

‘HIGH POLITICS’ AND THE ‘NEW POLITICAL HISTORY’*

DAVID M. CRAIG

University of Durham

ABSTRACT. *Recent claims about the convergence in methodology between ‘high politics’ and the ‘new political history’ remain unclear. The first part of this review examines two deeply entrenched misunderstandings of key works of high politics from the 1960s and 1970s, namely that they proposed elitist arguments about the ‘closed’ nature of the political world, and reductive arguments about the irrelevance of ‘ideas’ to political behaviour. The second part traces the intellectual ancestry of Maurice Cowling’s thinking about politics, and places it within an interpretative tradition of social science. The formative influences of R. G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott are examined, and Mark Bevir’s Logic of the history of ideas is used to highlight how Cowling’s approach can be aligned with ‘new political history’.*

In a stimulating essay on the future of political history, Susan Pedersen recently argued that there has been a convergence between the ‘high politics’ school and the more recent ‘new political history’. From the narrower concerns with ambition and manoeuvre and intrigue, students of the former have become increasingly involved in the ‘cosmologies’, ‘thought worlds’, and ‘doctrines’ of politics, and so have paid greater attention to its ‘intellectual setting’.¹ Meanwhile, the trajectory of social history away from social and economic determinism has created a new autonomy for politics, and more nuanced awareness of the evolution of political languages and subjectivities and the way that culture and communication could shape the preoccupations of voters.² Pedersen’s arguments have been influential, but she was not the first person to suggest such a convergence. This was first hinted by Philip Williamson – himself an advocate of ‘high politics’ – in a review of essays which had stressed their pioneering focus on ‘politicians’ electoral perceptions, linguistic manipulation and building of social alliances’. Such ideas, he suggested, were not in fact new and had been well understood by ‘the

Department of History, Durham University, 43 North Bailey, Durham, DH1 3EX d.m.craig@durham.ac.uk

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¹ S. Pedersen, ‘What is political history now?’, in D. Cannadine, ed., *What is history now?* (London, 2002), p. 42.

² In this context the phrase ‘new political history’ was coined by J. Vernon, *Politics and the people: a study in English political culture, c. 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), and D. Wahrman, ‘The new political history: a review essay’, *Social History*, 21 (1996), pp. 343–54. See also L. Black, ‘Popular politics in modern British history’, *Journal of British Studies*, 40 (2001), pp. 431–45, and S. Fielding, ‘Looking for the “new political history”’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42 (2007), pp. 515–24.

once-derided and still much-misunderstood “high politics” historians’, not least Maurice Cowling himself.³

The ‘new political history’ has been unusually self-conscious in the way that it has developed its arguments and sketched its genesis. It largely grew not from traditional political histories, but from studies of popular politics, labour history, and electoral sociology. These fields, so the story goes, were then transformed by the impact of the ‘linguistic turn’ pioneered first by Gareth Stedman Jones and later developed by Patrick Joyce in a post-structuralist direction. It should also be noted – because it is sometimes neglected – that the wider interest in ‘political culture’ was also spurred on by American historians of France such as Keith Michael Baker, Lynn Hunt, and William Sewell. The key point, however, is that this theoretical reflexivity has tended to monopolize discussion, and marginalize awareness of alternative, but related, traditions and debates. Pedersen notes that convergence has arisen despite these schools having different ‘intellectual heritages, methodological convictions and (often) political affiliations’, and suspects that Cowling would have had little sympathy with theoretical trends that have brought ‘his opponents to his door’.⁴ In reaching such conclusions, however, too little notice is taken of Williamson’s comment that the ‘high politics’ school remains ‘much-misunderstood’. This is a frequent lament: Cowling himself noted in 1990 that what had been called the ‘Peterhouse school of history’ had been reduced to a ‘typecast’ that treated parliamentary politics as ‘Namierite venality’, saw parliament itself as an ‘instrument of class warfare’, and viewed politics as a ‘spectacle of ambition and manoeuvre’.⁵ Even sympathetic observers such as Richard Brent, who was rare in examining the *methodological* cast of the school, continued to cleave to such a stereotype of its *historical* conclusions.⁶ This review focuses on the early works of ‘high politics’ (rather than the later work on religion and doctrine), and tries, first, to clear away deeply entrenched misunderstandings of what they were intended to achieve, before inspecting the intellectual genealogy of this approach, which turns out to have more in common with ‘new’ political history than even Pedersen might suppose.

The stereotype was already in place by 1975. Just as the phrase ‘Peterhouse school’ was being coined, so historians were coming to think that a coherent and controversial approach to political history was being pioneered.⁷ Cowling’s

³ *English Historical Review*, 113 (1998), p. 1024.

⁴ Pedersen, ‘What is political history now?’, pp. 42, 40.

⁵ M. Cowling, *Mill and liberalism* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1990), p. xiv.

⁶ R. Brent, ‘Butterfield’s Tories: “High politics” and the writing of modern British history’, *Historical Journal*, 30 (1987), pp. 947–8. See also R. Crowcroft, ‘Maurice Cowling and the writing of British political history’, *Contemporary British History*, 22 (2008), pp. 279–86, which offers a supportive but sometimes misleading survey of Cowling’s thinking. A forthcoming definitive account is P. Williamson, ‘Maurice Cowling and modern British political history’, in R. Crowcroft, S.J. D. Green, and R. Whiting, eds., *Philosophy, politics and religion in British democracy: Maurice Cowling and conservatism* (London, 2010).

⁷ Cowling suggested that the phrase was first used by the historian, Joseph Lee, when a fellow of Peterhouse between 1968 to 1974: *New York Review of Books*, 10 Apr. 1986.

1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and revolution appeared in 1967, followed by *The impact of Labour* in 1971. Andrew Jones's *The politics of reform 1884* was published in 1972, Alistair Cooke and John Vincent's *The governing passion* in 1974, and, finally, Cowling's *Impact of Hitler* in 1976. The fact that a series of seemingly related works were published within a short span of time, and that all but one were part of the 'Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics', only reinforced the idea that they shared a common method. By the time *The impact of Hitler* was published, Cowling was being identified by reviewers as the founder of a movement. Robert Blake wrote of 'a new school of history', while Robert Skidelsky identified Cowling as its 'high priest'. Stephen Koss pushed this metaphor to its limits by labelling him 'the patriarch of a new holy order' which propagated the 'Gospel of High Politics'.⁸ Most reviewers did not doubt the considerable scholarship on display – although occasionally some dismissively referred to research by index cards.⁹ Many of them, however, shared doubts about this new approach to political history, and in repeating the same criticisms – in both academic periodicals and higher journalism – they largely shaped the way future historians would interpret its main claims.

The first recurring criticism was about the purported exclusivity of the world of 'high politics'. Was political history really about the apex of power to the exclusion of wider parliamentary, and certainly extra-parliamentary, pressures? Royden Harrison thought *1867* hampered by the 'doctrinaire assumption' that the world of decision-makers was 'closed off from the doings of the vulgar', while Henry Pelling believed it understated the way that feeling in the country could affect the thoughts of politicians.¹⁰ Robert Rhodes James worried that readers of *The impact of Labour* might be 'uneasy' about the focus on high politics, while Peter Stead lamented the absence of extra-parliamentary political sociology. He believed that 'in our history, as in our politics [there is] too great an inclination to see High Politics as the sphere where norms are determined'.¹¹ Writing from a labour history perspective, James Hinton was adamant that, because it detached high politics from class loyalties and struggles, the book was ignorant of the 'larger historical forces' which shaped politics.¹² *The Economist* claimed that Andrew Jones adopted a sterile approach in *The politics of reform* and believed nineteenth-century governance was about more than force and fraud.¹³ Most reviewers noted the forthright claims in *The governing passion* about the autonomy of Westminster and the irrelevance of Ireland to arguments about home rule.¹⁴ In an even-handed review of *The impact of Hitler*, J. P. D. Dunbabin commented that Cowling ought to have looked more closely at public and electoral opinion, while Robert

⁸ *Times Literary Supplement*, 25 July 1975, p. 839; *Spectator*, 26 July 1975, p. 111; *Listener*, 25 Sept. 1975, p. 407.

⁹ *Economist*, 2 Aug. 1975, p. 105.

¹⁰ *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 15 (1967), p. 40; *Historical Journal*, 11 (1968), p. 595.

¹¹ *Times*, 26 Apr. 1971, p. 16; *Historical Journal*, 17 (1971), p. 208.

¹² *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 24 (1972), p. 65.

¹³ *Economist*, 19 Aug. 1972, p. 54.

¹⁴ E.g. *Times*, 28 Feb. 1974, p. 15.

Skidelsky claimed ‘more “low politics” would have helped’.¹⁵ As Derek Beales put it in 1974, a core belief of this new ‘school’ of historiography was to treat ‘Westminster as a virtually closed system, scarcely affected by outside pressure’.¹⁶

The second line of attack was even more common, and focused on the claim that decision-making could be understood in terms of interests and ambitions rather than policy and ideology. There was a strong sense that Namier lurked behind this. *The Economist* was concerned that 1867 would land the nineteenth century with the same problems that ‘Namierite zeal’ had created for the eighteenth, described *The governing passion* as ‘old-fashioned Namierite history’, and headed a review of *The impact of Hitler* with ‘pure Namier’.¹⁷ A. J. P. Taylor agreed, commenting that the latter work followed Namier in its view that ‘politicians are concerned to get into power and that they take up policies in order to achieve this end’.¹⁸ Rhodes James worried about ‘over-simplifying personal and collective motives’ in *The impact of Labour*, while Hinton thought there was an excessive focus on the ‘trivial and nasty’ world of rhetoric and manoeuvre.¹⁹ Martin Harrison argued that it looked at politicians and ideas only insofar as they ‘impinge on the maneuverings and calculations of the leaders of parties and factions’ while Barbara Malament thought it more concerned with tactics than policy.²⁰ Allen Warren noted that *The governing passion* depicted a world little influenced by ‘any complex of ideas or personal principle’, and while Skidelsky saw in *The impact of Hitler* the important claim that ‘public policy’ could be understood as an instrument in ‘political conflict’, he thought the insight could be taken too far.²¹ Dunbabin, meanwhile, argued that Cowling adopted a ‘defeatist’ approach to motivation and so was overly committed to the ‘greasy pole’ view of politics.²² Beales, again, put it best: the crucial axiom was that ‘the political game is what counts’ and it must be studied in isolation from outside pressures and ‘from the promotion of any useful measures, let alone any higher aims’. These were, he believed, the central points made by the ‘younger school’ of conservative historians.²³

These arguments have been influential, but they are, in fact, misleading. That historians of ‘high politics’ privileged elites initially seems hard to deny, especially since *The impact of Labour* famously announced it would focus on ‘the high politics of the politicians who mattered’.²⁴ A passage from *The governing passion* has, perhaps, been even more widely circulated: the world of politicians ‘was a closed

¹⁵ *Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), p. 306; *Spectator*, 26 July 1975, p. 111.

¹⁶ D. Beales, ‘Peel, Russell and reform’, *Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), p. 874.

¹⁷ *Economist*, 22 July 1967, p. 329, 2 Mar. 1974, p. 110, 2 Aug. 1975, p. 105.

¹⁸ *Observer*, 27 July 1975, p. 23.

¹⁹ *Times*, 26 Apr. 1971, p. 16; *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 24 (1972), p. 65.

²⁰ *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974), p. 810; *American Historical Review*, 77 (1972), p. 795.

²¹ *English Historical Review*, 91 (1976), p. 153; *Spectator*, 26 July 1975, p. 111.

²² *English Historical Review*, 88 (1973), p. 145; *Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), p. 307.

²³ Beales, ‘Peel’, p. 875.

²⁴ M. Cowling, *The impact of Labour 1920–1924: the beginning of modern British politics* (Cambridge, 1971),

one. It was closed to those outside, in terms of direct access and influence: it was closed also in that politicians were bound to see more significance in the definite structure of relationships at Westminster, than in their contacts with the world outside.²⁵ This seems to suggest that *only* high politics mattered and that all other realms of politics were irrelevant. This is a major misinterpretation. Cowling was, in fact, saying he would only focus on those figures who ‘mattered’ in terms of national decision-making. He was not saying that these were the only people who mattered to any aspect of politics. Indeed, he agreed that ‘back-bench opinion, party feeling, the decisions of civil servants, the preferences of electors, the opinions of newspapers and the objective movements of social power all contribute to understanding’.²⁶ Similarly Cooke and Vincent thought ‘party organization, the press, the organized working class, the Ireland of peasants and priests’ were things ‘important in themselves and to those in them’, but that they were not important to the ‘high politics’ of 1885–6.²⁷ *The impact of Labour* was intended to focus on the minds of leading politicians, and Cowling considered this to be a preliminary to a wider ‘total social history’. He accepted that ‘the impact of politicians on British public opinion’ would be an important extension of the project, but it was not what his book was about.²⁸ This does not suggest that other parts of the system were unimportant – only that their relationship to the apex of political life needed to be worked out.

This leads on to the central point about the connections between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics. This is the major announced theme of *1867*, but one all too often missed by reviewers who, as we have seen, assumed that the book claimed that the elite world was closed. In fact, Cowling urged the labour school of history not to assume a priori causal links between popular and high politics, and insisted that the connections between public protest and parliamentary decisions were so complex that no necessary relation between them could be sustained.²⁹ The problem, he suggested, was that labour historians thought that class government was ‘stupid as well as bad’ and so underestimated the complexity of its response to working-class politics. ‘Assuming, what they would not do for working class action itself, a caricature instead of conducting an investigation, they produce a parody of the process of decision-making in which government and Parliament were involved.’³⁰ This ought not to be seen as a tirade against social history but as a request that its practitioners apply the same level of sophistication to high politics as they would to their own field. It is true that, in *The governing passion*, Cooke and Vincent stressed the distance between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics, and the

²⁵ A. B. Cooke and J. Vincent, *The governing passion: cabinet government and party politics in Britain, 1885–1886* (Brighton, 1974), p. 21. M. Cowling, *1867 Disraeli, Gladstone and revolution: the passing of the Second Reform Bill* (Cambridge, 1967), p. 340, also speaks of a ‘closed’ world. For an account of the differences between the approach of Cowling and that of Cooke and Vincent, see M. Bentley, ‘Party, doctrine and thought’, in M. Bentley and J. Stevenson, eds., *High and low politics in modern Britain: ten studies* (Oxford, 1983), p. 130.

²⁶ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 11.

²⁷ Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, p. 21.

²⁸ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 4.

²⁹ Cowling, *1867*, pp. 288, 340.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

virtual indifference of most politicians to, for example, constituency politics, extra-parliamentary organizations, and trades unions.³¹ Their conclusion therefore was that ‘a politics of dialogue was not to be expected so long as the public understood very little of Westminster, and Westminster felt itself remote from the public’.³² Cowling, by contrast, did speak in terms of dialogue. He believed there was continual interaction between public opinion and parliament. ‘The interaction took the form of dialogue: the dialogue was a real one. The interaction reached its most fruitful peak in Parliament.’³³

The nature of this dialogue is very important. In all three ‘high politics’ books, Cowling showed that politicians were aware of public opinion. In 1867 parliamentary opinion was affected by ‘a vague sense of the preferences of not one, but a number of public opinions outside’. Some politicians were even careful to ‘give an impression of sensitivity to what they took to be public opinion’.³⁴ The same point was repeated in *The impact of Labour*: politicians talked of public opinion as a factor which should guide their behaviour, and in some ways their speech and actions ‘were affected by what they took it to be’.³⁵ In other words, what mattered was how politicians perceived the wider public. Cowling assumed ‘that the crude picture politicians had of the electorate was a significant factor in determining their reaction to the problems it presented’.³⁶ In the case of the Second Reform Act, the public agitation was a factor in Conservative decision-making after July 1866, and had a role to play ‘in creating the climate’ which led Disraeli to accept Hodgkinson’s amendment in May 1867.³⁷ But the way in which the extra-parliamentary pressure played out in parliament did not alone determine the content of specific moves: ‘between the journalism and agitation of Potter, Howell and Beales and governmental or parliamentary decision a *filtering process* was interposed’, which turned manhood suffrage and equal constituencies into proposals which were more likely to be accepted by parliamentarians.³⁸ The same was true in reverse: the leaders of the extra-parliamentary movement interpreted what politicians did and acted as they saw fit in response, sometimes ratcheting up the pressure, sometimes letting it down. In *The impact of Labour*, for instance, most labour leaders wanted to make an impression on parliament, and distanced themselves from agitation if it compromised that end.³⁹ Cowling stressed that ‘the public movement was affected by what was done in Parliament and Parliament by what was done outside’, and urged labour historians to pay more attention to the interactions between the two at the ‘point where parliamentary and popular radicalism met’.⁴⁰ In sum politics was *not* a series of closed worlds that passed each other like ships in the night, but rather sets of distinct groups between which there could be permeability and filtration.

³¹ Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, pp. 5–6, 7–8, 20–1.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 21. Compare Vincent’s endorsement of 1867 in *Economic History Review*, 20 (1967), p. 564.

³³ Cowling, 1867, p. 3.

³⁵ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 4.

³⁷ Cowling, 1867, pp. 61, 286.

³⁹ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60, my emphasis.

⁴⁰ Cowling, 1867, p. 316.

Nevertheless the central focus for these historians was ‘high politics’. This phrase is actually more complex than is sometimes suggested. It is not synonymous with ‘Westminster’ or ‘parliament’ or even ‘Whitehall’. These are worlds in their own right: they may overlap more with ‘high politics’ than with popular politics, but they are not the same. Cooke and Vincent announced that their prime concern was not ‘administration’ and noted that some leading politicians – Kimberley, for instance – were more interested in running their departments efficiently than jostling with party leaders.⁴¹ Similarly, the day-to-day business of parliament was not always central to ‘high politics’. Cooke and Vincent commented on the fact that the 1886 session achieved a substantial amount of reforming legislation precisely because party leaders were distracted with ‘high politics’ elsewhere.⁴² At times parliamentary politics did become central to ‘high politics’: it is more important in 1867 than in *The impact of Labour* or *The impact of Hitler* because the centre of anxiety was a specific piece of legislation. At other times the focus could reside elsewhere. The historians of ‘high politics’ have often argued that the formal locations of decision-making – cabinet and parliament – were frequently not the actual locations: hence Cooke and Vincent’s famous insistence on ‘the medium of clubs, the lobby, the dinner table, the race meeting, the visit to dine and sleep, the morning call, and the stroll in the park’.⁴³ Nor should ‘high politics’ be seen simply as ‘government’ or even ‘cabinet’. When Cowling wrote that the political system ‘consisted of fifty or sixty politicians’ in tension with one another, it is often forgotten that this was rather a large cast.⁴⁴ It was not restricted to office holders, for ‘significance arose from mutual recognition; not from office, but from a distinction between politicians, *inside parliament and outside*, whose actions were thought reciprocally important and those whose actions were not’.⁴⁵ Strikingly, in 1867, Cowling stated that reform leaders such as ‘Beales, Bradlaugh and Potter were as much parts of the political system as Disraeli or Gladstone’.⁴⁶ By the 1910s and 1920s, significance was also attached to press barons and labour leaders.⁴⁷ Conversely, civil servants and backbenchers were often not part of the ‘system’ unless they came to be recognized as important figures in their own right – as Maurice Hankey was in the 1930s. There is a danger of a circular definition here, but nevertheless the argument was that the political system at any given point was made up of those figures whose power in some sense mattered and so needed to be taken into account when decisions were being made.

The other central criticism of the ‘high politics’ school – that its politicians were motivated by ambition to the exclusion of principle – is equally

⁴¹ Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, pp. xiii–xiv, 5, 119.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 3. The size could vary, even in the same work. *The nature and limits of political science* (Cambridge, 1963), speaks of forty to fifty men on p. 30 and seventy to eighty on p. 189.

⁴⁵ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 4, my emphasis.

⁴⁶ Cowling, 1867, p. 288.

⁴⁷ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 12; Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, p. 20.

misleading.⁴⁸ Admittedly some reviewers were more perceptive than others: Dunbabin noted that Cowling looked at the way policy was ‘filtered’ through party politics, and Skidelsky commented that other historians were not as good at discussing ‘issues in terms of politics’.⁴⁹ Certainly one can point to many ‘intellectual’ politicians in these works. Robert Lowe was a ‘systematic utilitarian and ideologist of respectability’, Lord Carnarvon an ‘earnest, doctrinaire, illiberal’ man, and James Bryce a ‘party intellectual’.⁵⁰ *The impact of Labour* opens with a survey of the ‘rag-bag of attitudes, purposes, programmes and intentions’ of the labour movement.⁵¹ These examples could be multiplied endlessly – suffice to say that the historians of ‘high politics’ were well aware that politicians had ideas. Some, perhaps, might come with fully-developed programmes, others, perhaps, with only half-formed prejudices. Many, of course, had few strong ideas about anything except their own welfare. Cowling’s point is emphatically not that all politicians were motivated by ambition. Instead, he saw politicians as having all manner of beliefs *and* ambitions at the same time. When discussing the attitudes of various labour leaders he noted that these ran alongside ‘the usual amount of ambition, vanity and manoeuvre *inseparable* from political action’.⁵² The point was made very clear in *The impact of Hitler*, the aim of which was to remove misunderstandings about an ‘implied contradiction between expediency and principle’.⁵³ This was not an argument about politicians being motivated either by firm convictions – which would be absurdly naïve – or by selfish interests – which is pure cynicism – but instead a case about how the nature of politics *necessitates* a complex relationship between the two.

Except, perhaps, in the politics of an autocracy, all political systems are social systems that require agents to work with each other.⁵⁴ As Cooke and Vincent put it, ‘The solitary individual cannot commit politics’ – he or she is incapable of being effective by working alone.⁵⁵ This is why party was so important in Cowling’s arguments, and why he was particularly interested in periods when the party system was unusually fluid. In the 1860s, the ‘context in which politicians were operating made it impossible to think of achieving any permanent political objective without attempting to control, or modify, the course adopted by one party or another’. Since numerous individuals made up the political system there was a ‘sense of continuing tension *between* and *within* and *across* party’. No political leader in the mid-nineteenth century could be so sure of their following that they could govern ‘without fear either of competition from within or of opposition from without’, and by the interwar period they had also to be aware of wider

⁴⁸ For Cowling’s views of Namier, compare *Nature and limits*, p. 172, with *Religion and public doctrine*, III: *Accommodations* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 620, 635–46.

⁴⁹ *Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), p. 306; *Spectator*, 26 July 1975, p. 111.

⁵⁰ Cowling, *1867*, pp. 10, 155; Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, p. 150.

⁵¹ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 30, my emphasis.

⁵³ M. Cowling, *The impact of Hitler: British politics and British policy, 1933–1940* (Cambridge, 1975), p. ix.

⁵⁴ Compare *1867*, p. 312, and *Nature and limits*, pp. 181–5.

⁵⁵ Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, p. 66.

public perceptions.⁵⁶ It followed that successful leaders were ones that were able to appeal to diverse groups over long periods of time, and to do so they necessarily had to be flexible and adaptive. As Jones suggests, ‘fixity of purpose is a liability ... where mastery is mastery of the situation after next’: shifting and shuffling was an essential skill.⁵⁷ Indeed, so strong and varied were the pressures on political leaders that the ‘high politics’ approach can sound overtly structural. Cowling wrote of how politicians ‘cannot usefully be said themselves to have wanted, desired, or believed anything except what was wanted by all other participants in the system’, while Cooke and Vincent thought that a politician ‘submits to enacting the roles the situation gives him and not the role his fantasies give him’.⁵⁸ In the 1880s, there was almost no connection between ‘Tory feelings and Tory actions’, and even when such connections existed, much depended on the exact political context.⁵⁹ Cooke and Vincent accept that Gladstone did not act solely from ‘gross or opportunist’ motives, that for some time he had privately sympathized with home rule, and that from December 1885 he was jotting down outlines of bills. ‘What we do not know, and still more important, what he could not know, would be the political context in which these useful contingency measures might become the basis of legislation.’ He might have had ideas about what he wanted, but he was also aware of ‘what it was possible to achieve’.⁶⁰ What can be concluded is not that politicians had no private beliefs, but rather that those private beliefs might not be of much use in interpreting public performance at any given moment.

While Cowling’s principal concern was not what politicians believed, he was undoubtedly interested in what they said. This interest in rhetoric was fundamental and once again reveals the Namierite typology to be misleading. *The impact of Hitler* insisted that ‘the public statements of politicians were functional, not “true”’ and so the question was what purposes the words served, not whether they were accurate.⁶¹ The historian was dealing with politicians who were ‘histrionic’: their words and actions were intended to be ambiguous and it was best to think of them as inhabiting roles, roles which were attuned to the ‘limits of political possibility’.⁶² Some political leaders – pre-eminently Disraeli and Palmerston – were masters of the ‘highest sorts of ambiguity’, while even a seeming ideologue such as Bright possessed an ‘unconcealed ambiguity’ which could prove useful.⁶³ Sometimes politicians might, without even realizing it, entertain a range of views on particular topics. Lord Derby had a variety of opinions about how best to oppose Labour and emphasized different ones ‘according to their relevance to the tactical situation’, and Lloyd George’s views can be

⁵⁶ Cowling, *1867*, pp. 4, 5.

⁵⁷ A. Jones, ‘Where “governing is the use of words”’, *Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), p. 252; Cowling, *1867*, p. 33.

⁵⁸ Cowling, *1867*, pp. 311–12; Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, p. 66.

⁵⁹ Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, p. 61.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 55.

⁶¹ Cowling, *Hitler*, p. 2. This was reaffirmed in the 1990 edition of *Mill and liberalism*, p. xv.

⁶² Cowling, *1867*, p. 7.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 209, 294.

interpreted in a similar light.⁶⁴ Sometimes their expressed views were attuned to a particular end: in 1867 Disraeli and Gladstone both couched reform proposals in a ‘language’ designed to play down its innovating aspects, while in *The impact of Labour*, all manner of politicians were casting around for a new political ‘rhetoric’ to reshape the landscape.⁶⁵ A central theme of the latter book is the way that the Conservatives eventually hit upon an ideology to resist Labour. This was an ideology of Englishness, headed by Baldwin’s ‘mindless rural persona’, and which was capable of binding together ‘moral, industrial, agrarian, libertarian, anglican and nonconformist opinion’. The purpose of this ideology was resistance to socialism, but its advantage was that it made it possible ‘to talk about something – almost anything – apart from the function the party had to perform’.⁶⁶ In terms of belief, some of those who articulated this ideology may also have believed it: ‘Bryant probably meant what he wrote. Davidson certainly did.’⁶⁷ It is clear, then, that even in these works of ‘high politics’ rhetoric is part of the toolkit of a politician. That which was said might only have a tenuous relationship with what the politician believed, or it might be that, being said over and over again, it came to be something which he believed fervently.⁶⁸ The point, however, is that ideas certainly did matter, and could not be emptied out of the landscape of ‘high politics’.

The problem was how to uncover the ‘function’ of rhetoric and so expose the real motivation for political action. It was argued that most of the sorts of material typically used by political historians – newspapers and pamphlets – gave ‘marginal’ returns, because their authors rarely knew why politicians acted in the way that they did.⁶⁹ Parliamentary speeches also had to be used carefully: they could be used to reconstruct cultural and political assumptions, but they did not normally tell the historian why the speaker spoke, nor what objective he had. Sometimes a speech might be used as an instrument of self-advancement, sometimes as an expression of true beliefs, and sometimes because the politician was expressing ‘local, personal or extraneous’ issues. Sometimes he might simply have been told what to say by a frontbencher.⁷⁰ In other words public speech did not in itself reveal the ‘relationship between belief and calculation’ which was so central to understanding why decisions were made.⁷¹ It is for these reasons that this approach to political history is closely associated with a strong preference for private over public sources, because letters and diaries provided the best chance of glimpsing the real motives that lay behind political performances. These

⁶⁴ Cowling, *Labour*, pp. 9, 418; Cowling, *Hitler*, pp. 36–41.

⁶⁵ Cowling, 1867, p. 54; Cowling, *Labour*, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Cowling, *Labour*, pp. 422–3. See also M. Cowling, ‘The present position’, in M. Cowling, ed., *Conservative essays* (London, 1978), p. 10.

⁶⁷ Cowling, *Hitler*, p. 260.

⁶⁸ See *Nature and limits*, pp. 185–6, and ‘The present position’, p. 9.

⁶⁹ A. Jones, *The politics of reform, 1884* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 11.

⁷⁰ Cowling, 1867, pp. 317, 318.

⁷¹ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 39. The same was true of official publications: *Nature and limits*, pp. 20–3; *Hitler*, p. 2.

historians were not at all as naïve about these sources as is sometimes suggested.⁷² Cowling was well aware that while some politicians probably did reveal their actual motives in correspondence (for instance Derby in the second half of 1866), others who were in the thick of political management (such as Disraeli and Gladstone) were more cautious.⁷³ He concluded that evidence about the ‘minds and intentions’ of major players in which they explained the ‘grounds and objectives’ of their policies with an absence of ‘tactical intent’ or with ‘tactical intention that is readily discernible’ was ‘extremely slender’.⁷⁴ It was, however, such information which had the best chance of illuminating the relationship between what politicians desired and what they said and did. At this point it is worth stressing – because it is often forgotten – that Cowling’s approach was not restricted to political leaders. In a penetrating assessment of reform societies in the 1860s, he distinguished between the ‘substantial objectives of their policies’ and the ‘tactical purposes by which their objectives were surrounded’. While this was obvious in dealing with parliamentary politicians ‘it is no less necessary in evaluating the activities of those whose centre of power lay outside Parliament’.⁷⁵

It should now be clear that ‘ambition and manoeuvre’ were only elements of political understanding. This need not mean the ambition was always narrowly personal and selfish. It *could* be directed to the perceived interests of a class or, perhaps, the nation, a group or, most often, a party. It should also be clear that ‘rhetoric’ was an inseparable component of politics because of its role in persuading others in the system. None of this means that *all* political decisions were steeped in ‘high politics’.⁷⁶ Cooke and Vincent showed that, because the party leaders in 1886 were so wrapped up in problems of party structure, fifty-nine public acts – many of a radical liberal nature – were passed with little contention. This was legislation in the virtual absence of high politics, and so its content can be explained without recourse to ‘ambition and manoeuvre’.⁷⁷ Cowling made the same point. In *The impact of Labour*, he argued that the politics of 1919–22 can be seen as the ‘history of serious, powerful and determined attempts at a high level of competence to resolve the major problems’ created by war and peace, but that they were ‘detached from the world context to which they belonged’ and became battle cries for ‘conflicting groups whose objects were to gain, or keep, political power more even than to settle Europe’s problems or improve Britain’s place in it’.⁷⁸ In *The impact of Hitler*, he argued that foreign policy became central in the 1930s ‘not only because it was’ – meaning that it was important in its own right – but also because politicians could ‘fit it into the political battle’ begun in the 1920s. Hence ‘the politics of the Powers must be seen through the *filtering* effected by the politics of the parties’. Crucially, however,

⁷² E.g. P. M. Gurowich, ‘Party and independence in the early and mid-Victorian House of Commons’ (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1986), pp. 8–9.

⁷³ Cowling, *1867*, pp. 325–31.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁷⁶ This is a common misperception of critics, e.g. P. Clark, ‘Political history in the 1980s’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (1981), p. 47.

⁷⁷ Cooke and Vincent, *Governing passion*, p. 16.

⁷⁸ Cowling, *Labour*, p. 109.

Cowling also argued that when ‘foreign policy is marginal’ – or indeed any policy is marginal – it was ‘possible to neglect the total situation and still show how policy is conducted’.⁷⁹ Put in simple terms this meant that when policies did not raise, or could not be used to raise, substantial questions that affected the party system, historians did not need to interpret their operation through the lens of ‘high politics’, and might even be able to explain them as the outcome of ‘relevant decisions relevantly taken about the substantive merits of questions’.⁸⁰

It follows from all this that the ‘high politics’ school did not propose a cynical or pessimistic or defeatist understanding of politics. Indeed, the histories written by Cowling were applications of various philosophical and sociological opinions that he had acquired since the 1940s. While there is now a wide and growing interest in his doctrines, much of this generally focuses on his political and religious thought, rather than on his historical methodology.⁸¹ However, in a comprehensive but esoteric essay, Peter Ghosh has offered the view that ultimately Cowling is ‘not properly a historian at all’. His historical writings reject the intellectual tools forged since the Enlightenment, reveal ‘ignorance of any form of social or institutional explanation’, and so are ‘alien to history in their conception’. These problems, Ghosh continued, were generally veiled by the narrow time-frames adopted by the ‘high politics’ trilogy. While Cowling’s pupils have tackled some of the issues he has raised – especially the ‘overwhelming difficulty’ of explaining the relationship between ideas and action – they have been unaware that they were dealing with problems that Cowling thought were ‘insoluble’.⁸² The root of Ghosh’s argument is that by committing himself a priori to a radical relativism and individualism he created an insurmountable problem for all his historical works.⁸³ This is an important argument which raises fundamental questions, but as we shall see the case is overstated. Nevertheless, Ghosh recognized that Cowling’s studies of ‘high politics’ were themselves steeped in a philosophical atmosphere from which they cannot easily be detached.

Attention must now be given to *The nature and limits of political science* and *Mill and liberalism*. Cowling conceived *1867* as an historical application of the arguments of these first two books, and referred the reader back to them for theoretical guidance.⁸⁴ But in looking for the intellectual influences that lay behind *these* works, the historian is hampered by the lack of private papers. As Cowling later explained, in the 1950s he wanted to read, rather than write, so that he could ‘develop’ and know ‘how to say what I thought I wanted to say’.⁸⁵ The first

⁷⁹ Cowling, *Hitler*, pp. 1, 5, my emphasis.

⁸⁰ Cowling, *1867*, p. 3.

⁸¹ E.g. C. Covell, *The redefinition of conservatism: politics and doctrine* (London, 1986), pp. 144–71; I. Harris, ‘Religion, authority and politics: the thought of Maurice Cowling’, *Political Science Reviewer*, 26 (1997), pp. 434–81.

⁸² P. Ghosh, ‘Towards the verdict of history: Mr Cowling’s doctrine’, in M. Bentley, ed., *Public and private doctrine: essays in British history presented to Maurice Cowling* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 306–8.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 274–5.

⁸⁴ Cowling, *1867*, p. 312.

⁸⁵ See Michael Bentley, ‘Interviews with historians: Maurice Cowling’, Institute of Historical Research DVD, c. 1998.

volume of *Religion and public doctrine* provides something like an intellectual autobiography, but its focus is primarily his religious development, rather than his methodological alignments. Interestingly, he notes that he picked up the ‘dismissal of the politics of principle’ at Cambridge in the 1940s from reading Hegel, and, more importantly, Nietzsche.⁸⁶ The latter, of course, articulated the most influential case that truth is perspectival, and that statements of principle masked the will to power. A central influence was Butterfield who, amongst other things, taught him that even a reasonable degree of ‘cupidity’ and ‘wilfulness’ among men could create ‘predicaments and dilemmas’ in politics and ‘tie events into knots’.⁸⁷ In addition, Cowling’s experience of ‘the outer fringes of the English polity’ during the 1950s drew attention to the differences between ‘political society’ and ‘society at large’ which sowed the seeds of *The nature and limits of political science* and, later, the ‘high politics’ trilogy.⁸⁸ This was combined with the influence of English Idealism, a movement out of favour in mid-twentieth-century Britain, but one which proved central to Cowling’s intellectual development.

Examination of R. G. Collingwood and Michael Oakeshott enables a more precise focus on Cowling’s approach to political history. Their writings provided both an antidote to much that he opposed, and set the foundations for his approach to history. Both provided a strong sense of the autonomy of history from science, and both included naturalism and positivism among their antipathies. They were equally sceptical of the pretensions of ‘social science’. As Cowling summarized, history ‘knew nothing and cared less about a “natural or logical development” and had nothing to learn from “cause and effect” or from Bury’s “conflux of coincidences”’. The “science of history” was said to be an absurd notion’. It followed that any attempt to claim special predictive power for such a science was absurd. Furthermore, both opposed the idea that history as the ‘past-as-it-was’ could be recovered. Oakeshott ‘rejected objectivity, “unbiased history” and the idea that the historian “begins” by collecting material’ and Collingwood taught that historians always asked questions of the past and that the facts were never independent of the judgements of historians.⁸⁹ The seeds were sown for Cowling’s conviction (‘acquired early and never lost’) that ‘professional history’ was an illusion because the perspective of the historian always entered into the research he conducted, and so ‘historical writing is an instrument of doctrine, whatever historians may imagine’.⁹⁰

In 1949, Cowling encountered the Collingwood of *The idea of history*, *The idea of nature*, and the *Autobiography*, and, perhaps, of *An essay on metaphysics*. This body of work gave a fillip to the study of the history of thought and supplied undergraduates with ‘a justification of non-scientific study based on the view that

⁸⁶ M. Cowling, *Religion and public doctrine in modern England* (Cambridge, 1980), p. xxi.

⁸⁷ H. Butterfield, *Christianity and history* (London, 1949), p. 37, and highlighted by Jones, ‘Where “governing is the use of words”’, p. 253. See also Cowling, *Religion*, pp. 237–8.

⁸⁸ Cowling, *Religion*, p. xx. The best account of Cowling’s early years is recalled to Bentley, ‘Interviews with historians: Maurice Cowling’.

⁸⁹ Cowling, *Religion*, p. 258.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

human action and thought, being free and self-determining, could be grasped, discussed or recreated by critical, philosophical or historical thinking'.⁹¹ In the slogan that 'all history is the history of thought', Collingwood provided a basis for the subsequent development of the Cambridge approach to the history of political thought.⁹² This legacy to intellectual history, however, is misleading because Collingwood was outlining an approach for *all* historians. In distinguishing between the 'outside' and 'inside' of an event, he insisted that only by understanding the latter – 'getting inside other people's heads' – could one provide explanation.⁹³ This was as true for understanding the Battle of Trafalgar as for the *Two treatises of government*. It was true of politics:

Political history is the history of political thought: not 'political theory', but the thought which occupies the mind of a man engaged in political work: the formation of a policy, the planning of means to execute it, the attempt to carry it into effect, the discovery that others are hostile to it, the devising of ways to overcome their hostility, and so forth.⁹⁴

In other words Collingwood could provide a base not just for those interested in political ideas, but also for those concerned with political action. Collingwood asked historians to look at the thought that accompanied and underpinned behaviour, and so, while a history of high politics might reject the view that 'ideas' (in the strong sense) had much impact on politicians, it could accept that 'ideas' (in this weaker sense) remained central to explaining events from 'inside other people's heads'.

Collingwood also supplied Cowling with 'a complicated type of relativism' which had similarities with his earlier engagements with Arnold Toynbee and, more importantly, Karl Barth via Edwyn Hoskyns. The latter, in particular, convinced him that when set against the transcendence of God the insignificance of man meant that 'no moral or political system has any authority, and more or less anything will do'.⁹⁵ What Cowling had in mind were Collingwood's 'brilliant conceptions' of 'absolute presuppositions and total contextualization' which 'deserved better' than to be reduced to a 'caricature' about the importance of context.⁹⁶ The idea of 'absolute presuppositions' was sketched in the *Autobiography* and detailed in the *Essay on metaphysics*. Metaphysics, Collingwood argued, should concern itself with laying bare the foundations of a system of knowledge beyond which no further questions could be asked. It was an attempt, first, 'to discover what the people of that time believe about the world's nature' and, second, 'to discover the corresponding presuppositions of other peoples and other times' and to trace how 'one set of presuppositions has turned into

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁹² Although now a cliché, this phrase was used repeatedly in R. G. Collingwood, *The idea of history* (Oxford, 1946), pp. 115, 117, 215, 317, and endorsed in *idem*, *An autobiography* (Oxford, 1939), p. 110.

⁹³ Collingwood, *Idea of history*, p. 213; *idem*, *Autobiography*, p. 58.

⁹⁴ Collingwood, *Autobiography*, p. 110.

⁹⁵ Cowling, *Religion*, pp. 162, 94. For the way these ideas were conveyed to Cowling by his tutor in 1943–4, see pp. 73–96.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

another'.⁹⁷ It followed that there could be no absolute presuppositions which held universally for all humans across time and space, but that there could be shared presuppositions held by people with common 'cultural equipment', such as 'social and political habits, religion, education and so forth'.⁹⁸ Cowling noted three conclusions. First, there could be no eternal problems in metaphysics only different problems at specific historical moments. Second, the complex and variable nature of absolute presuppositions meant they could not be used to establish a deductive science. Finally, these presuppositions were a constitutive element of all thought. Collingwood 'made it clear that the metaphysical exposure of presuppositions could be applied to all systematic objects' and that metaphysics was really the exposure by historical criticism of the roots of civilization.⁹⁹ These ideas have had a growing influence since Collingwood's death, and various scholars have noted their affinity with those of Wittgenstein, Kuhn, Foucault, and even Nietzsche.¹⁰⁰ What impressed Cowling was that 'absolute presuppositions' seemed to show that at root our commitments were historically contingent and lacked foundations. As he explained in a radio discussion, certain intellectual conflicts – especially questions about religion – dealt with 'fundamental assumptions' about which appeals to evidence and reason became meaningless.¹⁰¹

The doctrine of 'total contextualization' had a related appeal. This arose from Collingwood's ideas about the logic of 'question and answer', which claimed that any proposition was the answer to a question, and that that question was an answer to another question and so on, all the way down to absolute presuppositions, about which no further questions could be asked. If reconstructing the context was essential to capture the meaning of a proposition, then ultimately 'the whole of a civilization is the only adequate context to consider in using artefacts as material for creating an historical past'.¹⁰² In practice, of course, it was impossible for historians to know this totality. Nevertheless, in his earliest writings, Cowling insisted that, to understand a writer, it was necessary to examine not just what he said, but how and why he came to say it. This meant paying attention not just to 'intellectual tradition' but also to 'personal situation' and relevant social and political contexts. It meant using a person's 'intimate writings' – letters and diaries – to provide insight into 'personal consciousness' and so distinguish 'what he thought from what he said'.¹⁰³ This approach to context helps explain Cowling's criticisms of sub-fields like the histories of historiography and of political thought: both were abridgements of 'a history of the whole of thought'.¹⁰⁴ It also helps

⁹⁷ Collingwood, *Autobiography*, p. 66. See also idem, *An essay on metaphysics*, ed. R. Martin (Oxford, 1998), pp. 70–4.

⁹⁸ Collingwood, *Metaphysics*, p. 60.

⁹⁹ Cowling, *Religion*, p. 178.

¹⁰⁰ See R. Martin, 'Editor's Introduction' to Collingwood, *Metaphysics*, pp. lxxxii–iii n. 4.

¹⁰¹ M. Cowling, 'Theory and politics', transcript of radio broadcast, c. 1963, p. 11, in the possession of Philip Williamson.

¹⁰² Cowling, *Religion*, p. 188. See Collingwood, *Autobiography*, pp. 29–43; idem, *Metaphysics*, pp. 23–33.

¹⁰³ See M. Cowling, 'Mr Woodruff's Acton', *Cambridge Journal*, 6 (1952), p. 181; *Nature and limits*, pp. 46–7.

¹⁰⁴ Cowling, *Religion*, p. 230.

explain one of his disagreements with Quentin Skinner, who was accused of contextualizing propositions only within a field of linguistic meanings. Cowling claimed to offer an ‘actual (or historical)’ rather than an ‘exhortatory (or Skinnerian)’ contextualization.¹⁰⁵ There was a further reason why Cowling approved of ‘total contextualization’: the historian himself was part of the context he investigated. Collingwood ‘understood, even when he did not explain, that historical writing is wrenched out of a present totality which determines the direction of historical thinking, is vital to the creation of “the past”, and demands self-consciousness about assumptions as an essential facet of historical thinking’.¹⁰⁶ This made Cowling, on the one hand, sceptical towards claims to historical neutrality and, on the other, interested in the attitudes that historians brought to their research. He recognized that the concepts we hold infuse the work we pursue, and this was to be a central plank of his scepticism towards objectivity.

Cowling first read Oakeshott in 1948 (probably in the *Cambridge Journal*) and by the time *The nature and limits of political science* was published he was familiar with most of Oakeshott’s writings.¹⁰⁷ Many of these were, as Cowling comments, attempts to change the ‘tone and assumptions’ of political debate in the post-war climate. The unifying theme was resistance to the claim that technical knowledge (‘ideology’) was the only genuine form of knowledge and that practical knowledge (‘tradition’) should give way to it. Cowling later summarized this as the view that

human behaviour is a matter of art, not nature; that human conduct is rational when it exhibits intelligence appropriate to the idiom of the activity it is concerned with; and that concrete activity – knowledge of how to act – is ‘practical’ or ‘traditional’ knowledge, the ‘sort of knowledge without ... which ... the pursuit of any concrete activity is impossible’.¹⁰⁸

Oakeshott did not believe that technical knowledge was irrelevant, only that its place was alongside practical knowledge. *The nature and limits of political science* upheld these arguments. In the world of practice, the absence of articulate doctrine did not mean that actions lacked a purposive dimension. All persons held a ‘picture of the world’ which was shaped by more than political philosophy or formal education. It was shaped by ‘the whole of the education and the whole of a religion’ that a person had, and this included the ‘conventional habits, reasonable laws, acceptable customs and well understood liberties’ which made up a political structure. It followed that persons were ‘in the grip of, dependent on, and in one sense determined by’ conditions over which they had no control: their very

¹⁰⁵ Cowling, ‘Introduction’ to *Mill and liberalism*, p. xv. He also objected to Skinner’s liberalism and irreligion: *Religion*, III, pp. 619–21.

¹⁰⁶ Cowling, *Religion*, pp. 188–9.

¹⁰⁷ He later criticized *Nature and limits* for its statements about academic neutrality, arguing that all academics had doctrines to peddle: *Religion*, p. xxii; ‘Introduction’ to *Mill and liberalism*, p. xi.

¹⁰⁸ Cowling, *Religion*, p. 272. The quotation is from M. Oakeshott, ‘Rationalism in politics’, in *Rationalism in politics and other essays* (Indianapolis, IN, 1991), p. 12. The statement par excellence is ‘Political education’ in the same volume, pp. 43–69.

constitution as agents.¹⁰⁹ This was traditional knowledge or ‘rational prejudice’, concepts which only appeared paradoxical to those who thought that rationality must be judged by ‘deliberate premeditation and rational intention’. While many political decisions were indeed made as a result of purposive deliberation, others could be reached almost spontaneously and seemingly by intuition: ‘action need not be self-conscious in order to be rational or right’.¹¹⁰ It followed that while some politicians spoke of adhering to principles and others of conforming to tradition when they acted, it was nevertheless true that both had principles and pragmatism inscribed in their political decisions. ‘Moral action does not emerge from the utterance of irrelevant slogans – or even from the utterance of relevant ones – it emerges *ambulando*, in the full accomplishment of practice.’¹¹¹ What Oakeshott gave Cowling – among other things – was a way of thinking about political behaviour which gave significance to principles and prejudices without turning the individual agent into a bearer of articulate ideology. Hence, like Collingwood, Oakeshott thought a study of politics should be about ‘what people have thought and said about what happened: the history, not of political ideas, but of the manner of our political thinking’.¹¹²

The sorts of arguments Cowling took from Collingwood and Oakeshott enable us to locate him within debates about the philosophy of social science. This is made clearer by Peter Winch’s *Idea of a social science*, which drew on Wittgenstein, Collingwood, and Oakeshott to present an extremely influential argument in the interpretative tradition which stood against the claims of naturalistic social science. Cowling thought it provided something like a ‘systematic’ account of social science, and in attacking J. S. Mill, it pre-empted some of the arguments used a few years later in *Mill and liberalism*.¹¹³ (Cowling stressed, first, that because all historical knowledge was dependent on the perspective of the historian, there was no objective knowledge of ‘the past’ from which laws of behaviour could be distilled, and, second, that the generalizations adduced from historical research had no special status as explanations, let alone as predictions.)¹¹⁴ In presenting an alternative approach to social science, Winch stated that ‘Our idea of what belongs to the realm of reality is given for us in the language that we use. The concepts we have settle for us the form of the experience we have of the world.’¹¹⁵ The different ways of making the world intelligible – scientific, religious, philosophical, etc. – could not be reduced to a single type. Winch was inspired by Wittgenstein’s concept of following a rule: the rules of any form of meaningful behaviour constituted it as that sort of activity and so enabled agents to have understanding of such practices and, ultimately, to ‘go on’. Interestingly, Winch also explored the similarities this approach had with Oakeshott’s arguments

¹⁰⁹ Cowling, *Nature and limits*, pp. 131, 208, 198, 206.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 135, 138.

¹¹² Oakeshott, ‘Political education’, p. 63.

¹¹⁴ Cowling, *Mill and liberalism*, pp. 118–31.

¹¹⁵ P. Winch, *The idea of a social science and its relation to philosophy* (London, 1958), p. 15.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹¹³ Cowling, *Nature and limits*, p. 16.

about habitual behaviour.¹¹⁶ The work concluded with an endorsement of Collingwood's approach to historical explanation as the basis for social science: social relations exist in and through the ideas current in society and so the task of the historian – or social scientist – is to trace the internal relations between them.¹¹⁷ Cowling's thinking can clearly be placed within the same interpretative approach to social science. We can draw out the implications of his arguments further by comparing them with the recent work of Mark Bevir, which also allows us to consider the criticisms that relativism and individualism fatally undermine his histories.

The logic of the history of ideas outlines a sophisticated approach to historical understanding and explanation which draws on post-foundationalism and idealism. Its arguments are shaped by a series of debates with Wittgenstein, Collingwood, Gadamer, Kuhn, Foucault, Winch, and Skinner among others. Unsurprisingly, therefore, its key themes are similar to those examined by Cowling. Let us take the issue of objectivity first. Bevir rejects traditional objectivism, but argues that this need not automatically lead to absolute scepticism about a form of objective knowledge. There is a strong scepticism associated with Dilthey and Gadamer which suggests it is impossible to recover the past because 'the current meaning of a historical event depends on a grasp of history as a unity culminating in the present' and that 'to grasp the full meaning of a historical event, we would have to see history as a whole, which we cannot do'. There is also a weaker scepticism which claims that 'our contemporary presuppositions enter into our understanding in a way that prevents us having real knowledge of the past'.¹¹⁸ Bevir's rejection of pure facts means he accepts this latter position, but argues that a form of objectivity can be reached by comparing rival theories for accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency, progressiveness, fruitfulness, and openness. The important point is that rejection of 'foundational objectivism' does not collapse into 'irrationalist relativism'.¹¹⁹ Cowling sometimes seems to endorse the strong position, but his practice is compatible with the weaker stance. In an interview in 1990, he spoke of his distaste for the 'truth rhetoric' and belief that objectivity was not a 'useful concept' but went on to say that the historian uses material to make

the past that he wants to make and *that he thinks plausible*. Obviously truth comes into it in the sense that there can be a misrepresentation of the material, and other historians will tell you if you misrepresent it ... Obviously historians are biased. There's no reason why they shouldn't be. Other people will correct them. It's a pluralistic activity.¹²⁰

The defence of procedural individualism – as distinct from atomistic or methodological individualism – is central to the *Logic*. Bevir argues against theories which state that structures or conventions fix the meanings of utterances and

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 54–65.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

¹¹⁸ M. Bevir, *The logic of the history of ideas* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 122–3.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 80.

¹²⁰ N. Attallah, ed., *Singular encounters* (London, 1990), pp. 130–1, my emphasis.

insists that meanings always belong to agents. Conventionalists, such as Skinner, argue that because ‘language presupposes social conventions’ an author ‘must follow existing social conventions. But to establish that shared conventions are necessary for a language to exist is not to establish that authors cannot successfully express their intentions unless they respect the ruling conventions.’¹²¹ Instead, conventions and structures are best seen as abstractions based on aggregates of individual viewpoints. Bevir goes on to explain that the ‘webs of belief’ of any person can be explained in terms of a ‘tradition’ which connects – conceptually and temporally – these beliefs against an acquired social background. Unlike a paradigm or language or episteme as commonly conceived, traditions are not hypostatized entities and have no existence separate from the individual beliefs that constitute them. Moreover, they have no determining power. ‘People reach the webs of belief they do against the background of traditions, but they are agents who can extend, modify, or even reject the traditions that provided the background to their initial webs of belief.’¹²² The logical possibility of agency is built into the concept of tradition even if some traditions discourage agency. Next, Bevir argues that individuals modify the traditions they inherit as a result of dilemmas – that is, when a new understanding clashes with an existing web of beliefs and causes the latter to be modified to account for it. The concept of a dilemma has some similarity with Kuhn’s idea of an anomaly, although the latter refers only to cases where dramatic shifts of belief occur. By contrast, dilemmas occur all the time: ‘even the trivial puzzles that lead all of us to adopt new beliefs all the time in our everyday existence’.¹²³ Thus Bevir’s *Logic* provides a framework for thinking about individual beliefs, the social background against which they arose, and the reasons for their continuity and change.

These arguments can cast light on the more problematic aspects of Cowling’s work. Both Bentley and Ghosh see a ‘staunch individualism’ in his thought which undermines the application of compound notions such as structures, concepts, institutions, and so on.¹²⁴ It is certainly true that prosopography increasingly came to dominate his writings, and it is also true that talk of structures was never predominant. The language of structure, however, is often used confusingly and has naturalistic tendencies which Cowling opposed. The minds of his agents, nevertheless, are shaped by a social inheritance. *The nature and limits of political science*, as we have seen, describes political actors as imbued with habitual and traditional knowledge, while *1867* speaks of political leaders acting out roles which their positions had made second nature.¹²⁵ Furthermore, the aim of *Religion and public doctrine* was to reveal the ‘deep structure’ of the doctrines of writers, and by looking at their whole *œuvre* it was hoped that such ‘structures’ might be more clearly visible. There are clear echoes here of the ‘absolute presuppositions’ of

¹²¹ Bevir, *Logic*, p. 46.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

¹²⁴ M. Bentley, ‘Prologue: the retiring Mr Cowling’, in *Public and private doctrine*, p. 8; Ghosh, ‘Towards the verdict of history’, *passim*.

¹²⁵ Cowling, *1867*, p. 312.

Collingwood.¹²⁶ Although he recognized that such presuppositions could be shared, Cowling rarely made an effort to ‘find any “structures” *between* thinkers’.¹²⁷ As Bevir’s concept of tradition indicates, however, there was nothing to *prevent* him from embarking on this task. Indeed, he often gestured in this direction, as when he sketched a tradition of conservative thought in ‘The present position’ or invoked traditions such as romanticism, evangelicalism, idealism, and so on.¹²⁸ The ‘high politics’ trilogy was primarily concerned with the immediate motives and actions of numerous politicians, but that it did not map the underlying intellectual traditions has not prevented other historians from doing so.¹²⁹ It appears that while Cowling was aware of the structures or traditions that underpinned the performances of individuals (he peppered his trilogy with short biographies of leading politicians which sketched their educational and intellectual influences), he was uneasy with any analysis that seemed to give them deterministic power.

Bevir’s primary concern is with beliefs expressed in a work rather than the motives which led to that work. ‘All historians study the same things. It is just that historians of ideas ask questions exclusively about the beliefs these things express, whereas other historians also ask questions about the pro-attitudes that motivated these things.’¹³⁰ He also argues that there must be a logical presumption – though not an expectation – in favour of sincere, conscious, and rational beliefs. Skinner, by contrast, uses speech-act theory to argue that the meaning of a work includes not just its sense and reference, but also its point. Indeed this is often assumed to be one of the advantages of his method: it encourages historians to look at why utterances were made, rather than to assume them to be sincere. The classic analysis is of Lord Bolingbroke, who spoke in a Country Whig language not because he believed it, but because by appealing to other Whigs to undermine Walpole, his own ambition was served.¹³¹ In its focus on the *purpose* of speech, Cowling seems closer to Skinner because he was interested in what politicians ‘do’ with ideas.¹³² Bevir, however, also proposed procedures for thinking about cases of deception. Historians should pay attention to the actual beliefs of the deceiver, they should examine his expressed beliefs in terms of the effects he thought they would have, and they should explain the disjunction between the two sets of attitudes by a pro-attitude which motivated the deception in the first place.¹³³ Bevir accepts such evidence is often difficult to acquire, but that this is the appropriate way to proceed. This is just what Cowling did in his ‘high politics’ trilogy: he looked at political rhetoric as a form of expressed belief, and used

¹²⁶ Cowling, *Religion*, p. xxiv.

¹²⁷ Bentley, ‘Prologue’, p. 9.

¹²⁸ Cowling, ‘The present position’, pp. 22–3.

¹²⁹ See J. Parry, *Democracy and religion: Gladstone and the liberal party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986).

¹³⁰ Bevir, *Logic*, p. 141.

¹³¹ Q. Skinner, ‘The principles and practice of opposition: The case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole’ in N. McKendrick, ed., *Historical perspectives: studies in English thought and society in honour of J. H. Plumb* (London, 1974), pp. 93–128.

¹³² Cowling, ‘Theory and politics’, p. 10.

¹³³ Bevir, *Logic*, pp. 269–70.

private correspondence to gather information both about the motivating pro-attitudes, and even the actual, private beliefs.

So far our concern has been with explaining individual thought and conduct. The ‘high politics’ trilogy, however, depicts a tightly woven intersubjective world composed of around fifty individuals all reacting to each other. It followed that the consequences of almost any action were potentially unpredictable. In politics, consequences mattered as much as intentions and ‘the consequences of even the most limited intentions are at the mercy of many factors over which no single will can have control’. Wherever one looked, there was ‘unexpected accident, unforeseen clash, unpredictable predicament’ crashing in on purposes and intentions. The very ‘nature of the world’ meant that there was a large gap between intended aim and actual consequence.¹³⁴ The knowledge of this ensured that most politicians, most of the time, were trying, as best they could, to take account of whatever circumstances seemed relevant whenever they acted, in order to control, as best they could, the consequences of those actions. While this ‘calculation of possibility’ was not the whole of politics, without it politics was impossible.¹³⁵ This was understood by Collingwood when he argued that an individual entered a world ‘crowded’ with other people ‘all pursuing activities of their own’, and so there would be little room for his own activity ‘unless he can so design this that it will fit into the interstices of the rest’. The ‘situation’ was made up of the thoughts of all persons involved, and so for ‘a man about to act, the situation is his master, his oracle, his god. Whether his action is to prove successful or not depends on whether he grasps the situation rightly or not.’ A wise man will do all in his power to find out what it is before he acts: ‘if he neglects the situation, the situation will not neglect him’.¹³⁶ This, for Cowling, generated a sociology of power: individuals persuading, or trying to persuade other individuals to do things in conditions of complexity, subject to fluctuation, and often with unknowable effects.

There is no reason to assume that the methodology proposed by Cowling made the writing of history impossible. Indeed, though he seems to avoid the sorts of social, institutional, and structural analysis Ghosh believes essential, this is not a necessary consequence of his approach. Again, Bevir’s work is suggestive. In an account of modern British governance he – along with Rod Rhodes – has responded to two major criticisms of interpretative theories. The first is that they cannot account for the ‘solidity and persistence’ of institutions. Bevir and Rhodes respond that too often institutions are defined as ‘fixed operating procedures or rules that constrain, arguably even determine’ actions, and that instead one should analyse the ways institutions are ‘produced, reproduced and changed through the particular and contingent beliefs, preferences and actions of individuals. Even when an institution maintains similar routines while personnel

¹³⁴ Cowling, *Nature and limits*, pp. 18–19, 124.

¹³⁵ Cowling, *Mill and liberalism*, p. 107.

¹³⁶ Collingwood, *Idea of history*, p. 316. Cowling also favoured the language of ‘situation’. See *Nature and limits*, pp. 178–85 and 1867, pp. 312–15.

changes, it does so mainly because the successive personnel pass on similar beliefs and preferences.¹³⁷ While Cowling generally bracketed questions of long-term institutional change, the methodology is not inconsistent with such enquiries. A second objection is that interpretative approaches cannot allow for material constraints on social actions. Bevir and Rhodes respond that, while they oppose economic determinism, they can accommodate economic influences. While it was always the ‘subjective beliefs people hold about the world’ that mattered, it was always possible that such beliefs arose ‘because of pressures in the world’, and that therefore ‘dilemmas often reflect material circumstances’.¹³⁸ Cowling was generally careful to indicate the way that *perceptions* of economic conditions affected how politicians acted. He would also have endorsed Bevir’s and Rhodes’s comment that governments cannot determine the consequences of their actions: ‘The effects will depend on how others react and their reactions will collectively constitute a relevant material reality.’¹³⁹ Just as politicians have perceptions of the populace, so too the people have perceptions of politicians which affect how they think and behave. The central point, however, is not whether one endorses Bevir’s arguments, but that Cowling adopted positions which find remarkable resonance in some of the most recent and reflective accounts of historical method.

There is a further point. Cowling’s writings in the 1960s and 1970s supply both a coherent methodology and a substantive history. These are often assumed to be interdependent, but in fact they are not. Cowling chose to focus on ‘high politics’ not because of his methodological commitments but because of his sociological interests. In *The nature and limits of political science*, he argued that contemporary political sociology – especially ideas about the influence of élites – did not have the requisite source materials to generate genuine insights. Instead, ‘much may be said for the view that political sociology will flourish best by turning attention to the innumerable questions which are still unanswered about the power, habits and intentions of the British political elite of the day before yesterday’.¹⁴⁰ The ‘high politics’ trilogy was Cowling’s answer to this problem in sociology, a problem which necessarily required examining the history of the political élite. If he had been interested in some other aspect of history, he could have adopted the same methodological positions (though he may have felt the source material insufficient). This was made abundantly clear in *The nature and limits of political science* which stated that its procedures applied to ‘all political action’ and operated in ‘all societies’.¹⁴¹ This could be as true of popular politics as of parliamentary politics, and indeed of the operation of power in a more diffused setting.

What then of ‘high politics’ and the ‘new political history’? The historians of ‘high politics’ have become increasingly interested in intellectual history since the 1970s – without abandoning concern for tactical questions – and it is probable

¹³⁷ M. Bevir and R. Rhodes, *Interpreting British governance* (London, 2003), pp. 63, 41.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ Cowling, *Nature and limits*, p. 174.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 189.

that ‘cultural’ approaches to politics may yield further insights. Conversely ‘new political history’ may be able to learn more from the idea – understood by Cowling and Skinner – that rhetoric could be used by all manner of persons to disguise motives and achieve ends. If there is a gap now between the two ‘schools’, it is less about method and more about subject. The ‘new political historians’ are still largely preoccupied by the concerns of electoral sociology, popular politics, and labour history, and – occasionally – can express disdain for ‘high politics’. The compliment has often been returned in kind. There are, however, signs that this gap too is being narrowed. If, in the 1960s and 1970s, it was claimed that ‘high politics’ was a ‘closed’ world, by the 1980s and 1990s this had become ‘half-closed’ or ‘largely autonomous’.¹⁴² A half-closed world is also a half-open one, and Lawrence Goldman has rightly urged attention to the points of interaction and contact between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics.¹⁴³ Jon Lawrence has recently pressed this thought further, arguing that there is little justification for these ‘ring-fenced’ endeavours and that a focus on the interconnectedness of the whole of politics is surely desirable.¹⁴⁴ This is salutary, although, as Jonathan Parry notes, there was never a complete fit between parliamentary and popular politics: ‘each world had its own cultures, traditions and priorities, and effective connections can be made between them only once historians are clear what these were’.¹⁴⁵ Hopefully, it may soon be recognized both that ‘new political history’ is not altogether new, and that ‘high politics’ need not always be high.

¹⁴² M. Bentley and J. Stevenson, ‘Introduction’ in idem, *High and low politics*, p. 1; P. Williamson, *National crisis and national government: British politics, the economy and empire, 1926–1932* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 13.

¹⁴³ L. Goldman, *Science, reform, and politics in Victorian Britain: the Social Science Association 1857–1886* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 7–11.

¹⁴⁴ J. Lawrence, ‘Political history’, in S. Berger, H. Feldner, and K. Passmore, eds., *Writing history: theory and practice* (London, 2003), p. 194.

¹⁴⁵ J. Parry, *The politics of patriotism: English liberalism, national identity and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 33.