedness then aimed to produce an 'elite of clever and disinterested public servants', a Croslandite consensus critiqued then as now by writers like David Marquand as a *rebranding* of public services which remained carefully separate from popular experience.¹¹⁸

The early 1940s settlement might also, King implies, be seen as one for which the ideal of democracy loses any referent outside of itself, which is dedicated solely to perpetual reinvention, as parties become ever more pragmatic in marketing carefully targeted promises.¹¹⁹ Parliamentary sovereignty then becomes streamlined to the channelling of public opinion as the rational distillation of self-actualizing wants, and audit culture becomes ascendant, as seen in a saturation of public culture with accountability, further alienating experience through maintenance of labour.¹²⁰ The ideal of transparency helps present power as naturally evolving, and the need to maintain informal checks-and-balances over written rights is confirmed by the faux mandate of elections, which take up an inordinate proportion of 'British culture'. In this sense, neither the apparent failings of post-war Labour, nor the apparent deviations of New Labour, as it was apologetically described, are that surprising, as labour-based sovereignty itself is perceived as conservative and as having to perpetually re-invent itself in commodity terms to placate aspiration.¹²¹ And Jennings himself notes that the party term 'Conservative' was only adopted over 'Tory' at an apparent conclusion to class standoff to express reaction to threats to the continuity of parliamentary sovereignty – 'apparently by way of a consensus of opinion, to indicate that the British Constitution was in danger from the Reformers and had to be conserved or protected'.¹²²

And yet from only a decade and a half after the new consensus there were formidable counter-currents to this straitened and modernized British culture, for multiple reasons including the difficulties of maintaining superstates (both of the Seeleyan-Oceanic and the post-Hungarian Soviet type, the latter till then still looked on fondly by much of the British left), and the effects of new forms of stratification within education, particularly

as working-class writers were projected into hostile elites. In the meritocracy of the post-war era, the latter-day incarnation of the Coleridge-to-Richards ideal of the disinterested and the examinable, the scholarship student would often rise to join an Arts or Humanities environment in an ancient university whose canonicity had been built to exclude him (for the scholarship child is almost always imaged as a boy), problematizing the terms of franchise assumed by consensual Britain.

Expanding this critique into the terms of literary form, Raymond Williams's 'social realism' experienced something of a revival at the end of the 1950s over the 'psychological realism' associated with positivist continuity, and the welfare state was seen as partly addressing but also partly reproducing the class divisions glossed by Leavisism. The resultant critique, of course, would grow into the counter-discipline of Cultural Studies, which has remained a thorn in the side of English Literature ever since. Williams's *Culture and Society* is one of the most iconic interventions of a kind rising through the *Universities and Left Review* then *New Left Review*, an environment which effectively linked 1790s Jacobinism to a counter-consensual democratic critique.¹²³ Cultural Studies has continued to oddly echo and distort the English Literature department, which emerged from within Classics in the 1910s. As a subject Cultural Studies has remained pointedly difficult to market as a 'hard' one in neoliberal terms, and is one of the subjects present-day conservatives are most keen to see disappear – particularly since it encourages the analysis of everyday processes rather than transmitting ahistorical heritage.

Correspondingly, underlining the way a challenge to constitutional culture is also a challenge to the sovereignty of English Literature, Williams describes the history of the term *culture* as more or less coincident with that of the term *democracy*, both coming into common English use only during the era of revolutions and worker concentration, the Burkean era of the end of the eighteenth century.¹²⁴ As was often hinted by New Left writers, since culture, unlike heritage, demands a registration of everyday experience, on a structural level it represents a disciplinary and political challenge to canonical or Leavisite English. Williams's reading of Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), which described working-class material while warning about a narrowing of affective experience under consensual conditions,¹²⁵ suggests how the heritage of parliamentary sovereignty continues to stand against democracy in principle, and looks somewhat shocking in a time of expanding consumer power.¹²⁶

Williams similarly teases out the terms of Leavis's *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* and Leavis and Denys Thompson's *Culture and Environment*, as misleadingly conflating culture (historical, active) and civilization (ahistorical, reactive), in a way which mirrors Burke's distinction between revolution (1789) and restoration (1688). English Literature had been continuously managing this slippage via the modern form of clerisy, surviving as the 'appreciation' of classics by a 'zealous reforming minority' still bound to inheritance on fundamental levels.¹²⁷ But counter-currents would then aim at the 'process of revaluation of the inherited tradition',¹²⁸ or, as we might put it now, another way of reading after English. Williams's *The Long Revolution* (1961) moved further towards a shared understanding of the experience eclipsed by English – and Williams's account would be reprinted in 2011 to follow the student and Occupy protests, which (as I will suggest) amplified scepticism over parliamentary authenticity or canonicity.¹²⁹ In this book Williams extends his critique of the ascendancy of the social-realist over the psychological-realist in the canonical story of English:¹³⁰ Where psychological realism, ascendant in the Leavisite remaking of the canon, had concerned itself with tracing the individual character onto lateral and intuitive (Burkean) bonds, the post-consensual moment showed a new social-realist registration of experience – and the period 1956–63 would indeed see an explosion of social-realist fiction and film.¹³¹

A recursion of experience beyond the psychological and organicist realism which had risen in the long nineteenth century and had been underlined by inter-war British constitutional culture was then in Williams and the New Left intermittently perceived as open to territorialization, de-enclosure, or formal registration.¹³² The modernized British constitution, beholden to an 'appraisal culture' now lacking a global reach for its markets, would struggle to answer the question of territorialization and provincialized power (and it is also worth mentioning the abandonment of the British Blue Streak for the American Skybolt nuclear missile system in April 1960, the year before the publication of *The Long Revolution*).¹³³ It was increasingly suggested around the turn of the 1960s that the consensual mixed economy had left parliamentary sovereignty stronger, and so popular sovereignty weaker.¹³⁴ In sovereignty terms, the early Thatcherites of two decades later have a case as inheritors of this radicalism: state-capitalism presented as a public good was the target of libertarian Tories from the mid-1970s, albeit with no time for the public at all, far less the commons (though with dialectically

productive results, since visible splits in the consensual constitution allowed for a recursion of everyday experience as a constitutional principle, and, of course, led to the recursion of popular sovereignty in Scotland). Thatcher's own stated economics praised the 'real' Keynes who argued for the correction of markets in a low-interest low-inflation economy over the state overwhelming of markets – not the Keynes claimed by Labour as promoting 'public' investment or long-term ethical investments which he conceived, as Skidelsky puts it accidentally connoting devolution metaphors, as a 'marriage', but the Keynes of rational self-maximization and property rights, a prophet of public choice theory and shareholder sovereignty.¹³⁵

And alongside the critiques of Raymond Williams working in and against English should be laid Karl Polanyi's classic *The Great Transformation* (1944), a book which appeared only three years after Jennings and offered a withering critique of post-war 'constitutional Keynesianism'¹³⁶ – although Polanyi was rarely taken up by 1950s and '60s New Left accounts. This is slightly surprising given Polanyi's concentration on British economy in the period after the Burkean whig victory, 1795–1834, a period which saw the full establishment of an anti-formalist market system using choice as an ideological cover. Polanyi's account of course can also be seen as describing the inception of what would become known as neoliberalism – and it must be seen within the time-frame of its publication, as state-Keynesianism was strengthening the informal constitution much as had the anti-Jacobin literati of the 1790s–1810s.

Just as Polanyi traced the sovereign dispossession in the informal British constitution,¹³⁷ so also 1940s 'state neoliberalism' can be seen as the survival at all costs of anti-Jacobin constitutional culture, and as the inheritor of the parliamentary sovereignty of the line through Burke, Coleridge, Mill, Arnold, Dicey, Leavis, Reith, and Jennings. Polanyi also duly stresses the expansion of credit markets in the 'modernizing' 1920s – something of which Keynes was aware, but which he refused to declare as a disenfranchisement, even while it normalized the state's management of debt. So for Polanyi, 'with the failure of the credit system in the 1920s, the almost forgotten issues of early capitalism reappeared. First and foremost among them stood that of popular government'.¹³⁸ The resulting slide towards neoliberalism and post-democracy relied on the constitutional conservatism built into the modernist redefinition of the organic – and it is telling that Polanyi's example of the British answer to European fascism is that Leavisite cornerstone,

D. H. Lawrence's 'erotic vitalism', a link that Polanyi makes independent of any reference to literary criticism.¹³⁹

So in a new era of high consensus, Britain was seen by Polanyi as having pioneered a type of 'national' public described purely in market terms sponsored by a narrowly instrumental state, a 'transformed' freedom for which

[s]overeignty, of course, was a purely political term . . . [Governments] neither could nor would bind their countries in respect to monetary matters – this was the legal position. Actually, only countries which possessed a monetary system controlled by central banks were reckoned sovereign states.¹⁴⁰

This binding of sovereignty and central banks, as seen in the modernized Keynesian 'moral' fiat currency, again demands the alienating acceptance of the state distribution of debt. So for Polanyi the state's spread of a market economy demands micro-power as a conduit for a simultaneous managerial devolution and centralization: '[f]or however generously devolution of power is practical, there will be strengthening of power at the center, and, therefore, no individual freedom'.¹⁴¹

A comparable diagnosis of the post-imperial managerial malaise would appear six years after this in Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), a book also concerned with the post-war management of franchise – and particularly, in this case, with the fallout of Britain's (Seeleyan) tendency to describe empire as national: for Arendt the projection of a universalized constitutional culture causes an attrition of *both* state and nation, since the former is unable to accommodate shared action and the latter is robbed of affective civil society and opened to unlimited bureaucratization.¹⁴² Arendt's book, like Polanyi's, has travelled far, but was also quite specific to its 1940s–50s British environment, appearing at the height of the welfare-consensual push and just after the Orwellian description of the perpetual performance of a bureaucratic anti-revolutionary revolution.¹⁴³

By the time the neoliberal era was being widely critiqued as *neoliberal* in the 1990s and 2000s, there were already signs of a return to Polanyi (whether avowed or otherwise), in a broad range of writers including Andrew Gamble, Colin Crouch, and David Marquand. Consumer sovereignty had been worried over since the new Oceanic turn which saw a nascent Reaganomics

coincide with the Centre for Policy Studies in the UK: Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), for example, describes how individualist terms were easily imposed on consensus,¹⁴⁴ and apparently shared goals converted to mass individuation, or celebrity realism.¹⁴⁵ By the 2000s the British Polanyian concentration had become broader and angrier, and was often describing, even before 2008, a Marxian Polanyi's account of a privatization of social thought – often ranged *against* state-Keynsianism, whether in strong (Marquand) or mild (Crouch) form. So in *The Decline of the Public* (2004), Marquand, a veteran of the New Left, historicizes the neoliberal 'renewal' of democracy, and carefully distinguishes between the public domain – in which audited outcomes can be made transparent, empty of content, and open to bureaucracy and surveillance – and the public sector, an open exchange without calculation of gain.¹⁴⁶ (The latter, of course, was precisely what was becoming untenable under the British sovereignty conditions of the 'explicitly' neoliberal era.)

The Polanyian turn of the early 2000s, parallel to and amplifying Sennett's flagging of a transatlantic turn to financial markets, is nevertheless also important to the recognition that the destruction of the public was not an entirely post-1970s phenomenon. Welfare consensus in the 1940s 'empowering' in economic terms, can now be read as disempowering in its rationalization of risk, as in a Keynesian management of unpredictability which feeds into the Anthony Giddens–Tony Blair moment.¹⁴⁷ The stakes were certainly raised in the mid-1970s, in part because of changing economies of franchise, for example the inability of 'naturally stagflationary' economies like Britain to deal with oil precarity, but also domestically because of the uncomfortable social implications surrounding the 1973 Kilbrandon Report on devolution and national self-determination, furthering the possibility of a sovereignty challenge.¹⁴⁸ (Also instructive for the new Polanyian turn, though, were changes in political contest over a 'national' London with the devolved Greater London Assembly election of 2000, readable in one sense as another coup d'état as the ruling Labour Party pressed their own choice of candidate to maintain an image of London as finance hub – a battle of 'two cities' whose literary-cultural implications have not yet been much recognized in the Humanities.)¹⁴⁹

And crucially for those who administer English as well as for those who are said to be required to draw 'skills' from it, as Marquand has stressed, the loss of an interpersonal or commons-based version of the public also

risks the loss of professionalism, since it spells the end of the possibility of judgements made independent of bureaucratic compulsion, and so a challenge to the Humanities' ability to take positions beyond those based on short-term reward. This also helps explain why 'hard' institutional English is in danger of repeating the Polanyian condition of government and turning towards customer choice as a public subject within a complex bureaucracy. With the attrition of professionalism and personal judgement, 'public' positions of responsibility have increasingly been taken by problem-solvers, a tendency which according to Marquand and others of the New Left has much in common with that other modern state-nation the Soviet Union, as critiqued by sovereignty sceptics after the 1956 invasion of Hungary.¹⁵⁰ The comparison of the *performance* of a public to late Soviet planning picked up the background feeling of the new Polanyian moment,¹⁵¹ and paralleled, in institutional English, the definition of 'impact' in terms of those projects which are most readily performable, even if they are often those with the least impact in popular terms.¹⁵²

However, where the dis-crediting of the state-bureaucratic model has been widely perceived after 2008, there have also been widespread hints at the creation of a newly common ethos.¹⁵³ An interpersonal commons is suggested not only by the long cultural history leading up to and through devolution, but also by the wave of discontent which has followed the failure of the financial model. And this coalescence of desires has remained largely unspoken because, as the Polanyian turn anticipated, the informal constitution has maintained the natural ascendancy of 'flexible' parliamentary bodies. So as Tom Nairn put it in 2011, although an investment in the public sector might have been useful to various countries struggling after the 2008 crisis, the same couldn't be said of a UK whose shared services had melted away.¹⁵⁴ The combination of expanded choice and contracted franchise is also critiqued in the Colin Crouch who asked in 2011 why neoliberalism had so stubbornly failed to make way, and stressed that neoliberals tended to be centralizers using local government as their (micropolitical) means.¹⁵⁵ The impulse towards combined choice and centralization allows sovereignty to be hoarded even as it appears to be shared, and 'market Keynesianism' leads to chains of *risk trading* – the simultaneous performance of growth and monopolization of the management of probability.¹⁵⁶ Since 2008, it has become clearer that in the British context the public and the private are both separated from *and* nested inside one another,¹⁵⁷ a disempowerment which

has through two centuries of constitutional culture come to seem natural to the informal British constitution.

So Crouch describes how, whatever the claims made for Keynesianism by post-democratic governments, Keynes's ideas have been made 'occult' in the way 'public spending' has become incalculable through ever more hidden outsourcing – recalling the insight of the New Left about the ease with which British capitalism was incorporated into state provision through widespread informal consensus.¹⁵⁸ The state's expropriation of the commons as public would also, of course, eventually be of use to David Cameron's 'Big Society', albeit this time in a peculiar retro-Disraelian sense of the term rather than in any very serious attempt at redefinition (and why, as Polanyi might ask, would the society need redefinition in any case?)¹⁵⁹ Cameron's homely sense of franchise projected through an era which had to maintain 'hard' English looks something like a Leavisite Big Canon, one which can take on 'other' literatures into the same discipline, but only to further accumulate cultural capital within the same parameters.

The 2008 banking recapitalization can of course be seen as part of the inheritance of state-Keynsianism in its demand for an official return to optimism over debt expansion – or as Gamble puts it, ideology spread thin.¹⁶⁰ London in particular has had to be maintained as an official world financial centre despite and through the attenuation of the public in that city, which is perhaps now the most unequal in the developed world.¹⁶¹ The modernist paraphernalia of consensualism has also paradoxically come into vogue in something like a welfare state nostalgia, despite a massive increase in surveillance and informal state powers and a clear inability to convert tax income into public services. In this sense, 'British' is simply a sovereign binding to capital,¹⁶² and enfranchisement a market projected as a shared public – or in Schumpeterian terms, a competition between elite factions for the licence to manage business cycles.¹⁶³

So Gamble describes how the 2008 panic underlined the way the neoliberal state was bound to appear to leave the road free for action while in fact making popular participation more difficult.¹⁶⁴ Neither redistributors of wealth nor facilitators of social intercourse, post-war governments became the consumers of marketized monopolies, political authority became the micro-power of shareholder sovereignty,¹⁶⁵ and 'public' policy a PR problem.¹⁶⁶ The function of governments was then, as Crouch describes it, to engineer

the presentation of risk so as to individuate the ‘public’ into ‘debt-holders, participants in credit markets’.¹⁶⁷ This makes it all the more troubling that ‘public services’, such as the on-time train which has always already never arrived at the station at Greenwich, have remained untouchable as *public* for most left progressives: ‘[o]nce privatized Keynesianism had become a model of general economic importance, it became a kind of bizarre collective good, however nested in private actions it was’.¹⁶⁸

As the passengers at the Greenwich Meridian understand, such services demand aspiration to a personal control that can never be reached – just as literary study demands aspiration to a canonical value which can never be reached by its student-clients. Understood in economic and literary terms, debt as alienation has been made to seem intuitive:

The essence of this trap is perfectly expressed in what is now happening to the welfare state. Governments have to make deep cuts . . . to satisfy the anxieties of the financial markets over the size of the public debt, the operators in these markets being the very same people who benefited from the bank rescue, and who have already begun to pay themselves high bonuses – bonuses ‘earned’ because their operations have been guaranteed against risk by the government spending that created the public debt.¹⁶⁹

The logic of this then leaves nothing but for the ‘public’ to be performed with ever more gusto as it becomes ever more estranged, and for public debt, understood in terms of private finance or of constitutional culture, to be continuously re-presented as a moral good. As the performance of the public comes to be a kind of theatre, a ‘transformation’ in a Polanyian sense, or a *transformismo* in a Gramscian sense,¹⁷⁰ so the entire constitutional culture of the British state-nation, rather than just its economic fortunes, can be seen as a ‘bubble’, relying on endless and ever more tenuous reflation.

But as suggested above, a crisis point may be reached when ideas of popular sovereignty join up throughout the whole UK.¹⁷¹ Although concerning sovereignty forms, in many ways this is more a cultural argument than a legal one, since it addresses the incommensurable terms of precedent spreading across the UK.¹⁷² So, the civilizing mission of English as constitutional culture must become seriously troubled when the state’s best

self is perceived, especially in England, as having been *extrinsically* British, and dependent on the *performance* of consensus. This problem returns, in particular, as Scottish education shows a socially ambitious autonomy at the very time education in the territory whose name was given to the literary discipline seems left to the whims of financial panics, and universal English is perceived as a debt bubble.¹⁷³