

- Press, 2015); Mary Ellis Gibson, *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011).
5. Margaret Loose, *The Chartist Imaginary: Literary Form in Working-Class Political Theory and Practice* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016); Kirstie Blair, *The Poets of the People's Journal: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2016), *Working Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (forthcoming), and *Form and Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Charles LaPorte, *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, Parody* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Justin Sider, "'Modern-Antiques,' Ballad Imitation, and the Aesthetics of Anachronism," *Victorian Poetry* 54, no. 4 (2016): 455–75.
  6. Carolyn Williams, *Transfigured World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Justin Sider "Aesthetic Categories and the Social Life of Genre in Victorian Criticism," *Victorian Studies* 59, no. 3 (2017): 450–56; Naomi Levine, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Historiographical Poetics," *Modern Language Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (2016): 81–104; and Naomi Levine, "Tirra-Lirrical Ballads: Source Hunting with the Lady of Shalott," *Victorian Poetry* 54, no. 4 (2016): 439–54.
  7. See [historicalpoetics.com](http://historicalpoetics.com) for a full discussion.
  8. Jason Rudy, "On Cultural Neoformalism, Spasmodic Poetry, and the Victorian Ballad," *Victorian Poetry* 41, no. 4 (2003): 590–96.



## Politics

MARK ALLISON

### A PROLEGOMENON

I want to approach this vexed subject indirectly. Consider the following events:

- **24 March 1832:** Edward Bulwer [Lytton] votes for the Reform Bill, which passes the House of Commons.

- **30 August 1841:** The gentleman-radical Feargus O'Connor emerges from his prison term, where he is met by a jubilant crowd. He is dressed in a suit of fustian, a fabric “worn exclusively by nineteenth-century workmen.”<sup>1</sup>
- **19 October 1847:** Smith, Elder and Company publishes *Jane Eyre*.
- **30 April 1895:** Oscar Wilde defends “The Love that dare not speak its name” in open court.<sup>2</sup>

I assume that most *VLC* readers would agree that all four of these events might be meaningfully characterized as “political.” I further assume that the majority of my readers would agree that their political significance cannot be determined simply by referring to their proximity to institutional politics. (One cannot presuppose, for example, that Bulwer’s vote for the Reform Bill is intrinsically the “most political” of these events, in either substance or significance, merely because it took place within Parliament.) I wholeheartedly share these assumptions. And that is why we are in such a muddle.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), G. W. F. Hegel famously dismissed Friedrich Schelling’s theory of the Absolute as “The night in which . . . all cows are black.”<sup>3</sup> By explaining the entirety of phenomenal existence by referring to a single, underlying concept, Hegel maintains that Schelling succeeded only in reducing the rich diversity of the material world into an undifferentiated homogeny. Hegel’s barb is equally—and uncomfortably—applicable to the way that we employ “politics” and its cognates in contemporary Victorian studies.<sup>4</sup> By characterizing virtually everything we analyze as “political,” we are merely rendering the darkness more visible.

How did we arrive here? Briefly: the theoretical paradigms (Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist) and identarian social justice movements of the last half-century spurred us to develop a far more sophisticated and capacious understanding of the “political,” as well as a keen awareness of its ubiquity. (Indexically, there is no entry for “politics” in Raymond Williams’s *Keywords*; it is the taken-for-granted horizon of the entire project.<sup>5</sup>) These are invaluable critical—and, indeed, ethical—gains. But they came at a cost: they plunged us into the night in which all cows are black.

What is to be done? It would be a theoretical regression to reserve the term “politics” for institutional governance and statecraft. Our challenge, rather, is to develop a methodological self-consciousness and theoretical vocabulary commensurate with the more expansive conception of “politics” that we now possess.<sup>6</sup>

First, we need to find ways to talk with greater precision about the different registers, or *modalities*, of politics. While it is apparent that each of the events I listed at the outset of this essay is political, it is no less apparent that they are not political in the same way. It would greatly benefit us to have the theoretical resources to conceptualize such distinctions—even though we will want to complicate and problematize them in individual cases.

Second, and more difficult, we must develop critical concepts that will enable us to theorize how these different political modalities are connected to one another. If the events I listed above indeed represent four different modalities of politics, how do we theorize their interrelations?

Several clarifications are in order. I am not proposing that we engage in a neostructuralist exercise in typology for typology's sake. Nor is the goal to set ourselves up as arbiters who retrospectively decide which Victorian phenomena were “truly” political—much less to rank nineteenth-century texts and events according to their “real” political efficacy. What I am advocating, rather, is greater self-consciousness and methodological clarity about the different valences of politics, as well as their interconnections.

We can make considerable progress simply by taking more responsibility, as scholars, for being explicit about how we are conceiving of “the political” in our own work. But a reinvigorated theoretical vocabulary will surely help. This vocabulary need not necessarily be new provided that we use extant concepts imaginatively and robustly. Several from the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, in particular, strike me as promising, although undoubtedly other critical paradigms have their own resources to offer.

The first of these concepts is *mediation* (*Vermittlung*). Mediation is of course a multi-faceted term, but one of its most important uses is for designating how events or actions that occur in one part of a totality exert an indirect impact on other spheres of that same totality. In a social totality comprised of many relatively autonomous levels, mediation names how interventions on one level ripple outward, sending shock waves that pass unnoticed through some domains while violently upsetting others.

The second is *nonsynchronism* (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*). Ernst Bloch employed this concept to describe the precapitalist contradictions that survive, unresolved, into the current mode of production.<sup>7</sup> If conceived more expansively, this term can help us articulate the fact that different modalities of the political unfold according to very different temporalities, none of which need be construed as primary or normative. They are all parts of the ongoing dynamic that Williams called (third term!)

“the long revolution”: the open-ended, multi-fronted struggle for human emancipation, realization, and dignity.<sup>8</sup> And, that, presumably, is a politics that we can all agree upon.

#### NOTES

1. Paul A. Pickering, “Class Without Words: Symbolic Communication in the Chartist Movement,” *Past & Present* no. 112 (1986): 144–62, 157.
2. Montgomery H. Hyde, ed., *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (New York: University Books, 1956), 236.
3. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 9.
4. Indeed, this is a fundamental problem for the contemporary left more generally. See, for example, Mark Lilla’s recent—and rather uncharitable—manifesto, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017).
5. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).
6. As this statement suggests, I am not persuaded that the available models (such as Rancière’s tripartite distinction between archipolitics, parapolitics, and metapolitics) are adequate to the task, although they are certainly stimulants to thought. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 61–93.
7. Ernst Bloch, “Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics,” trans. Mark Ritter, *New German Critique* no. 11 (1977): 22–38.
8. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).



## Progress

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AS Victorianists, we are eager reject the ideological commitment to historical progress that ostensibly dominates our culture of study. Although there are political and intellectual reasons to distance ourselves