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Democratic Struggle or National Uprising?

The Canadian Rebellions in British Political Thought, 1835-1840

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Between November 1837 and December 1838, the British colonies of Upper and Lower Canada witnessed a series of armed insurrections that were quickly defeated and brutally repressed by the authorities. These events sparked a public debate on the Canadian Question which continued until at least 1840, when the two provinces were merged together by the Canada Act. The rebellions have been widely studied by historians of colonial Canada, and occupy a prominent place in Québécois cultural memory.¹ On the other side of the Atlantic, however, the British debates on those events have not attracted similar attention.²

This article therefore argues that the role of the Canadian rebellions in early nineteenth-century British political thought has been under-appreciated. They were, in fact, the occasion of major reconceptualizations of two important terms that would later become central to the political lexicon of modern Britain: ‘democracy’ and ‘nationality’.

Historians have shown how the 1830s were a moment of transition for ‘democracy’: mainly used as a term of abuse by Tories during the debates on the 1832 Reform Act, by the end of the decade, Chartists had appropriated the term as a badge of honor.³

While this shift in usage is usually analysed in terms of British domestic politics, we show that it can be better understood by studying the debates around Canada in the period. ‘Nationality’, in contrast, has been identified as a salient issue in the British debate on Canada, but the ways in which the word was deployed throughout the debate has not been examined in detail - likely because it is not thought to have been attached to a fully political concept until the ‘principle of nationality’ became established in

public discourse in the late 1840s.⁴ Here our research suggests that new tentative uses of ‘nationality’ did emerge in the second half of the 1830s, and were redeployed in the context of the Canadian question. More generally, because the Canadian Rebellions were explicitly analysed by contemporary British commentators in terms of ‘democracy’ and ‘nationality’, we argue that the British debates on the Canadian Question throws new light on the contemporary reconfigurations of the ideas of democracy and nationality in the 1830s and 1840s.

After a brief overview of the Canadian crisis, we trace the histories of ‘democracy’ and ‘nationality’ prior to 1835. We then proceed to an analysis of the Tory and Whig uses of the words in Parliament and in the periodical press⁵. This allows us to contrast the innovative uses of the terms deployed by Radical commentators in the same period. In order to give a more comprehensive survey of the uses of ‘democracy’ and ‘nationality’, we choose to primarily focus on the words themselves and not the concepts they represent. The distinction between the two is of course fraught with difficulties. The challenge of disentangling words and concepts has preoccupied intellectual historians for decades, especially proponents of Reinhart Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte*⁶. Conversely, Quentin Skinner famously argued that he was more interested in the history of rhetorical strategies than of concepts, which he deemed impossible.⁷ Our aim is therefore not to settle the question but to take a more modest - and pragmatic - approach. Following Joanna Innes, we maintain that in order to understand the intentions and strategies behind the use of ‘nationality’ and ‘democracy’, we need to pay attention to their history as words⁸. While the concepts of democracy and nationality did have other signifiers at the time, we argue that focusing on these two words allows us to gain a richer understanding of the political and rhetorical strategies of British political writers in the late 1830s.

1- The Canadian Crisis: between ‘democracy’ and ‘nationality’

For both contemporaries and historians, the origin of the Rebellions is often traced back to 1791, when the Constitutional Act created the provinces of Upper and Lower Canada. This was in part in response to the arrival of numerous American Loyalists in the Province of Québec. By dividing the territory between Upper Canada, with a majority of English-speaking subjects, and Lower Canada, where French-Canadians were allowed to preserve their laws and religion, the British government hoped to prevent tensions.⁹ It also granted both provinces a local government, explicitly modelled in the image of the mixed constitution of Britain.¹⁰ The two provinces were to be ruled by a Legislative Assembly elected by property-owners, a hereditary Legislative Council and a Governor, chosen by the Imperial government. This mixed government was established in part to prevent the republican temptation following the American Revolution.¹¹ The strategy was only partly successful, as in the beginning of the nineteenth-century, demands for reform began to emerge.

In both provinces, conflict developed between the elected Assemblies and the Governors, who nominated and thus ruled the Legislative Council. For the Canadian reformists, strongly influenced by William Blackstone and Jean-Louis De Lolme, it was the collusion between the two elements that prevented the proper functioning of the Constitution. Calls for a government responsible to the elected House of Assembly, as in the British case, and not to the Governor, became more frequent. In the face of an intransigent Colonial Office, reformists increasingly turned to republican rhetoric, especially in the 1830s. Drawing on the American example, the Reformists in Upper Canada and the *Patriotes* in Lower Canada claimed that the Legislative council should be elected, and promoted a Jeffersonian ideal of a community of small landowners.¹²

Conflicting identities were also woven into the debate: in Lower Canada, the French-speaking Assembly denounced British favoritism, while in Upper Canada, reformists tended to be long-established settlers. As Allan Greer sums up, by 1837, both provinces had 'on one side, office-holding oligarchies loosely affiliated to more broadly based 'Tory parties' composed mainly of British immigrants and, on the other, a 'Reform' opposition critical of existing power structure.'¹³

Amidst an economic crisis and mounting political conflicts, the Whig government of Lord Melbourne officially refused the *Patriotes*' demands for reform in March 1837. Lord John Russell's *Ten Resolutions* enabled the Governor to spend without approbation of the Assembly, violating the principle of parliamentary control of expenses.¹⁴ The *Patriotes* began to organize committees and rallies, while in Upper Canada Reformists issued calls to vigilance and solidarity. When 26 *Patriotes* decided to resist arrest, armed conflict finally spew in November. After a *Patriote* victory in Saint-Denis, the British army retaliated and defeated the rebels in December, killing between 250 and 300 and jailing many more. At the same time, the Reformists also organized a short-lived insurrection in Toronto, although they were quickly put down, with less than a hundred being captured and deported. February and November 1838 witnessed two other invasion attempts by *Patriotes* forces based in the United-States, once again crushed through the work of the British army and local loyalist militias. For Michal Durcharme, this defeat marks the last chapter of the Atlantic Revolutions, ending the republican movement that had started in 1776.¹⁵

In the meantime, in May 1838, Lord Durham had arrived in Canada with special powers as Governor General to investigate on the rebellion. Although quickly dismissed by Melbourne in October 1838, Durham published his famous *Report on the affairs of British North America* in February 1839. The report recommended both the union of

Upper and Lower Canada to diminish French-Canadian influence in politics, and the granting of responsible government to the North American Colonies. Following vigorous debates, Westminster passed the British North America Act in 1840, merging the two Canadian provinces under a single legislature, favoring 'assimilation' over 'representation'.¹⁶ While initially not responsible to the House of Assembly, from 1848 onwards, the provincial Cabinet was being selected by and amongst the elected members.¹⁷

As this outline makes clear, the 1837-1838 Canadian crisis touched both on questions of 'democracy', in its relationship to 'responsible government', and of 'nationality', in the context of the preservation of the French-Canadian identity. This dual interpretative framework was immediately obvious to contemporaries, who, depending on their political allegiances, read the rebellions through the prism of either 'democracy' or 'nationality'.¹⁸ The colonial administrator George Gipps, sent to Canada in 1836 to assess the reformists' grievances, immediately seized upon this duality, and spelled out the stakes for the Canadian reformists in terms of perceived legitimacy and public sympathy: 'so long as the contest can be made to appear as one not of nationality but of political principle', he assessed, 'the Americans, and a portion even of the British will be on the democratic side.'¹⁹ The subsequent British debate was characterized by efforts on each side to frame the narrative, with critics of the rebellions portraying it as a national uprisings, and supporters denying its roots lay in 'nationality' and portraying it as a legitimate constitutional, and even democratic, struggle.²⁰

To understand why conservative and reformist contemporary commentators were so keen to portray the rebellions in terms of 'nationality' or 'democracy', we need to turn to the history of the two words before 1835. Although used in widely different contexts, both words shared similarities in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century

in that they were both minor, largely pejorative terms in the British political vocabulary. Until the mid-eighteenth-century ‘nationality’ had primarily been deployed in the context of naval or church law, but towards the end of the century it became increasingly used to denote excessive or bigoted attachment to a nation or ethnic group²¹. It remained rarely used until at least the 1830s.²²

‘Democracy’ had a longer, more historically - and politically- weighted history: it was a learned word, mainly used to designate a political regime with popular participation, and was associated with the republics of Antiquity.²³ As such it was synonymous with a turbulent, disorderly regime, leading to anarchy or despotism. Sometimes it was also used to imply an egalitarian principle (as in the idea of ‘a levelling democracy’) or to designate a social group, such as the lower orders – and both uses had a negative connotation. In Britain, in addition to these uses, ‘democracy’ was sometimes used positively by the late eighteenth-century within the context of the ‘theory of mixed government’, which analysed the British state as a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy.²⁴ But following the French Revolution, ‘democracy’ became a shorthand for violence and revolution.²⁵ While occasional positive uses of ‘democrat’ could still be found (mainly in opposition to ‘aristocrat’²⁶), in the early nineteenth-century British reformers were overall careful to present their demands within a constitutionalist idiom²⁷, and to leave ‘democracy’ out of the equation.²⁸

Therefore, both words were rarely used before the period of political and conceptual turmoil that characterized British political thought in the 1830s. It is not until the debates leading to the 1832 Reform Act that the use of ‘democracy’ increased in British political vocabulary, albeit primarily in negative contexts. The Reform Bill was defended by the Whigs as an essential barrier against ‘democracy’ and as a tool to

prevent popular upheavals²⁹, while the Tories labelled the proposal as ‘democratical’ and leading to the overthrow of the Constitution.³⁰

At the same time, as a result of discussions of the United-States, ‘democracy’ was increasingly used to designate a type of society, without privilege and with egalitarian tendencies. In this sense, ‘democracy’ was less a particular set of institutions, and more a specific dynamic in human history. In the 1820s and 1830s, British travelers frequently recounted their adventures to the public, painting an unflattering picture of America as a disorderly country with rough manners and a lack of culture.³¹ Sometimes these flaws were explicitly linked to the democratic institutions of the United-States.³² Others were more positive: in 1833, Edward Gibbon Wakefield, a future protagonist in the Canadian question, published a social and political comparison of England and America. While he praised the mixed constitution of Britain as ‘the best government ever established in Europe’, he also argued that ‘democracy’ was more adapted to the egalitarian society of America.³³ This emerging reading of ‘democracy’ as a political system adapted to a particular type of society was strengthened by the success of Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840). The first volume of *Democracy in America*, published in 1835, was immediately translated in English by Henry Reeve. For Tocqueville, ‘democracy’ was not so much a political regime as a type of society, with ‘an almost complete equality of condition’.³⁴ This pushed previous understandings of ‘democracy’ as a levelling principle further, by seeing this egalitarian tendency as the main thrust of modernity. Although Tocqueville also insisted on the specific conditions that made democracy possible in America, his uses of ‘democracy’ as a future-oriented concept had immediate and lasting impact. Indeed, in Britain, perhaps because of its very adaptability to varying political agendas, the book was well received by Conservatives and Radicals alike.³⁵

The use of 'nationality' also increased in the early 1830s, albeit for different reasons. While the word remained polysemantic and was not typically used to refer to the modern concept of the nation-state, or even to ideas of national identity³⁶, the sympathy attracted in Britain by the Polish revolt of 1830-31 marked the first sustained use of 'nationality' in a political sense. In Westminster, MPs frequently invoked 'the nationality and independence of Poland', and the word 'nationality' was most often used positively, as something to be 'preserved' and not 'destroyed'.³⁷

This emerging use of 'nationality' to describe 'national sentiment' or 'national identity' also characterized discussion of continental Europe in the periodical press of the 1830s. In this context 'nationality' was not understood to be a universal or a-historical phenomenon, but rather a sentiment that developed historically.³⁸ It had emerged in early modern Europe, particularly in France and England,³⁹ and its progress was now most noticeable in continental Europe. 'Nationality' was seen to have progressed in Spain and Germany in reaction to Napoleon's occupation, and was currently flourishing in Italy, as illustrated by the 1830s revolutionary insurrections. But even when the word was used in a neutral or positive sense close to 'national sentiment', it did not imply a fully developed political understanding of the nation-state. As illustrated by the case of Poland, 'nationality' was not normally equated to 'national sovereignty' or to an independent state: 'nationality' could be preserved within a multinational state such as Russia, and if anything, the word tended to be employed in discussion of those continental nationalities that did not have a state.⁴⁰

The Canadian rebellions thus took place in a crucial period of conceptual reconfiguration for the words 'democracy' and 'nationality'. While they had both been minor and largely pejorative terms of the British political lexicon in the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century, by the 1830s their uses were beginning to shift, with both

words becoming more frequent, and acquiring a variety of significations. In both cases external factors were important in prompting new usages: the American case provided a sociological example of the egalitarian implications of ‘democracy’, while through the Polish, Spanish and Italian examples, ‘nationality’ gained a more historical and less negative dimension. By the time the Canadian crisis took center stage in British political life in 1837, the two words remained polysemantic with flexible meanings. But as the British debate was, from the outset, framed in competing terms of ‘nationality’ and ‘democracy’, political actors were forced to refine, clarify and sometimes reconfigure their uses of the words. It is to these discussions that we now turn.

2- Conservatives and Canada: nationality illegitimate and democracy denied

As Peter Burroughs has shown, the British responses to the Canadian crisis differed greatly between political affiliations. On one hand, most Radicals framed the issue as one involving popular government and a struggle against oligarchic rule. On the other, the Tories – and to some extent the Whigs – portrayed it as a rebellion led by treacherous French-Canadian Catholics.⁴¹ In Tory and Whig discourse, the use of ‘democracy’ and ‘nationality’ mirrored earlier usages of the words, in support of anti-reformist positions. Both terms were used negatively, to denigrate the legitimacy of the rebels: their demands for responsible government were labelled as dangerously democratic, while labelling the Rebellions as a product of ‘nationality’ discredited them. Indeed, most British commentators agreed that claims of Canadian ‘nationality’ were not a legitimate basis for demanding reform of current institutions: Tories and Whigs were equally hostile to ‘the ridiculous idea of nationality now entertained by the French

party'.⁴² This is precisely why they attempted to frame the issue in terms of 'nationality', and why the Radicals responded by disentangling the two issues and shifting the discussion onto the terrain of representation.

While the widespread hostility to Canadian claims of 'nationality' prompted John Stuart Mill to accuse his contemporaries of hypocrisy (given the sympathy which continental 'nationalities' often attracted), Tories and Whig considered the case of Canada in a different light, for two reasons. First, French Canadian 'nationality' was perceived to be less legitimate than oppressed continental 'nationalities', because it was a more recent development, and because its association to anti-gallican and anti-catholic tropes made it less worthy of respect.⁴³ Second, while continental nationalities were fighting for the 'survival' of their nationalities as they were threatened with 'destruction', the 'nationality' of Canada (understood as the protection of its distinct language, culture and laws) was believed to be entirely compatible with membership of the British Empire. As the then Whig MP George R. Robinson made clear: 'the object of the Canadians was, to secure the nationality of Lower Canada, and the French laws. He had no wish to deprive them of those laws—he had not the slightest wish to interfere with their privileges [...] but to allow them to be enjoyed by the Canadian party alone, was a proposition to which he never would consent⁴⁴.' This commitment to protect 'French laws' coexisted with Robinson's firm opposition to independence, as he would state a few days later: 'Why call themselves exclusively Canadians, as if they wished to be considered a distinct people? He contended, that at the conquest of Canada in 1761, it was made a part of the British family, and ought now to be considered as much so as any other part of his Majesty's dominions.'⁴⁵

In this view, hostility to Canadian demands was not necessarily incompatible with the acknowledgement that a distinct Canadian 'nationality' did indeed exist, which

the British Empire had at one point deemed worthy of protection. In 1840 we can see the *Monthly Review* relying on this assumption to argue in favour of Durham's proposal of union of the two provinces: the British Empire had made important efforts to 'preserve the nationality of the French', but this generous policy had backfired and only fostered division and jealousy, instead of 'uniformly and consistently proceeding to amalgamate the two races, the conquered and the conquerors'. The previous policy of protecting the language and customs of the French 'could not but tend to keep the two races apart, widen breaches, and increase antipathies'.⁴⁶

In Parliament, Whig and Tory MPs not only described the British Empire as having historically protected Canadian nationality, but also argued that it would be threatened by a possible integration into American's universalist republic. William Gladstone, then a Tory MP, argued that:

[he] did not believe, that the people of Lower Canada, wished to throw themselves into the arms of the United States: What had been the conduct of the United States towards those communities that she had amalgamated with herself? Had she continued to them the same degree of nationality that had been preserved to Canada under the dominion of Great Britain [...]?⁴⁷

Gladstone's point was echoed by Lord Stanley:

The French Canadians lived under the lightest taxation of any people on earth; their only security for the absolute laws and feudal customs to which they clung was in the protecting power of this empire: If that protection were removed, in a short time would follow the utter destruction of their nationality, which would be merged in the one great, absolute, native-American republic.⁴⁸

As illustrated by the above quotes, references to the American republic abounded in Tory and conservative Whig discussions of the Canadian problem.⁴⁹ America was not only portrayed as a competing force of national amalgamation, but also – in keeping

with its emergence as the mandatory reference for discussions of ‘democracy’ in the 1830s – as the epitome of a democratic polity. Indeed, while most Tories – and Whigs – framed the Canadian issue as a problem of nationalities (often linked to the problem of confession), they did sometimes venture on the constitutional terrain. Unsurprisingly, when they did use ‘democracy’, it was mainly within a mixed government framework. As the conservative journalist Alfred Mallalieu made clear in a 1835 *Blackwood* article, the 1791 Constitution had carried out ‘the democratic principle to so extravagant an extent’⁵⁰ that it was unbalanced, as proved by the continual conflict between the Assemblies and their Governors. According to most Tories, the Radical plan of giving more power to the Assembly went in direct opposition to the principles of the British constitution. As Conservative Leader Robert Peel argued, this actually meant creating ‘a complete democracy, or at any rate a republic with monarchical institutions’.⁵¹

In Tory discourse, the recent rebellions were therefore the outcome of a constitutional imbalance, exacerbated by the Whigs’ policy of ‘concession’ to reformist movements, thereby ‘depressing the loyal, and encouraging the democratic and republican factions in that country’⁵². Here, as during the debates of the 1832 Reform Act, the Tories did not hesitate to label reformers as ‘democratic’ and their demands as ‘democratic clamour’.⁵³ This clearly remained a potent rhetorical weapon, as illustrated by the fact that Canadian political actors themselves largely avoided labelling themselves as ‘democrats’, preferring to see themselves as ‘reformers’, ‘republicans’ or ‘*patriotes*’.⁵⁴

Therefore, the Canadian Crisis saw both Whigs and Tories reinforce traditional uses of both ‘democracy’ and ‘nationality’. This is particularly clear in the case of the former. While in the 1830s, following the American example, a more Tocquevillian view of ‘democracy’ as a type of society was gaining traction, during the debates on

Canada, Conservatives emphasized the necessity of constitutional balance and reinforced preexisting negative associations between ‘democracy’ and political disorder. As for ‘nationality’, the case of Canada confronted both Tories and Whigs to the domestic implications of the public support previously enjoyed by a number of European nationalities. This only reinforced misgivings previously associated with the weaponization of ‘nationality’ by Irish nationalists recently emboldened by an influx of Irish Catholic MPs.⁵⁵ In response, it became necessary to expound and nuance the meaning of ‘nationality’, in order to differentiate the supposedly illegitimate claims of the French-Canadians from the (more legitimate) claims of continental European ‘nationalities’, and to argue that ‘nationality’ was compatible with membership of an imperial, multi-national state. Implicit in this new argument was the acknowledgement that at least some nationalities were worth ‘preserving’: this represented an addition to previous negative uses of ‘nationality’ in the sense of ‘excessive attachment’ or ‘jealousy’, thus layering and nuancing the concept of nationality.

3- Attempts at redefinitions: Radicals and Canada

Even before the 1837-1838 Rebellions, Radicals in Britain had framed the demands of the colonists as a struggle between democratic and aristocratic principles. When news of the Rebellions reached Britain, they were naturally disinclined to play into Tory attempts to discredit the colonists’ demands for being grounded on ‘nationality’. Rather, they firmly argued that the rebellions were about political representation, and sometimes about ‘democracy’. The argument was presented within the traditional framework of mixed government, and depicted the crisis as a conflict between the corrupt aristocratic elements of the Canadian constitutions (especially the Legislative Council) and the democratic principles of the House of Assembly. In addition, some

Radicals simultaneously used ‘democracy’ in a more sociological way, *à la* Tocqueville, arguing that the conditions of North America prevented the application of British political principles.

This was clearest in John Arthur Roebuck’s discourse. Born in India to an East India Company official, Roebuck had spent much of his youth in Canada before becoming closely acquainted with JS Mill and the ‘Philosophical Radicals’, and was elected as a Radical MP for Bath in 1832. The Canadian rebellions were the occasion of his rise to public prominence: he had been a paid agent of the Lower Canada Assembly in 1835, and had stated in an April 1835 speech in Westminster that Canada was a country ‘of democratic habits. There is a great equality in the condition of all the inhabitants—no aristocracy exists; neither can the elements of an aristocracy be discovered’.⁵⁶ Three months later, he had used a *London Review* article to directly challenge the idea that the theory of mixed government could be applied in North America. For him, the Legislative Council, far from serving as ‘a counterpoise to the democratic opinions prevalent in America’, fueled the power of a vile aristocracy and through this strengthened ‘democratic feeling’.⁵⁷

Roebuck was subsequently chosen to present the assembly’s petition before the Commons and the Lords in January 1838 (in spite of having lost his seat in August 1837). As a spokesperson for the Canadian reformists, Roebuck made it clear that their main demand – which he called ‘self-government’ – originated in the sociological conditions of Canada. The idea of a disjunction between a colony founded on democratic lands, and a distant and aristocratic motherland, remained a recurring pattern in his commentary.⁵⁸

Roebuck’s analysis of the Canadian rebellions was echoed by a number of middle-class Radicals. In December 1837, his frequent collaborator Henry Warburton –

also close to the Benthamite George Grote – dismissed proponents of the theory of mixed government by arguing in Parliament that reforms to the Canadian governments should be judged on their own merit, not according to the principles of government at home.⁵⁹ A few weeks later, he further argued that Britain had imposed institutions which were unsuited to Canadian society. For him, ‘the state of society in the colony, [...] was essentially democratic. The uniformly easy circumstances in which the inhabitants lived, their institutions and laws, particularly that which shut out primogeniture, and established an equalization in property—this state of society, he repeated, was essentially favourable to democratic institutions.’⁶⁰

As previously suggested, this use of ‘democracy’ to signify an egalitarian society – on which only democratic institutions ought to be imposed – had much in common with Tocqueville’s perspective. Middle-class Radicals were particularly taken with the first volume of *Democracy in America*: the book was reviewed by JS Mill for the *London Review* in late 1835⁶¹, Mill immediately beginning a correspondence with Tocqueville through its English translator, Henry Reeve.⁶² Around the same time, Roebuck wrote a pamphlet praising the book.⁶³ As mentioned, Mill’s friend, the colonial reformer E.G. Wakefield, had previously published a book comparing England and America which shared a number of common points with Tocqueville’s analysis.⁶⁴ As Wakefield also happened to be working for Lord Durham, whose 1839 *Report* paraphrases Tocqueville in places⁶⁵, it is clear that Tocqueville’s views largely informed middle-class Radical uses of ‘democracy’ in the Canadian debate, by allowing them to expand the meaning of the word and attach new connotations to it. For the first time in the nineteenth-century ‘democracy’ was regularly used in a positive manner in Westminster, as Radicals deployed the term to characterize Canadian society and its potential political institutions⁶⁶.

While middle-class Radicals were more willing to endorse ‘democracy’ in the Canadian context, their proto-sociological, Tocquevillian definition of democracy stood in sharp contrast with the political language of the emerging Chartist movement, whose self-consciously ‘democratic’ demands were framed in terms of popular sovereignty and rights to equal representation. Chartists sympathized with the plight of the Canadians, and were energized by the rebellions, organizing protest meetings and sending declarations of support to their Canadian ‘brothers under oppression’ which explicitly defended ‘the cause of democracy’.⁶⁷

Therefore, while they were outwardly aligned in their defense of the Canadian reformists, working-class and middle-class Radicals deployed very different uses of ‘democracy’ in their commentary, as Mill’s associates remained wary of any non-contextual, or universalist, appeal to democratic principles. Thus, Roebuck decried the conservatives’ misrepresentations, and argued that the colonists were shocked to be accused of wanting to ‘to set up an absolute democracy.’⁶⁸ And William Molesworth – another associate of Grote and Mill’s, and co-founder of the *London Review* alongside Roebuck – waxed poetic about the ‘absurdity’ of setting up ‘democratic institutions in all our colonies—amongst the ignorant and superstitious millions of India—amongst our negro fellow-subjects in the West Indies’.⁶⁹ Therefore, while the Canadian crisis allowed middle-class Radicals to promote a less controversial definition of ‘democracy’ and to normalize - to some extent - their use of the language of democracy, it also highlighted the political distance that separated them from the incipient Chartist movement, which soon would clearly embrace the term as a legitimate political objective.⁷⁰

Conversely, when Radicals engaged with the idea of ‘nationality’, it was usually to deny that it had played a central role in the Canadian rebellions. This approach was

exemplified in Westminster by Molesworth. On 23 January 1838, he spoke in Parliament to blame the rebellions on ‘a small faction, whose object was power; who, for that purpose, appealed to disgraceful national antipathies.’ The ‘national’ aspect of the rebellions had been manufactured for political ends, as there was in fact ‘no real contest of races in the province of Lower Canada.’ In any case, ‘nationality’ did not constitute legitimate grounds for claims of sovereignty. Here Molesworth explicitly rejoined the Tory argument by highlighting the dangerous consequences of the logic of national sovereignty, when applied to Ireland:

if, on the grounds of being dissimilar in race, and of speaking a different language, they were to accord dominion to this party in Canada, then tenfold was the claim of the analogous party in Ireland to supremacy over a people whose native language was far more dissimilar to our tongue, and who sprung from a stock far less akin to ours than that of the French.⁷¹

This is not to say the Radicals necessarily thought of ‘nationality’ in a negative way: rather, they tended to see ethnic or cultural identity (often described in terms of ‘nationality’) as perfectly compatible with a broader civic identity embodied in a multi-ethnic state with shared values and shared sovereignty. In the late 1830s this tendency was exemplified by the *Westminster Review*, whose contributors adopted the previously-discussed understanding of ‘nationality’ as a historically-contingent development. But from 1837 the *Westminster Review* increasingly argued that ‘nationality’ itself was evolving: originally a narrow and defensive sentiment, its modern manifestation was shifting into a more open and less jealous form of identity.⁷² The Medieval or Early Modern version of ‘nationality’ was described as shallow and destructive precisely because it had lost the civic element that had been central to the ‘nationality’ of ancient republics, especially Rome. Genuine nationality consisted in that ‘feeling of common interest ... contained within the same natural or historical

boundaries'. It was the mark of successful modern nations such as England, France, but also republican Holland and Switzerland, and its absence in Ireland was identified as the root cause of the Irish problem.⁷³

On the occasion of the Canadian crisis, the Radicals applied their emerging conception of a modern, civic 'nationality' in the context of British colonial policy. It is therefore notable that Lord Durham's mission to Canada was shaped by his Radical advisers Charles Buller and E.G. Wakefield: Buller, who acted as his private secretary and served in the second session of the Special Council of Lower Canada, was a Benthamite Philosophical Radical and frequent contributor to the *Westminster Review* between 1836 and 1843; as for Wakefield, who came to Canada with Durham as an unofficial adviser, he was the leader of the 'Colonial reformers' and had greatly influenced Mill's own colonial vision.⁷⁴

Durham's Proclamation of October 1838 clearly reflected emerging Radical understandings of 'nationality' as a historical process tending towards a 'modern', more civic and less narrowly ethnic, or jealous, model:

I had great and worthy objects in view. My aim was to elevate the province of Lower Canada to a thoroughly British character, to link its people to the sovereignty of Britain, by making them all participators in those high privileges, conducive at once to freedom and order, which have long been the glory of Englishmen. I hoped to confer on an united people a more extensive enjoyment of free and responsible government, and to merge the petty jealousies of a small community, and the odious animosities of origin, in the higher feelings of a nobler and more comprehensive nationality.⁷⁵

Durham's *Report on the Affairs of British North America*, published in February 1839, whose joint authors Mill later identified as Buller and Wakefield, developed the same argument, and argued for the incorporation of a French-Canadian identity into a broader

‘British’ imperial identity, while also incorporating a number of Tory and Whig tropes about the inferiority of French-Canadian nationality.⁷⁶

Mill’s lengthy advance review of the *Report* in the *Westminster Review* was highly flattering, which has often been interpreted in light of his domestic political agenda and ambition to convince Durham to lead a future Radical government⁷⁷. Yet his commentary on ‘nationality’, in the context of the Canadian rebellions, has also been read as being broadly supportive of the notion: indeed, Mill explicitly denounced the double standards involved in the widespread public sympathy afforded to Poland, and the accusations of treachery levelled at the Canadians (‘What have the Canadians done other than the Poles?’⁷⁸).

There remains an unresolved tension in these accounts: if Mill defended the Canadians’ claims of ‘nationality’ against hypocritical Tory attacks, why then did he praise Durham’s plan for ‘destroying’ French Canadian ‘nationality’ and merging it into a broader British identity?

it was the only legitimate means of destroying the so-much-talked-of nationality of the French Canadians. It would compel them to consider themselves, not as a separate family, but an integral portion of a larger body; it would merge their nationality of race in a nationality of country; instead of French Canadians it would make them British Americans; and this without bringing into their house and home, into their social and domestic relations, the customs of another people (which, whether practised on all of them or on a part, would be one of the last excesses of despotism) [...].⁷⁹

As pointed out by Varouxakis, one element of the answer lies in Mill’s ‘capacious’ understanding of ‘nationality’ as allowing for ‘the possibility of merged ethnic groups forming “a nationality of country”’.⁸⁰ However, the Canadian example also highlighted that not all ‘nationalities’ were so enlightened⁸¹, and that some needed to be pushed in the right direction. In Mill’s analysis, Durham’s approach would render the Canadians’

narrow conception of 'nationality' obsolete, allowing instead for the emergence of an open, modern 'nationality' which would both preserve existing French-Canadian national law and customs while also encouraging full membership in the British imperial state.

The *Durham Report* still enjoys a largely positive reputation for having established the foundations of democratic governance in Canada, including the principles of responsible government and federalism⁸² - although it is also noted for illustrating Britain's imperialist disdain for supposedly inferior local cultures and identities.⁸³ In that sense it was typical of the 'imperial liberalism' that characterized many in Mill's Radical circle.⁸⁴ But, and this is what has been less noted, it also brought emerging Radical reconfigurations of 'nationality' into mainstream British political discourse. By relating the meaning of 'nationality' to state membership and expanding it beyond previous narrow definitions in terms of group identity, it also paved the way for a politicization of the concept that would come to grow deep roots in the following years and decades.

4- Conclusion

The British debate on the Canadian rebellions has not attracted much interest, perhaps because it occurred between two dramatic moments in British domestic politics – the Reform Act of 1832 and the rise of Chartism in the late 1830s. When historians have looked at it, it has usually been from the perspective of its impact on domestic politics, in particular as it concerned the middle-class Radicals' hopes to form a Durham-led government, and its energizing effect on the emerging Chartist movement. Its impact on British political discourse has attracted even less attention, except in relation to J.S. Mill's theory of imperialism. In this article, however, we have argued that the rebellions

constituted a genuine moment of reconfiguration for two subversive and little-used words in British political discourse, both of which were about to emerge as central to mid-century British politics: ‘democracy’, and ‘nationality’.

Several reasons can be advanced as to why. From the perspective of the Tories and Whigs who framed the rebellions in terms of ‘nationality’, the Canadian crisis compelled British commentators to confront directly the logical consequences of the public sympathy previously afforded to several continental ‘nationalities’. Beyond the special case of the Irish problem, which had deeper historical and argumentative roots, ‘nationality’ was for the first time being discussed in the context of the British imperial state. The Canadian debate therefore exposed inconsistencies which required reconfiguring and nuancing previous uses of the word, in order to argue that some ‘nationalities’ were more deserving of protection than others, and that protecting ‘nationality’ could be compatible with membership of an imperial, multi-national state. Additionally, because the debate on ‘democracy’ did not directly concern post-revolutionary Europe or Britain, but rather far-away colonial possessions, it acquired additional argumentative layers: increased interest in American democracy in the mid-1830s allowed the Canadian reformists’ supporters to frame the crisis in a broader North American context and express views that would normally have been deemed highly subversive in the context of the British state – although the crisis also reinforced previous negative uses of ‘democracy’ by critics of the rebellions relying on familiar tropes inherited from the French Revolution.

Because participants in the British debate largely focused on the opposition between ‘nationality’ and ‘democracy’, it showcased the quickly shifting Radical uses of both words. The Canada crisis provided a platform for Radicals to deploy their redefined, Tocquevillian understanding of democracy in the North American context,

thus allowing the reappearance of the word itself in British political vocabulary and paving the way for the Chartists' more subversive use of the word in a domestic context. It also marked the beginning of the redefinition of 'nationality' as a broader, more civic-minded notion. This was directly tied to the emerging use of 'nationality' in middle-class Radical circles as a historically-contingent phenomenon, whose most noble and legitimate manifestation was found in the modern, civilized states of Europe. This use and understanding of the word was taken up by Lord Durham, forming the basis of his plan for action as presented in his *Report*. The semantic reconfigurations that took place during the Canadian debates therefore set the stage for British liberal commentators in the following decades as they struggled to reconcile sympathy for continental national movements with support for the British Empire.

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Notes

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- ¹ For a summary of the Canadian rebellions and of their vast twentieth-century historiography, see Ducharme, 'Closing the Last Chapter of the Atlantic Revolution'; Greer, '1837–38: Rebellion Reconsidered'.
- ² Notable exceptions include Burroughs, 'The Canadian Rebellions in British Politics'; Chase, 'Brothers under Oppression'; Martin, 'Confederation Rejected'; Turner, 'Radical Agitation and the Canada Question'.
- ³ Gurney, 'The Democratic Idiom'; Innes, Philp, and Saunders, 'The Rise of Democratic Discourse in the Reform Era'.
- ⁴ Varouxakis, '1848 and British Political Thought on "The Principle of Nationality"'.
- ⁵ The Canadian crisis was primarily discussed in Parliament and the periodical press, but we have also consulted books, official letters and first-hand accounts where necessary. Most of the periodical titles published between 1835 and 1840 were consulted, but the Canadian crisis was discussed in most depth in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Fraser's Magazine*, as well as the *Edinburgh Review*, *Monthly Review*, *Quarterly Review*, and *Westminster Review*.
- ⁶ For a recent overview of these debates and an attempt to analyse concepts as constellations of words, see Bolla et al., 'Distributional Concept Analysis'.
- ⁷ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 1:179.
- ⁸ Innes, "'Reform" in English Public Life'.
- ⁹ Milobar, 'Conservative Ideology, Metropolitan Government, and the Reform of Quebec, 1782–1791'.
- ¹⁰ McNairn, *The Capacity To Judge*, 25.
- ¹¹ Ducharme, 'Closing the Last Chapter of the Atlantic Revolution', 418.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 420.
- ¹³ Greer, '1837–38: Rebellion Reconsidered', 10.
- ¹⁴ Turner, 'Radical Agitation and the Canada Question', 99.
- ¹⁵ Ducharme, *The Idea of Liberty in Canada During the Age of Atlantic Revolutions*, 429.
- ¹⁶ Martin, 'Confederation Rejected', 34.
- ¹⁷ Greer, '1837–38: Rebellion Reconsidered', 16.
- ¹⁸ This is also largely true of the historiography of the rebellions, much of which has focused on establishing whether the rebellions should be analysed as a 'proto-nationalist' phenomenon, or as precipitating the emergence of democratic liberalism in Canada. See Arsenault, 'L'historiographie des Rébellions de 1837-1838 au XXe siècle'.
- ¹⁹ Gipps, 'Reports of Commissioners on Grievances Complained of in Lower Canada', 98. Cited by J.S. Mill in 'Radical Party and Canada: Lord Durham and the Canadians', 427. The same passage was cited in Parliament by the radical William Molesworth HC Deb, 23 January

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- 1838 vol. 40 c. 381. Notably, both Mill and Molesworth offer a highly tendentious reading of the quote, asserting that it denies the ‘national’ nature of the rebellions.
- ²⁰ Burroughs, ‘The Canadian Rebellions in British Politics’; Turner, ‘Radical Agitation and the Canada Question’.
- ²¹ On the early history of ‘nationality’ see Varouxakis, ‘1848 and British Political Thought on “The Principle of Nationality”’.
- ²² For a detailed analysis of the use of ‘nationality’ in Hansard, see Plassart and Forbes, ‘La « nationalité » dans les discours parlementaires britanniques au XIXe siècle’.
- ²³ Innes and Philp, ‘Democracy from Book to Life’.
- ²⁴ Weston, *English Constitutional Theory and the House of Lords*. Velde, ‘Democracy and the Strange Death of Mixed Government in the Nineteenth Century’.
- ²⁵ While in American and French revolutionary discourse there was a strong difference between ‘republic’ and ‘democracy’, this was not the case in Britain, where both terms were freely conflated by political actors (Cotlar, ‘Languages of Democracy in America from the Revolution to the Election of 1800’; Monnier, ‘« Démocratie représentative » ou « république démocratique »’).
- ²⁶ Philp, ‘Talking about Democracy: Britain in the 1790s’, 2013.
- ²⁷ Epstein, ‘The Constitutional Idiom’.
- ²⁸ There is a specific history of ‘democracy’ in Ireland, with positive uses of the terms by the United Irishmen and the Repeal movement as synonymous with a republican polity (Colantonio, ‘“Democracy” and the Irish People, 1830-1848’; Gillen, ‘Constructing Democratic Thought in Ireland in the Age of Revolution, 1775–1800’.) A similar point can be made about ‘nationality’, which, from the 1790s, was deployed by the United Irishmen in a new, positive sense of shared national identity (‘that nationality of mind, which spreads its parental embrace around a whole people’ Society of United Irishmen of Dublin, *Address*, 8.).
- ²⁹ Charles Wood, Earl Grey’s son-in-law, commended the Act as ‘an efficient, substantial, anti-democratic, pro-property measure’ (quoted in Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture*, 86.).
- ³⁰ While a few popular radicals contested this reading, their positive understanding of ‘democracy’ were buried in the negative uses. See for example William Carpenter praising the creation of half a million new electors as a ‘bold stride towards democracy’. (Carpenter, ‘A Political Olio’, 3.).
- ³¹ DeVine, *Nineteenth-Century British Travelers in the New World*; Lauterbach, ‘British Travel Writing about the Americas, 1820-1840’.
- ³² Ames, *The Influences of Democracy*; Fidler, *Observations on Professions, Literature, Manners, and Emigration*, 170; Hall, *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828*, 2:261,278.

³³ Wakefield, *England and America*, 1:197.

³⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:15.

³⁵ Innes and Philp, 'Synergies', 204. While J.S. Mill praised the first volume in the *London Review* in 1835, the conservatives in *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review* were as positive (Anon., 'Democracy in America by Mons. Alexis de Tocqueville'; Anon., 'Tocqueville on the State of America').

³⁶ 'Nationality' retained a pejorative sense of excessive attachment to a regional or national identity. For example, in 1839, George Moir, in an *Edinburgh Review* article, criticized excessive Scottish 'nationality': 'Nationality, in the present day, though we are far from thinking it extinguished, is, at least among many classes of society, much less prominent and prevailing' (Moir, 'Ancient Scottish Melodies', 209.) At the same time, the *Monthly Review* chastised a book that was 'by no means free from the indulgence of his besetting sins of pique and nationality' (Anon., 'Cooper's History of the American Navy', 524.)

³⁷ Plassart and Forbes, 'La « nationalité » Dans Les Discours Parlementaires Britanniques Au XIXe Siècle'.

³⁸ Johann Gottfried Herder's historical understanding of 'nationality' as a 'progressive evolutionary principle' was singled out for praise in the *Eclectic Review*, Anon., 'Menzel on German Literature'. See also in the *Monthly Review*, Anon., 'Austrian Dominions', 160.

³⁹ 'The rise of English poetry, the use of English in our courts of law, the assembling of English parliaments, are but symptomatic of the change simultaneously working over all Europe; viz. the *development of nationality*.' (Anon., 'Ranke's History of the Popes', 294.).

⁴⁰ This is consistent with Georgios Varouxakis's analysis, which argues that there was some sympathetic interest in Britain for the demands of some specific nationalities in the 1820s and 1830s, but no interest in the concept of 'nationality' as such until 1848 (Varouxakis, '1848 and British Political Thought on "The Principle of Nationality"', 147.)

⁴¹ Burroughs, 'The Canadian Rebellions in British Politics', 56. The Catholic dimension of French-Canadian identity was particularly underlined by Conservative writers, drawing implicit or sometimes even explicit comparisons with Ireland. See Wylie, 'Canada and Ireland'; Anon., *The Annual Register 1837*, 165.

⁴² George Robinson, HC Deb 14 April 1837, vol. 37 c. 1259. Compare with the *Annual Register's* use of the phrase 'the ridiculous notion of nationality now cherished by the French party', in the same year. Anon., *The Annual Register 1837*, 165.

⁴³ See for instance the *Annual Register*, which in the same issue referred to 'the ancient nationality of Poland' (Ibid., 258.), while writing that 'the object of the French Canadians was, to preserve what they called their nationality' (Ibid., 154.).

⁴⁴ George Robinson, HC Deb, 06 March 1837 vol. 36 c. 1323.

⁴⁵ George Robinson, HC Deb, 16 May 1836, vol. 33 c. 941.

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- ⁴⁶ Anon., 'British American Colonies', 8.
- ⁴⁷ William Gladstone, HC Deb 08 March 1837, vol. 37 c. 102.
- ⁴⁸ Lord Stanley, HC Deb 08 March 1837 vol. 37 c. 125-126.
- ⁴⁹ Anon., 'State of Lower Canada'; Bond, 'British Policy'. In Parliament, see Robert Peel, HC Deb 26 January 1838 vol. 40 c. 558; Thomas Pemberton Leigh, HC Deb 27 March 1838 vol. 41 c. 1374 ; William Gladstone, HC Deb 29 May 1840 vol. 54 c. 749-750.
- ⁵⁰ Mallalieu, 'The Canada Question', 910.
- ⁵¹ Robert Peel, HC Deb 14 April 1837 vol. 37 c. 1280-1281.
- ⁵² John Pakington, HC Deb 29 May 1840 vol. 54 c. 711.
- ⁵³ Wylie, 'Canada and Ireland', 385; Crocker, 'Canada', 262.
- ⁵⁴ Dupuis-Déri, 'History of the Word "Democracy" in Canada and Québec', 6-9.
- ⁵⁵ On the Irish nationalists and the Canadian rebellions, especially as it concerns Daniel O'Connell's strategy of alliance with the Whigs, see Chase, 'Brothers under Oppression', 40-41.
- ⁵⁶ Roebuck, HC Deb 09 March 1835 vol. 26 c. 682.
- ⁵⁷ Roebuck, 'The Canadas and Their Grievances', 466.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 464; Roebuck, 'Affairs of Canada', 141. ; HC Deb 14 April 1837 vol. 37 c. 1211.
- ⁵⁹ Warburton, HC Deb 22 December 1837 vol.39 c. 1473.
- ⁶⁰ Warburton, HC Deb 25 January 1838 vol.40 c. 478.
- ⁶¹ Mill, 'De Tocqueville on Democracy in America [I]'.
- ⁶² Tocqueville, *Memoir, Letters, and Remains*.
- ⁶³ Roebuck did however challenge some aspects of Mill's review. Roebuck, 'Democracy in America'.
- ⁶⁴ Harrington, 'Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the Liberal Political Subject and the Settler State'.
- ⁶⁵ Ajzenstat, *Political Thought of Lord Durham*, 22.
- ⁶⁶ Roebuck, HC Deb 14 April 1837 vol. 37 c. 1211; Molesworth, HC Deb 22 December 1837 vol.39 c. 1473; Thomas Wakley, HC Deb 22 December 1837 vol. 39 c. 1506; Joseph Hume, HC Deb 17 January 1838 vol. 40 c. 140; John Temple Leader, HC Deb 14 August 1838 vol. 44 c. 1249.
- ⁶⁷ Lovett, *The Address of the London Working Men's Association to the People of Canada*. On Chartism and the Canadian rebellions, see Chase, 'Brothers under Oppression'.
- ⁶⁸ Roebuck, HC Deb 22 January 1838 vol. 40 c. 286; see also HC Deb 09 March 1835 vol. 26 c. 674. Perhaps because of his association with the Canadian cause, Roebuck was nevertheless a relatively trusted figure among working-class Radicals, and was brought in to help draft the People's Charter alongside William Lovett and Francis Place, later defending several Chartists at their trials.
- ⁶⁹ Molesworth, HC Deb 06 March 1838 vol. 41 c. 484.

⁷⁰ Gurney, 'The Democratic Idiom'.

⁷¹ Molesworth, HC Deb 23 January 1838 vol. 40 c. 381.

⁷² 'Their nationality is that of the Middle Ages, distrustful, hostile, and revengeful' (Usiglio and Mazzini, 'Italian Literature since 1830', 146–47.); 'We have characterised William Howitt's book as eminently national, in the best not the by-gone sense of the word' (Chorley, 'England and Britany', 356.). There was also praise for Belgium for having established a 'true sentiment of nationality', or 'united feeling of nationality', which superseded 'all the prejudices of local and provincial attachments' after the revolution of 1830. (Grattan, 'Leopold and the Belgians', 393.).

⁷³ This analysis is notably exemplified by Mill's famous 'Coleridge' article in 1840, which outlined his conception of a 'strong and active principle of nationality' comparable to the 'feeling of common interest' that characterized 'ancient commonwealths', and explained how Rome had 'succeeded in establishing the feeling of a common country among the provinces of her vast and divided empire' (Mill, 'Coleridge', 135.).

⁷⁴ Bell, 'John Stuart Mill on Colonies', 38.

⁷⁵ Lord Durham, *The Report and Despatches of the Earl of Durham*, 387.

⁷⁶ Mill, 'Considerations on Representative Government', 563. While Buller has traditionally been identified as the author of the Report, the extent of his contribution is disputed. See Garnett, 'The Authorship of Lord Durham's Canada Report'.

⁷⁷ Hamburger, 'Introduction', xlii–xlvi. Mill wrote that Durham's mission to Canada could become 'the turning point of English politics for years to come,' and improve 'the prospects of the popular cause in England . . . [and] the possibility of an effective popular party'. *The Spectator* speculated that a potential radical cabinet would include Durham as P.M., Buller at Colonies, along with Roebuck and Mill for unspecified posts. *The Spectator*, London, 9 Dec., 1837, 1164, 1166; see also *ibid.*, 16 Dec., 1837, 1192. For an argument that Mill analysed the Canadian rebellions as an important even both for 'the legitimacy of imperial rule in general; and the fate of British political radicalism', see Bell, 'John Stuart Mill on Colonies', 47.

⁷⁸ Mill, 'Radical Party and Canada: Lord Durham and the Canadians', 414. See Varouxakis, '1848 and British Political Thought on "The Principle of Nationality"', 146.

⁷⁹ Mill, 'Lord Durham's Return', 458–59.

⁸⁰ Varouxakis, '1848 and British Political Thought on "The Principle of Nationality"', 146. See also Varouxakis, 'Cosmopolitan Patriotism in J. S. Mill's Political Thought and Activism'.

⁸¹ Note that Mill rephrased Gipps's characterization of the contest 'as one not of nationality but of political principle', into the more specific 'not one of races, but of principles': Canadian 'nationality' firmly belonged to the old, narrow understanding of 'nationality' (Mill, 'Radical Party and Canada: Lord Durham and the Canadians', 427.).

⁸² It is ‘widely credited as both putting forward a framework for the peaceable government of Canada and forming one of the constitutional cornerstones of the British Commonwealth.’ (Chase, ‘Brothers under Oppression’, 31.). On the contemporary reception of the *Report* (which was largely negative), see Martin, *The Durham Report and British Policy*.

⁸³ See for instance Darwin, ‘Durham in the East?’, Schreuder, ‘British Imperialism and the Politics of Ethnicity’.

⁸⁴ Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*.