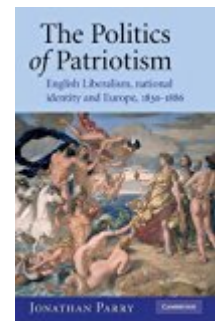


**Jonathan Parry.** *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830-1886.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. x + 424 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-83934-1.



**Reviewed by** Philip Harling

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As Jonathan Parry notes in his excellent book, propertied Victorians "considered their country to be the greatest power that the world had ever seen and expected that status to be maintained" (p. 387). Most people thought that providence had decreed this lofty status, and that with it came a responsibility to uphold it at home as well as to spread abroad the values--constitutionalism, Christian humanitarianism, tolerance, fiscal accountability, and free trade--that were seen as justifying Britain's claim to be a top nation. Nobody would deny that these were important elements of Victorian national identity, or that they provided the features of what a great many Victorian observers perceived to be a virtuous British exceptionalism. But the great strength of Parry's book is to make very clear just how important this virtuous exceptionalism was to Liberal identity in the age of Liberal political hegemony.

In a brief review, one cannot hope to do full justice to the complexity of Parry's analysis, which, like his other books, deserves to be greeted as a foundational text in the historiography of Victorian Liberalism.[1] Indeed, at this point in his

scholarly career, Parry may well know more about Victorian Liberalism than anyone else on the globe. His erudition is on display in this highly readable but weighty and demanding tome, which even advanced graduate students are likely to find rather daunting as well as illuminating. At the risk of oversimplifying matters, Parry features three important themes that are particularly worth stressing here. The first is that Liberal notions of Britain's virtuous political exceptionalism were continually defined against a negative set of European others. The second is that Liberal responses to the Irish question were not marked by notions of racial difference, but by the perceived need to balance English constitutionalism against "continental" religious and land policies that were deemed suitable to Irish circumstances. The third is that an important reason for the end of Liberal hegemony in the 1880s is that the notion of virtuous British exceptionalism, which the Liberals had for so long attached to themselves, became less plausible and less relevant to the domestic and international political contexts.

Parry stresses that it was a Liberal commonplace to present foreign disagreements as the result of an ongoing ideological struggle "between a Britain which stood for constitutionalism, law, inclusiveness, conscience and humanitarianism, and various continental regimes--usually autocratic, sometimes republican--which were threatening and 'un-English'" (p. 4). This not only "provided a comprehensible and uplifting narrative by which foreign crises could be explained to a domestic audience," but also served the useful political aim of casting Liberal statesmen "in a virtuous and patriotic light" (p. 4). Equating British interests with the spread of constitutional regimes, free trade, and peaceful relations among nations, for instance, made it easier for Lord Palmerston to assert British influence in Europe in marked contrast to the explicitly anti-interventionist Conservatives. It also helped to associate Liberalism with the self-congratulatory political mood that prevailed at home in the wake of the failure of revolution in 1848. As the continent was seen to have succumbed to illiberalism in its several guises--French plebiscitary dictatorship, Austrian and Russian authoritarianism, and "papal aggression"--Britons congratulated themselves on their commitment to liberty and their ability to enshrine it in their political institutions, and they looked to the Liberals to protect it at home and champion it abroad.

Parry is careful to stress that this notion of English political virtue that reaped such advantages for the Liberal Party was not predicated on racial exclusiveness. Liberals were committed to the promotion of enlightened self-government as a universal principle. Thus, for example, they supported Italian independence not because they sympathized with any particular notion of ethnic nationalism, but because they felt that the Italians had been victimized by despotism. Thus, more broadly, Liberals never completely jettisoned the notion that all peoples were capable of political self-improvement. The assumption of the racial inferiority of the indigenous peoples of the em-

pire clearly became prominent in Liberal thinking by 1850. The notion that racial differences were biological and therefore unalterable, however, never entirely won out over the notion that it was Britain's responsibility "to act as a trustee superintending the slow and steady development of native peoples" (p. 25), who could be tutored up to at least a modicum of self-government. Of course, it is true that the assumption that the English were miles ahead of every other people in arriving at political maturity provided grounds for endless self-congratulation and condescension. But it is worth pointing out, as Parry does, that in Liberal thinking, at least, this assumption did not arise from the idea that political maturity was obtainable only by those of Anglo-Saxon racial stock.

Nowhere in Liberal thinking was the tension between English constitutionalism and the legitimate claims of cultural "difference" more obvious than it was with respect to the Irish question. As Parry convincingly argues, "no Liberal government could sit happily with the charge of oppressing Ireland" (p. 27). Preserving the Union was a moral responsibility, and ultramontane and republican threats had to be forestalled through just and progressive laws that were appropriate to Irish circumstances, and through strictly limited coercion rather than main force. According to Liberal Anglican statesmen, such as Lord John Russell and William Gladstone, justice demanded a "continental" approach to the amelioration of religious grievances through state encouragement of religious pluralism (as practiced in the Rhineland, for instance) via concurrent endowment for Catholics and Ulster Protestants, the appropriation of surplus Church revenues, and, ultimately, disestablishment of the Irish Church. By 1870, at least, justice was also seen to demand greater security for the beleaguered Irish peasantry, even though the legal recognition of customary tenant rights was seen by its many critics as a slap in the face to the Anglo-Irish gentry and a bane to sound agricultural practices. The problem for reform-minded Liberal statesmen was that, on the one

hand, their acquiescence in Irish "difference" alienated many powerful interests, including many Liberals who were committed to preserving a religious aspect to the state in Ireland as well as in England. On the other hand, Liberal acquiescence in Irish "difference" did not go far enough to soothe Irish discontents--discontents that Russell and later Gladstone tended simplistically to blame on the rabble-rousing of Catholic priests, whose influence within an increasingly complex nationalist movement they tended to exaggerate.

Finally, Parry argues that the most spectacular effort to settle the Irish question, Gladstone's Home Rule Bill of 1886, not only brought an end to Liberal political hegemony, but also marked the end of Britain's virtuous exceptionalism as a commanding political idea. Gladstone made much of that exceptionalism in his attacks on the putative cynicism and aggressiveness of "Beaconsfieldism" during his Midlothian campaign of 1879-80. But shortly thereafter his second government was beset with international problems that made Britain look like just another coldly calculating European power trying to maximize its influence on the world stage. The occupation of Egypt could scarcely be advertised as a libertarian or constitutionalist intervention. Failure to save General Charles "Chinese" Gordon and his troops in Khartoum made Gladstone and his colleagues look like reluctant as well as inept imperialists. That racial attitudes were hardening became increasingly obvious, not least in the fierce resistance of Anglo-Indians and their Tory supporters to Liberal legislation designed to enable native Indian judges to preside over trials of Europeans in the subcontinent.

Parry convincingly argues that Gladstone saw his Irish Home Rule Bill as one last effort to counteract the drift toward more aggressive imperialism with an act of justice that would restore England's image as an architect of self-government and arbiter of constitutional fairness. But the boycotting, assassinations, and intimidation that

marked Irish politics in the early 1880s made it all too easy for opponents of Home Rule to argue that it would be a concession to lawlessness, that the Irish were not yet fit for self-government, and that nationalists would only view Home Rule as a convenient resting place on the path to independence. Even the many Liberals who parted with Gladstone over Home Rule had concluded that "the most obvious way of asserting a patriotic appeal by the mid-1880s was an unsentimental defence of British prestige and British strategic and commercial rights against other powers and other races" (p. 398), and this was an appeal that the Conservatives were much better equipped to make. Thus, it was no coincidence that Liberal political hegemony came to an end when the Liberals could no longer agree on the efficacy of English constitutionalism as a mode of engaging either with Ireland or with the rest of the world.

#### Note

[1]. Jonathan Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867-1875* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and Jonathan Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

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