Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe
Also by Alan S. Kahan

ARISTOCRATIC LIBERALISM: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville

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Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe

The Political Culture of Limited Suffrage

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For my teachers
## Contents

**Introduction: Defining Liberalism**
- The party of contradictions 1
- The discourse of capacity 5
- The suffrage question 8
- The varieties of liberal discourse 11
- Liberal language and European culture 13
- The pre-history of liberalism 15

**Part I: The Discourse of Capacity**

1 Liberalism and Suffrage, 1830–47
- The English Case: the Great Reform Act of 1832 21
- Founding the July Monarchy in France: the suffrage debates of 1831 35
- Attempts to reform the suffrage in France: 1842 and 1847 45
- Liberalism and the suffrage in Germany, 1830–47 50

2 Liberalism and Suffrage, 1848–65
- Liberalism and revolution, 1848–50: Germany and Prussia 67
- Liberalism and counter-revolution: the French suffrage law of 1850 78
- Liberalism in the absence of revolution: England, 1848–65 83
- Prussian liberalism and the three-class suffrage, 1850–65 93
- French liberalism in retreat, 1851–65 102

3 Liberalism and Suffrage, 1866–85
- The marginalization of French liberalism, 1866–85 110
- English liberalism and suffrage reform, 1866–85 122
- German liberalism and the suffrage question, 1866–85 141

**Part II: Language and Culture**

4 The Discourse of Capacity in Context
- Contexts: hierarchy 154
- Contexts: social mobility and its limits 161
- Contexts: defining the middle class 165
Contents

5 The Decline of Liberalism

The usual suspects: traditional explanations for the decline of liberalism 172
The watershed of 1885 179
The new middle class 181
Consumer culture and the transformation of hierarchy 184
Liberalism and democratic society 189
Concluding Note: the Afterlife of a Political Discourse 193

Notes 202
Works Cited 228
Index 234
Introduction: Defining Liberalism

The party of contradictions

From the beginning, nineteenth-century European liberalism was defined by its contradictions. There were contradictions within liberal attitudes to the past, among liberal ideas about present-day tactics, and even in liberal projects for the future. This is why it has been so hard to define liberalism. Historians have even had trouble deciding whether liberalism should be considered a “left-wing” or a “right-wing” movement – as did nineteenth-century observers. Much depends on how left-wing and right-wing are defined, of course, but to give an example, when the nineteenth-century left and right are described as the confident vs the anxious, liberalism will forever remain in limbo, for the reason that liberals were, by definition, both. They were both the confident heirs of Voltaire and the frightened successors of Robespierre.

Nineteenth-century liberalism’s characteristic contradictions can be seen, first of all, in its ambiguous relationship to its immediate past, to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. The difficulty in situating liberalism between left and right owes much to this problem. Many of the goals liberals pursued in the nineteenth century had analogies with the aims of eighteenth-century Enlightened reformers. However, one of the lessons liberals had learned from the French Revolution was to reject the radical methods proposed by some of the Enlightenment’s leading spirits. Liberals’ views of the Revolution were equally fraught with tension. As the Revolution’s heirs, liberals identified themselves with the “men of 1789”. They proudly associated themselves with the “Declaration of the Rights of Man” and the abolition of feudal privileges, and they claimed the early accomplishments of the French Revolution as their own. On the other hand, liberals rejected Jacobinism, the Terror, and all the other aspects of the French Revolution summarized by the year 1793. Liberals sought not to unmake the Revolution, but to tame it so that the enlightened progress symbolized by 1789 could be maintained and carried on, and the Terror and anarchy
they feared avoided. Opposing the virtues of 1789 to the vices of 1793 was a hallmark of liberal historiography of the Revolution.

When looking back on the past and using it to draw lessons for the present, liberals accepted the Revolution in part and rejected it in part, a position equally untenable from the democratic or the conservative standpoint. As much as they opposed all revolutions in the present, liberals could never (and never really wanted to) sever their connection with the mother of all European revolutions. The connection between liberalism and the French Revolution was recognized by contemporaries throughout the nineteenth century. German liberals were less inclined to praise the French Revolution than others, but when Bismarck boycotted the centenary celebrations of the Revolution held in 1889, all the German liberal newspapers condemned him. As one of liberalism’s most acute conservative critics put it, “stopping halfway in the implementation of the principles of the revolution is what characterizes . . . liberals.”

Trying to stop halfway often places one in an ambiguous position. To see how the contradictions inherent in liberal attitudes to the past fostered the contradictions liberals faced in their present, we need only examine liberals’ attitudes to nineteenth-century revolutions. Liberal goals were often summed up as the ideals of 1789, revolutionary ideals. But liberals believed that revolutionary means would never attain those revolutionary goals. They rejected 1793, and consistently rejected revolutionary methods. If liberals were sometimes the Party of Change, they were never the Revolutionary Party. Liberal radicalism was moderated by the fact that not even the most daring liberals wanted a revolution to attain their ends. The only acceptable liberal means of changing things was reform; liberals had been convinced by the French Revolution that revolutionary means would lead only to anarchy and despotism. Because liberals rejected revolution as a means, they were often in the position of calling for reforms without being able to threaten their opponents with revolution if their demands were refused. However, although liberals could not threaten to make a revolution themselves, they could and did threaten that others would make a revolution if their demands were rejected, and that this would prove less palatable than the reforms they were demanding. Did this make them revolutionaries? All too often the answer was no, in the eyes of the revolutionaries, and yes, in the eyes of the government.

When revolutions did occur in nineteenth-century Europe, liberals were forever trying to end them. This sometimes made liberals look identical with conservatives. But while anyone who willingly started a revolution was not a liberal, liberals were prepared to join revolutions in order to end them, as in the French Revolution of 1830, when liberal revolutionaries prevented the establishment of a republic and succeeded in founding a liberal constitutional monarchy. Liberal intervention in the German revolutions of 1848 was less successful, although liberals succeeded in establishing constitutional
regimes in many German states, with opportunities for political participation and guarantees of civil rights, while avoiding democracy and social revolution. England's 1832 suffrage reform was the most successful example of liberal intervention, since a liberal government averted revolution entirely. The willingness of liberals to make reforms and even to join revolutions started by others helped to separate liberals from conservatives.

One reason liberals were wary of revolutions, and another reason for their contradictions, both real and apparent, was that liberals were always fighting a war on two fronts, as has often been noted. This, too, had been a lesson liberals learned from the French Revolution. In their view, society was threatened by two kinds of despotism, one from above and one from below, the absolute monarchy and the sans-culotte lower classes, in many different guises. Liberals wanted no part of either Louis XIV or Robespierre, nor yet latter-day despots who claimed to be saving society from the socialists. Politicians concerned with only one enemy, whether above or below, were not liberals. Which threat liberals gave precedence to varied, by individual inclination as well as by circumstances.

The war on two fronts is characteristic not just of liberalism, however, but of whoever aspires to occupy the political center. Conservatives who saw themselves as the rightful political center also perceived themselves in this way. For example, in Prussia the conservative faction of the Gerlachs and F. J. Stahl was engaged in a dual campaign, described by one historian with the Scylla and Charybdis metaphor usually reserved for the liberal dilemma: "Trapped between the Scylla of revolution and the Charybdis of (Bonapartist) absolutism, the right chose . . .". Nevertheless, because liberals considered themselves the center party, they only true center party, the "two fronts" metaphor is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for defining liberalism. The need to fight a war on two fronts, and sometimes more than two, was another source of the contradictions of nineteenth-century liberalism.

One of the opponents liberals fought were the Catholics, yet liberalism ought not to have had opponents defined by religion at all. As heirs of the Enlightenment, liberals regarded themselves as defenders of religious toleration, and indeed liberals were the great proponents of Jewish emancipation in the nineteenth century, and in England liberals gradually emancipated Catholics and Dissenters. Yet in England, France and Germany, liberals engaged at various times in what can only be described as the persecution of Catholics, while disclaiming any intention of trespassing on private religious convictions. Anti-Catholicism has been described as one of the basic beliefs of German liberals, along with private property and constitutionalism. The French liberal Alexis de Tocqueville wondered if there wasn't a permanent natural antagonism between modern political principles and the Catholic Church. The hysterical reaction of English liberals to the re-creation of a Catholic hierarchy in England in 1850 was out of all proportion to the event. In reality liberal toleration, theoretically unlimited,
had limits – another of the many contradictions fundamental to liberalism. Liberals were not disposed to allow their basic values to be challenged, whether by socialists or by Catholics, and multiculturalism was in no way an attribute of nineteenth-century liberalism. Liberals saw Jewish emancipation as a way of diluting Jewish difference, not affirming it.

When thinking about their program for the future, liberal contradictions derived from the problem of having Utopian ends while rejecting the usual Utopian means, revolution or revelation, as ineffective. The political ends of even the most cautious nineteenth-century liberals were in fact Utopian, even revolutionary – perhaps envisaging a more radical change than that foreseen by most democrats. Democrats merely wished to give people rights they already possessed, in democratic theory. Liberals wanted to create political capacities in vast numbers of people who did not have them. Only when everyone was capable of usefully participating in politics would the ideal liberal state come into existence. Liberals were thus not only committed to achieving and preserving political freedom (a goal held in common with many democrats and conservatives), they were committed to an enormous educational project, the creation of a society in which the prerequisites of political capacity were a universal possession.

This Utopia was only to be attained by measured reform. Liberals were sustained on their long march by a great faith in progress, although their faith was tempered by experience of past revolutions and fear of future ones. Liberals’ fear of despotism or anarchy alternated with confidence in rational progress in shaping their attitudes towards the future. This contributed to liberal oscillation between favoring change and resisting it. Oscillation between change and resistance did much to make liberalism the Party of Contradictions.

In the final analysis, liberal contradictions with regard to past, present and future can all be derived from the greatest internal contradiction of liberalism: its stance midway between aristocracy and democracy. Tocqueville defined democratic societies as those in which equality among persons prevailed, while in aristocratic societies there was a general assumption of inequality. Democrats were partisans of equality, aristocrats were opposed to it. But liberals were in sympathy with some aspects of democratic society and opposed to others. By rejecting a permanent social and political hierarchy based on the past, liberals acted in conformity with democratic, egalitarian trends. But by rejecting demands for immediate political equality and refusing to accept the idea of a universal right to political participation, liberals opposed democracy. Liberals sought to find a third way between aristocracy and democracy. Since liberals looked forward to a democratic future, this third way was not meant to last forever. But for the present, liberals strove to find that ever-elusive third path in politics for a time they typically described as an era of transition. As one historian has put it, “Nineteenth-century politics was dominated by a sort of constant com-
promise between two worlds”. This was the fundamental source of liberals’ contradictions, as their path meandered to and fro between two worlds and more than one pitfall.

Is liberalism nothing more than a series of characteristic contradictions? Can liberalism be defined as more than a series of contrasting clauses? A coherent definition of liberalism demands that politics rather than economics be understood as central to European liberalism in the nineteenth century. Historians’ concentration on liberal economic theories comes much more from the preoccupation of Marxism and its opponents with economics than from the actual situation of nineteenth-century liberalism before the 1880s. During this period liberals’ concern for the preservation of private property hardly distinguished them from anyone except tiny socialist fringe groups, and in ordinary circumstances was the least defining thing about them. Other economic positions held by liberals, even on supposedly core liberal issues such as free trade, varied widely. Many liberals, such as Tocqueville, were not very interested in economics. Politics, unlike economics, was of primary importance for liberals, and in politics all the liberals’ contradictions came vividly to the fore. Liberals were compelled to find a way to reconcile them. Nothing could eliminate the contradictions – they were part of what made liberals liberal – but a strong rhetorical framework was needed to hold them together and to establish the liberal stance as insightful and realistic rather than incoherent and confused. Appealing to freedom was not sufficient. All liberals shared a fundamental commitment to political freedom, but this was not enough either to differentiate them from others or to preserve freedom from the threats it faced. The solution that liberals discovered, the language that defined them as liberals, was the discourse of capacity. Liberals articulated their vision of political freedom through the language of capacity. This political language is what defined liberals, and it is the focus of this discussion of liberalism. In the parliamentary suffrage debates discussed in Part I of this book (Chapters 1–3) we will see the ways in which liberals used this discourse during the period of their greatest success, from 1830 to 1885. In Part II (Chapters 4–5) the decline and disappearance of this language will be examined.

The discourse of capacity

In the history of French political thought, the word “capacité” is associated with François Guizot, the leading political theorist of the “doctrinaire” group of liberals and an important figure in the politics of the July Monarchy. However, French liberals of all kinds, whether doctrinaires or not, frequently referred to capacité when talking about who should participate in political life. English liberals talked about “capacity”, and German liberals used words like Befähigung and Kapazität. The concept of political capacity was crucial to liberals throughout Europe.
What did liberals mean by capacity? Where democrats talked about universal rights (and conservatives talked about historical or hereditary rights) liberals talked about capacity: who possessed it, who might acquire it, and by what means. It was liberals’ emphasis on capacity, and the varied ways in which they defined it, that distinguished liberals from other groups and from each other. The discourse of capacity expressed liberalism’s intermediate stance between the dead world of aristocracy and the world of democracy liberals wanted to see born, but not prematurely. Liberals defined themselves in opposition to both the old regime and to political democracy, and one of the functions of liberal political discourse was to enable liberals to reject the hereditary claims of absolutism and the aristocracy, as well as the democratic “rights” claims of the numerical majority. The discourse of capacity enabled liberals to continue to pursue the progressive goals of the Enlightenment while avoiding the pitfalls of the Revolution and the dangerous language of “rights”. Through the discourse of capacity, liberals could establish and legitimize a rational and progressive hierarchy strong enough to withstand the threats they faced, both old and new. The discourse of capacity was the foundation of liberal political culture.

A political culture consists of the means people use to justify the claims they make upon one another, and the ways in which they identify the boundaries of the community to which they belong (and from which others are excluded). Through the language of capacity, liberals legitimated their own claims to power and disqualified their competitors; with it, they drew the lines which marked the boundary between those entitled to participate in politics and those not yet so entitled. The inquiry into political capacity was the way liberals barred undesirable individuals and groups from entering politics, and defined people like themselves as the only people with the capacity to rule. By using the idea of capacity to strictly segregate politics from rights claims, liberals justified their own claim to political hegemony and found a means to exclude those, both above and below, who might challenge it. For example, when discussing the question of political participation, although liberals liked political participation in principle, they worried that participation by the wrong people would bring disaster. This meant excluding the idea of a right to political participation, because that would let in undesirables. But some title to political participation had to be found, for otherwise there would be no means of avoiding despotism and giving legitimacy to the government. The title to political participation created by liberals was capacity. The language of capacity was an original solution to the problem of avoiding rights talk – either talk of divine right or of universal rights. The possession of capacity defined the ability to exercise citizenship. Liberals’ questions were: Who had the capacity to participate in politics without bringing on revolution or reaction? How could one determine where this capacity lay? Was capacity represented by property, or education, or both? What kind of property? What kind of education?
Was the capacity to participate something that related to individuals, or to classes? What types of individuals or classes? To ask these questions in terms of an individual’s or a group’s capacity, not their rights, defines liberalism in the period 1830–1885. By answering these questions correctly, liberals hoped to found a stable and legitimate government that would preserve freedom and prevent revolution until the far-off day when everyone would have enough capacity to participate in politics, and democracy would no longer pose the threat of anarchy or despotism.

Who invented the discourse of capacity? Who invented liberalism? It would be easier to describe the discourse of capacity and to define liberalism if these questions had short answers, but they do not. Nobody ever claimed to be the first liberal. The discourse of capacity was not the invention of any prominent individual(s) – there was no Marx of liberalism. Liberal political vocabulary did not have an inventor. Liberalism was the common response by a segment of European culture to the French Revolution. Oddly enough, for a tradition derived largely from the Enlightenment, if ever there was an “organic” European political language, liberalism was it.

Liberals’ talk about political participation in terms of capacity did not mean that they did not also talk about rights, just as democrats and conservatives did. They talked about rights to assemble, rights to religious freedom, rights to property, rights to work and engage in commerce, rights to the free expression of opinion, Bills of Rights, even the Rights of Man. Liberals championed all these rights and put them in constitutions. This side of nineteenth-century liberalism was its advocacy of what we might today call civil rights. This civil-rights aspect of liberalism was gradually adopted by the democratic tradition, in many respects originally foreign to it and its individualistic bias. This aspect of nineteenth-century liberalism is still alive today: the emphasis on civil rights is what underlies the twentieth-first century American usage of the term “liberal”. John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* is still a living text, because of its arguments about individual civil rights. By contrast, the central concerns of Mill’s *On Representative Government* have only tangential relevance to twenty-first century Western political thought because the liberal politics of capacity on which they were based is foreign to contemporary democratic political culture.

The liberal attitude to politics, based on capacity, and the liberal advocacy of civil rights do have something in common – their stress on recognizing, preserving and extending autonomy, an important value for liberals in both regards. But this kind of broad, over-arching philosophical description of liberalism as autonomy is beyond the scope of this book, which is concerned with political liberalism, not with all forms and expressions of liberalism. This book is not about liberal attitudes to civil rights, the aspect of nineteenth-century liberalism most familiar to us today. It is about the political language liberals used, a language based on the rejection of the idea of
a right to political participation. The discourse of capacity is the only liberal language of politics, not the only liberal language.

Rejecting rights in politics and advocating them elsewhere involved liberals in yet another set of their characteristic contradictions, both apparent and real. Liberals were perfectly comfortable in making distinctions between areas in which rights existed and areas in which they did not, just as they were willing to draw lines to distinguish the kinds of people who had the capacity to participate in politics from the kinds of people who did not. Nevertheless commitment to civil rights and the rejection of political rights did sometimes clash, as can be seen in questions of press freedom, where politics and personal freedom of expression intersected. Liberals’ attitudes to a free press were complicated and often embarrassed, as the history of liberal attitudes to censorship and press regulation in the nineteenth century shows.14

The question of political participation, and above all of voting, gave liberals the fullest opportunity to express their views of the meaning of capacity. The language of capacity was the means liberals used to answer this pre-eminent question in its practical form — who should vote? Liberal portraits of the ideal voter served as the template for liberal cultural ideals and values. In discussing who should vote, liberals were defining what it was to be a fully mature individual, or a fully acceptable social group. The suffrage question shows how nineteenth-century liberals defined class and social status in their own language, and differed over the definitions. As will be seen, there were broad variations in the ways liberals used the language of capacity to describe the capacities of individuals and social groups. The suffrage question went to the heart of liberal ideas about both individuals and social structure. The parliamentary suffrage debates discussed in Part 1 of this book, “The Discourse of Capacity”, provide an excellent means of exploring that question.

The suffrage question

In principle liberals excluded no one, at least no adult males, from the vote. But liberals put good government and avoiding despotism above universal political participation: there was a right to be well-governed, rather than a right to political participation, even if political participation was a desirable thing, in the liberal view.15 For the time being, most people would have to be excluded from political participation and the vote, because their participation would be detrimental to the common welfare. In the future, however, everyone would be able to participate in good government. All real liberals supported universal suffrage, but only for a future time when everyone was really capable.16 This is an important element of a definition of liberalism: an exclusion principle to determine who was not a liberal. If one did not think political participation was, in the abstract, a good thing,
if one did not support eventual universal suffrage, one was not a liberal. This allows us to eliminate from consideration a number of conservative politicians who might otherwise be considered liberals.17

But one must not overestimate the openness of liberalism to extending the suffrage, either. A perceptive opponent of liberalism put it this way: “for these clever politicians, the people are always going to get their freedom, and are never ready for it.”18 For liberals, the crucial political question was to discover which people had the capacity to participate in politics without bringing on chaos and/or despotism. This meant that for the present a limited suffrage, delimited and justified through a theory of capacity, was a sine qua non for nineteenth-century liberals.

Who should vote was a crucial question for liberals both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, because the liberal idea of who should vote showed who they thought mattered or ought to matter in society. Practically, because it was clear to liberals that suffrage laws would determine their chances for electoral success. As Lamartine put it, “electoral laws are the dynasties of national sovereignty.”19 Examining liberal responses to the suffrage question shows liberalism as it was actually practiced in nineteenth-century politics and the language of capacity as it was actually used in political discourse, not just as a set of abstract conceptions.

How liberals dealt with suffrage questions will thus be examined through the parliamentary debates that took place in England, France, Prussia and Germany in the period 1830–85 about who should vote. All these countries saw fierce and sustained parliamentary debates over suffrage questions.20 Tocqueville wrote that “whoever has seen and studied only France will never understand anything about the French Revolution”.21 The same is true of liberalism – it cannot be understood by looking at only one country. In order for its chameleon-like shape to be seen for what it is, liberalism has to be contrasted against backgrounds of several different national colors. When historians of liberalism have studied just one country, they have often taken common European traits to be national particularities, or else made judgements based on inaccurate comparisons with liberalism elsewhere. Only if we know how liberals acted in France will we be able to understand what made German liberals unique, and vice versa. Through international comparison we can see what made liberal language identifiably liberal throughout Europe, at the same time as we can see, even more clearly than in studies of a single nation, the national differences that marked the use of liberal language in England, France and Germany. From the perspective of political discourse, there was both a nation of Europe and a Europe of nations in the nineteenth century.

Parliamentary suffrage debates were the prime forum for discussions of suffrage, and moreover they provide a chronological and institutional framework for the discourse of capacity, and a common context for examining the employment of this discourse. One of the difficulties confronting studies
of political language which cross national boundaries is the problem of
taking into account differences of context.\footnote{22} Parliamentary debates of the
suffrage question served as a convenient and broadly commensurable index
of liberal language. Although parliaments had different political significance
in different countries, their debates over suffrage nevertheless make it possible
to compare uses of that language.\footnote{23} The countries whose parliamentary
debates were chosen for discussion are strategic choices for several reasons.
England is the traditional homeland of liberalism, the place where it has
always been regarded as strongest. France, homeland of the Revolution, is
where liberalism had to confront the greatest early challenge from demo-

cratic visions of politics. Germany is often presented as the illiberal extreme
of European political culture, and sometimes indeed as beyond the Pale alto-
gether. The question of the influences of liberals of one country on those of
another will be left aside. At issue is the shape of European liberalism in the
nineteenth century, not its roots, whether they go deeper into the past or
extend across borders.

Once the language of capacity has been understood, it can be used as an
excellent tool for understanding liberal responses to many questions seem-
ingly far-removed from political participation. However, the language of
capacity cannot be fully explored in all its contexts within the covers of a
single work. As has been written of English liberalism, any coherent discus-
sion on the subject of European liberalism must be partial in scope.\footnote{24} This
book will discuss liberalism in relation to one question in several national
contexts: the parliamentary debates over suffrage in England, France and
Germany.

The suffrage question is by no means the only way in which an investi-
gation of liberalism or of the discourse of capacity could be conducted. Other
questions would also serve to illuminate the issues involved, and no doubt
present a different view of the spectrum of liberalisms presented here: in
discussing suffrage some kinds of liberalism are hard to find, for example
bureaucratic liberalism, a real force especially in Central and Eastern Europe.
Even in concentrating on the suffrage question, the choice to make parlia-
mentary debates the privileged form of evidence of liberal discourse is not
without consequence. Had other forms of discussion of the suffrage, for
example periodical literature, been the focus, they would have produced a
somewhat different picture, not of the nature of liberal discourse, but of the
relative strength of different varieties of liberalism. This does not make the
picture drawn here any less accurate in the parliamentary context, and a rel-
atively narrow focus on one kind of evidence is unavoidable if one wishes
to be comprehensive and to strive as much as possible for a commensurable
standard of comparison. Furthermore, parliaments were a particularly
important place for nineteenth-century liberals, even if non-parliamentary
forums of liberalism as varied as the Anti-Corn-Law League, German social
clubs, and the \textit{Revue des deux mondes} were important in their own right. In
parliamentary debate the discourse of capacity that defined liberalism was expressed with exceptional clarity, and that is why this form of evidence is privileged here. Where parliamentary evidence is lacking, for example in discussing German liberalism in 1830–47, or French liberalism after 1875, I have not hesitated to rely on periodical literature and other writings, while recognizing the different value of these sources.

**The varieties of liberal discourse**

The discussions in Part I of this book display the discourse of capacity in all its varieties. They are organized chronologically and nationally, beginning in 1830. In the 1830s liberalism moved to center stage in each of the countries discussed here. In France the July Revolution of 1830 created a consciously liberal regime and acted as the signal for liberal revival throughout the rest of Europe. In 1830, partly as a reaction to the July Revolution in France, a blizzard of political writing began among German liberals, and in some parts of Germany liberals entered into a new position of political influence. In 1832, partly in fear of a revolution at home, England’s first Whig government since the French Revolution passed the Great Reform Act and liberalized English politics.

Chapter 1 discusses the suffrage question in England, France, Prussia and other German states in the period 1830–47. Since for most of this period Prussia did not have a national parliament, and Germany did not exist as a state, German sources are drawn from a selection of political writings, supplemented by debates in Prussian provincial representative bodies and in the parliaments of Electoral Hesse and Württemberg. Chapter 2 considers the franchise debate as it developed from 1848 to 1865. Chapter 3 shows what liberal rhetoric was like from 1866 to 1885, as it peaked and began its long, terminal decline. It shows the increasing ineffectiveness of the rhetoric of capacity, the decline of liberalism as a political discourse, and liberalism’s decline as a dominant political force. It is no coincidence that after 1885 parliamentary suffrage debates were few and far between.25

Throughout the period 1830–85 there were extensive differences within liberalism about who had the capacity to vote. The language of capacity covered a wide range of positions about suffrage, but certain common features can be discerned in the parliamentary debates discussed in Chapters 1–3. Two different ways of defining capacity existed, broadly speaking: one based on evaluating the capacity of individuals, which I call “individualist liberalism”, the other based on evaluating the capacity of social groups, here called “socially oriented liberalism” or the “liberalism of social representation”. For both kinds of liberal, political participation was meant to legitimate the government by making it into an accurate mirror of the nation/people, that is, of the real social and individual capacities present in society. By correctly identifying where the capacity for political participa-
tion existed in society, the “real” nation or people in liberals’ eyes, and by giving those groups/individuals the vote, a good suffrage law would create a representative body that would be legitimate in the eyes of those with capacity. It would also be able to provide both good government and safety from revolution and despotism, since it would be an accurate representation of the nation, those with political capacity. 

By far the most common variety of liberal political discourse was one which had class at its center, which saw the question of capacity as a question of which class or classes (or “interests”) ought to be allowed to participate in politics. When speaking of the suffrage, this kind of liberal defined voting as the representation of social interests. Which class or classes ought to predominate, how they were to be defined, remained a question for debate among socially oriented liberals. Usually they thought the middle classes ought to play a role, but not necessarily a dominant one.

In the earlier part of the century, individualist liberalisms were relatively weak, but they gained strength over time. This kind of liberalism frequently featured a quasi-Kantian emphasis on the moral aspects of politics. The individual's capacities were often evaluated in moral terms, and voting itself sometimes seen as a moral act. To confuse tidy-minded historians, however, we also find ideas of politics as moral instruction among some socially oriented liberals, e.g. the English liberal Anglicans. It is primarily of individualist liberalisms that it can be said that “the moral objective of many liberalisms (though not all) is to define an ideal order toward which human beings will strive through education and by shedding their bondage to the grosser appetites.” From the individualist perspective, the qualities of the individual, his personal “independence,” to use Kant's own criterion, determine whether an individual is capable of political participation, rather than the individual's membership in a particular interest-group or social class. What characteristics were thought necessary to qualify the individual for political participation, for voting, varied widely among liberals of this kind. Both social and individualist liberalism were open, in theory and sometimes in practice, to changing their criteria to meet changing social circumstances, e.g. the progressive spread of capacities throughout society.

The rhetorical differences between class and individually oriented liberalisms had practical effects. For example, liberals who saw themselves as representing an existing social structure, class-oriented liberals of a certain kind, usually found it difficult to recognize large-scale social change, changes in the relationships between large segments of society such as genders, social classes and so on. Such a liberalism tended to interpret claims that real change had taken place as merely anarchic attempts to interfere with the way in which a good suffrage law, based on existing capacities, represented existing social interests. Thus the refusal of the French doctrinaires to enlarge the suffrage in the 1840s, which eventually led to the Revolution of 1848. Another example of this refusal to accept the occurrence of funda-
mental social change in practice is the German liberal historian and politician Heinrich von Sybel who, refuting John Stuart Mill’s claims on behalf of women’s suffrage, wondered what response one could make to an educated German woman, responsible for the education of her children and the finances of a large household, asking why drunken, ignorant, male factory-workers had the capacity to vote and not she. His response was that she was right – but that this did not mean that she should have the vote. It meant that universal male suffrage must be abolished as soon as possible, while women were still incapacitated by their gender. Sybel’s vision of what political society was about had no room for either women or proletarians, at least for the present.32

On the other hand, a liberal party that reached out beyond social powers and interest groups to qualified individuals of all classes, one that defined capacity in terms of the individual and not in terms of class, would find itself pulled towards democracy and even women’s suffrage as the century progressed.33 The greater the number of people who have the necessary capacity for political participation, the more capacity comes to resemble a common birthright, rather than an accomplishment that differs from one person to another. Thus individualist liberalism, once based on the superior capacity of a few, drifted towards democracy with the tide of the century, often through a slogan like Gladstone’s “trust the people”. In the end, it is assumed that political capacity will follow political participation, rather than being a precondition for it, and the discourse of capacity, and limitations on suffrage, lose all significance (see the discussion of the Third Reform Act in Chapter 4). These conservative and democratic influences were important contributors to the centrifugal forces that decimated all European liberal parties in the 1870s and 1880s.

Although these were the ways in which the individualist and social variations of the discourse of capacity tended to behave, it must be recognized that they were not necessary consequences of those variations. For example, one can imagine a class-oriented discourse that found itself adding more and more classes to the list of those with capacity, and thus eventually arriving at democracy. A handful of English liberals seem to have done this in the 1884 parliamentary debates on the Third Reform Act. But the majority tendencies were those described above.

Liberal language and European culture

A general account of nineteenth-century European liberalism must shed light both on the reasons for its success and on why it declined throughout Europe from the 1870s or 1880s until the First World War. In the late nineteenth century liberalism proved largely unable to adapt to changes in society and to the mass politics and consumer culture that developed, and the discourse of capacity was abandoned by politicians. Liberalism as it was
understood in the nineteenth century did not disappear at a stroke, but by 1885 it had entered what was to prove an irreversible decline throughout Europe as the doctrine of political rights gained sway. In some countries this decline was more rapid than others. In France, for example, the decline of liberalism seems like a slippery slope leading to a cliff as early as the late 1870s. In England, the slope seems to just grow gradually steeper after the watershed of 1885. Germany seems to fall somewhere in between. Where liberal parties showed persistent if diminished strength in the decades after 1885, the style, content and language of their liberalism underwent radical change.

The decline of liberalism that accompanied late-nineteenth-century social changes are explored in Part II of this book, “Language and Culture”. This effort to relate political language to its surroundings naturally abandons the parliamentary debates that were the focus of Part I. Part II suggests connections between the success and decline of the language of capacity and social and cultural contexts. If the goal of Part I is to define and describe nineteenth-century liberalism in relation to a single issue, suffrage, the purpose of Part II is to shed the broadest possible light on the history of liberalism. The results are necessarily more suggestive than proven; that is in the nature of such work.

Thus Chapter 4, “The Discourse of Capacity in Context”, considers some of the broad cultural reasons why the discourse of capacity was politically effective between 1830 and 1885, and politically ineffective thereafter. It looks at the social and cultural contexts in which that language was construed, at the attitudes, values, and aspects of social structure which helped listeners make sense of the discourse of capacity. The chapter describes the relationship between liberalism and some of the attitudes, values, and social structures which surrounded it, and suggests affinities between the discourse of capacity and ideas about status and hierarchy that were dominant in the period when liberals dominated Europe’s parliaments.

Chapter 5, “The Decline of Liberalism”, shows how the political culture of liberalism could no longer find resonance with important aspects of the larger society: “political arguments ... must, if they are to have any persuasiveness, deploy, re-work, or otherwise make use of the shared evaluative language of those to whom they are addressed, and hence must appeal to the ideals and aspirations which that language represents.”34 When the discourse of capacity no longer made sense to its audience, it died. Chapter 5 explores the ways in which a spreading consumer culture contradicted some of the fundamental assumptions of the discourse of capacity, and how liberal language lost resonance and audience as a result. Once the language of capacity could no longer be used in politics, liberalism as most of the nineteenth century understood it no longer existed, and it was no longer possible to be a liberal, at least not in the sense in which that word had once been used. Thus Chapter 5 sketches the demise of liberalism after 1885, its
dissolution into democratic-universalist and/or reactionary-elitist forms of political language. If “oligarchy and modernity were related, and not antithetical” before 1885, this was no longer the case afterwards, at least in political discourse.35

After 1885 the name “liberal” was still, for a while, applied to parties which no longer used liberal language. After the First World War, even the name disappeared, or else designated only a few small and relatively insignificant groups, e.g. the British Liberals. The distinctive language of liberalism was no longer present on the political scene.

If, however, liberal language declined more or less precipitously after 1885, it did not disappear from use outside politics. The Concluding Note, “The Afterlife of a Political Discourse”, discusses ways in which the discourse of capacity continued to be used in non-political spheres well after 1885, and even continues to find an audience in the twenty-first century. The social and cultural changes which helped deprive the discourse of capacity of its political appeal simultaneously created new contexts in which its use was welcome. These were to be found primarily in the world of education and the professions. Here capacity was cut loose from its connection with property and bound more closely to intellectual criteria. The language of capacity, having started out as a political discourse, became largely a discourse of civil society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The pre-history of liberalism

A word needs to be said about how this discussion of liberalism is framed. It is sometimes suggested that “liberalism”, usually left undefined, began well before 1830, and that a definition of liberalism that does not take account of Locke, to say nothing of Aristotle and Plato, is seriously flawed. Some would further suggest that the discourse of capacity is merely a fancy way of describing arguments that those with money and/or education should enjoy a monopoly of political rights, and that this theory is as old as or older than Classical Greece. However, this book is not an exercise in genealogy. A long intellectual family tree can be constructed for liberalism, reaching back to the Enlightenment and beyond. Nevertheless, such genealogy is not history. To juxtapose seventeenth-century Locke and nineteenth-century Guizot, for example, is to examine ideas constructed for essentially different purposes and under drastically different circumstances in an artificial context. While constructing this kind of context may have its own validity, it serves to remove the history of political thought from the history of political action. It illuminates neither Locke’s nor Guizot’s era. No action or idea of Locke’s time could have been motivated by Guizot, and while the ideas of Locke might have influenced Guizot, Locke had no idea of the political issues central two hundred years later or of the nineteenth-century cultural context. Although Aristotle and Machiavelli both wished to limit
the political influence of the masses, their purposes were not the same as those of Guizot. This is a restatement of Quentin Skinner's argument that historians ought not to attribute ideas to thinkers that they themselves could not have accepted in their own time. For the genealogist of political ideas to be transformed into an historian, she or he must accept the reality of historical discontinuities. The present may be rooted in the past, but its harvest is a unique product that grows in conditions unique to its own time.

A more serious objection is that the language of capacity in its entirety pre-dates 1830 and indeed even pre-dates the French Revolution. For example, this quotation from the Enlightenment thinker Holbach, written in the eighteenth century, could well have come from any of the nineteenth-century suffrage debates cited in Chapters 2–4:

By the word “people” I do not mean the stupid populace which, being deprived of intelligence and good sense, may at any moment become the instrument and accomplice of turbulent demagogues who wish to disturb society. Every man who can live respectably from the income of his property and every head of a family who owns land ought to be regarded as a citizen.

There are two answers to the objection that the discourse of capacity, and thus liberalism as it is defined here, already existed in the eighteenth or even the seventeenth century. One answer is to accept that it did exist, but to point out that the discourse of capacity only became the dominant language of European political discourse after the French Revolution, and indeed only after 1830. Before the Revolution liberalism was overshadowed by older political languages, by political discourses that appealed to virtue, a word largely absent from the nineteenth-century liberal vocabulary, or else dominated by historical or religious conceptions of politics. Liberalism and the language of capacity only fully came into their own after the French Revolution had destroyed or discredited these other political languages in the minds of leading elements of European society. Even in the period 1815–30 liberal language was still struggling to establish itself in much of Europe, and thus 1830 is a reasonable starting point for this study. This book discusses not the whole history of liberal political language or of liberalism, but rather its climax and decline.

A second response to this objection is more radical, in line with the disassociation of Locke and Guizot suggested above. It suggests that the French Revolution truly acted as a watershed for all nineteenth-century European political thought. As Karl Mannheim noted, “Any study in styles of thought characteristic of the first half of the nineteenth century must start with the fact that the French Revolution acted as a catalyzing agent . . .”. The Revolution transformed ideas (and the world), taking old elements and recombining them into new forms with altogether new properties and
characteristics. Liberalism emerged to deal with the new political constella-
tion created by the Revolution. While elements of the discourse of capacity
may date from earlier periods, the language of capacity presupposed the
experience of the Revolution in the minds of its listeners. Whatever Holbach
and other seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers who feared the
mob had in mind, it was not the French Revolution. When Adam Smith
wrote of the utility of educating the people, his thought was that “the more
they are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm
and superstition”, that is, to religious fanaticism. Nineteenth-century lib-
erals were not seeking to limit political participation out of fear of religious
fanaticism or even bread riots (although European liberalism’s long vendetta
against Catholicism might provide interesting counter-evidence); it was
the twin specters of Robespierre and Napoleon that liberals were seeking to
exorcize.
Part I
The Discourse of Capacity
The English case: the Great Reform Act of 1832

In the 1830s liberalism moved to center stage throughout Europe. In France, the July Revolution of 1830 created a liberal regime and acted as the catalyst for liberal political activity elsewhere. In England, partly in fear of a revolution at home, the first Whig government since the French Revolution passed the Great Reform Act in 1832 and liberalized English politics. In Germany, a torrent of liberal political writing began in 1830, and in some parts of Germany liberals entered into a new position of political influence.

Suffrage issues rapidly presented themselves as key concerns for liberals. The nature of the franchise was crucial to maintaining liberal political influence and creating a liberal state capable of withstanding threats from above and below. In the various parliamentary debates over the suffrage, and in writings about it, the language of capacity emerged as the common currency of liberal discussion. Of course, this did not mean that liberals always agreed with each other about who had the capacity to vote. Speakers of a language never all agree, especially about important matters. Differences within the liberal movement over questions of “capacity” made themselves increasingly evident as the century progressed, but they were present from the beginning.

The best place to start exploring the language of capacity is England, the traditional homeland of liberalism. England was certainly the country where, in the 1830s, liberal language was least subject to effective contradiction in parliamentary debate, especially from democrats. Thus England was the place where liberals could speak their own language with the fewest concessions to other ways of talking about politics, and the English debates about electoral reform in 1831–32 provide the ideal introduction to the rhetoric of capacity. By looking at the different dialects of liberalism present in these debates we can see what was acceptable liberal talk in the British Parliament, and we can examine the conceptions of politics that underlay liberal discussion of the suffrage. England is a good introduction to the
divisions within liberalism. In England in 1831–32 distinctly different dialects within the larger discourse of liberalism can already be seen, divisions that were characteristic of liberalism itself, and not the creation of outside pressures.

In 1831 and 1832 the British Parliament’s most pressing concern was electoral reform. Many in Britain feared a revolution in imitation of the French if there was no reform. To most observers the system cried out for change. Large cities such as Manchester and Birmingham were denied any representation of their own, individuals sometimes owned the right to name members of parliament (in the so-called “rotten boroughs”), and the House of Commons was dominated by the landed aristocracy and the gentry. There had been considerable pressure to reform this system in the late eighteenth century, but the Napoleonic Wars put a temporary halt to reform efforts. By 1830, however, the old system came under irresistible popular pressure from a variety of groups, aided by traditionally Whig, that is pro-reform, segments of the elite, who had more often than not been denied office under the unreformed parliamentary system.

The Reform Act of 1832 abolished “rotten boroughs,” gave new or additional seats to centers of population and industry, and established uniform national suffrage qualifications based on property, replacing a multitude of different qualifications which had varied by district. The Reform Act established two kinds of property-based suffrage qualification. The borough franchise, that is the franchise in most urban areas and many towns, went to those adult men who occupied houses assessed at £10 for tax purposes, who had been resident for at least six months and who had not received public charity within a year. The franchise for the counties was different. The counties were usually geographically larger electoral constituencies that were a mixture of agricultural districts and smaller towns. There the franchise was given to men who owned freehold land worth 40 shillings, and those who rented land long-term of £10 value or short-term of £50 value.

Anyone who met these requirements in time to be registered to vote could do so in the next election, and anyone who no longer met these qualifications lost the right to vote. A further important point is that anyone who had had a right to vote under the various old, pre-1832 rules retained their right to vote for their lifetime. By common calculation the Reform of 1832 raised the number of voters in England and Wales from 400,000 to about 650,000, or roughly 20 per cent of adult males. Thus most adults, even males, lacked the vote after the Reform Act, and no attempt was made to equalize the numbers of voters or the population in each constituency. In one respect alone was there equality – maintained rather than created by the Reform Act: all votes were direct and equal, in common with French liberalism but unlike German. This is not because English liberalism always shied away from plurality of votes. In 1834 the New Poor Law gave individuals up to six votes for the Poor Boards based on property qualifications.
But there was no precedent for it in Parliamentary elections (nor for indirect election), and the Reform of 1832 consistently avoided novelty.

The passage of the Reform Act aroused immense political excitement. Parliamentary speechmaking about Reform was lengthy, with many participants. These were dominated on the Reform side by the “Whig” leadership. Both “Whig” and “liberal” were somewhat amorphous terms in 1832. In the England of 1832 there was not yet a well-organized system of political parties, and no “Liberal Party” existed. The later Liberal Party was a coalition of Whigs and other liberal groups, in which Whig leadership continued to play a significant role through the 1880s. Voting in favor of suffrage reform in 1831/32 were the traditional Whig faction along with a large number of more or less independent liberals of various sorts. However, the “party” connections of pro-Reform MPs were highly varied, though a majority had been Whigs or independent liberals. Robert Grant, a prominent pro-Reform speaker in the debates, brother of a junior minister in the Whig government, had served in the Cabinet under the Tory leader Wellington. Lord Lansdowne, although affiliated with the Whigs, had never previously supported suffrage reform. There were MPs whose only “liberal” votes during their careers were to support the Reform Bill. In order to determine whom to count as a liberal speaker in the 1832 debates, two criteria have been used: first, support for the Reform Bill itself, as indicated by the roll-call votes, since no one could claim to be a liberal in 1832 if he opposed it, and second the speaker’s general political allegiance as identified by *Dod’s Parliamentary Companion* or the *DNB*. The authors of the speeches cited below include all the most notable liberals in Parliament, Whig and non-Whig, among others Macaulay, Russell, Grey, Althorp and Brougham, as well as many lesser lights.

Were the kinds of language used in the debates truly representative of English liberalism? The evidence contained in Parliamentary debates must be used with a certain caution. Most members of Parliament never spoke about Reform. Those that did speak might not be representative of those who were silent. The chief evidence that the speeches were representative of liberal language is the fact that they *were* the language spoken in the debate. The silent can be recorded in the history of political language only by their votes. The language that was actually spoken, intended to convince or reinforce the ideas of those present and a wider public beyond, can be marshaled into the patterns found below.

Two notions were fundamental to the ideas about suffrage reform expressed by supporters of the Reform Bill: voting was a trust, not a right or a possession, and the vote ought to be given only to those who had the capacity to exercise it properly. These ideas could be expressed in a single sentence, for example: The vote is a trust that should be given only to those who have the capacity to exercise it properly. This credo was accepted by all English liberals in 1832, and by the vast majority of all European liberals in the period 1830–85.
Both elements of the credo were significant for the Reform debates. Conceptualizing the vote as a trust was crucial, because the idea that the vote was a trust to be exercised for the common good allowed liberals to justify, to themselves and others, the almost revolutionary idea of changing suffrage requirements that had remained unaltered for generations. Thus Russell, the chief author of the Reform Bill, stated that “the existing right of voting... is a vested right, but it is a right that differs in its character from the rights of property, and other strictly private rights. It is a public trust, given for public purposes, to be touched... with... reluctance; but still which we are competent to touch if the public interest manifestly demands the sacrifice.”

Conservative opponents of suffrage reform alleged that the vote was a kind of private property, which the state could not take away or dilute. To dilute the votes of those who already had them required, at the least, financial compensation. Liberals denied this. As Earl Grey, the Prime Minister, put it, “I deny that the power of returning Members of Parliament is to be considered... property. It is not a property, but a trust.”

The problem, indeed, was that too restricted a suffrage turned representation into property. The goal was to give “the franchise to a class to whom it might be safely given, and in withholding it from others when the public convenience required it.” But if the suffrage was “a sacred trust conferred... for the public good,” to whom would it be safe to give it?

The idea that voting was a trust served to distinguish liberals from conservatives, as well as from democrats who thought that there was a right to vote. Most of the liberal debate in 1831–32 was devoted to commenting on the second part of the liberal credo: the vote was a trust, and ought to be given to those who had the capacity to exercise it properly. Once it was acknowledged that the vote was a trust, it was possible to alter the suffrage. The problem remained of deciding whom to entrust with the right to vote. What guarantees of their capacity did potential new voters have to offer, whether to show that they could represent the class to which they belonged, or themselves as qualified individuals? Which classes, what kind of individual ought to get the vote?

How liberals understood the idea of capacity served to differentiate them from one another. There were two dialects of liberalism in use in the British Parliament in 1831/32, two different ways of understanding political capacity. Some liberals stressed the social character of political capacity. Thus Mr X should have the right to vote because he represented a class or social group whose interests deserved representation. This is the social version of capacity which defined capacity in terms of classes or interests which deserved to participate in government. It was the capacity of the group that mattered, and the only question about the individual voter was whether he really belonged to a deserving group and/or was representative of its views. Of course, this view of voting as social representation allowed considerable latitude for disagreement about which social groups ought to be recognized...
in deciding qualifications for suffrage and boundaries for constituencies. Because this kind of liberal discourse emphasized social representation, it paralleled similar emphases in conservative language, remaining distinct from conservatism by insisting on the contemporary state of society rather than an old social order legitimized by history or ideological prescription.

A second understanding of what it meant to possess the capacity to exercise the trust of voting was expressed in terms of the individual's own personal fitness to vote. Thus Mr X should vote because he was personally wealthy and well-educated. This is the individualist version of the language of capacity. From the need to identify which individuals possessed this capacity came the stress on personal "independence", although independence was used as a criterion of political capacity by socially oriented liberals too, for whom it meant the voter was capable of representing his own group and not subordinate to another. The individual had to be independent in order to have the capacity to make his own choice. This independent judgement required a certain level of intelligence and education, and these criteria were typically stressed by individualist liberals, although they often used property as a convenient indicator of their presence. By no means are socially oriented liberalisms to be identified with property-based qualifications for suffrage while individually oriented ones are identified with educational qualifications. As so often in history, the lines are much fuzzier, although majority tendencies in these directions can be discerned.

Among those who agreed on the larger issue of voting as the representation of individual opinion there was room for disagreement about whose opinion ought to count. Different liberals disagreed about what particular qualifications an individual had to possess. Because this kind of liberal discourse emphasized personal qualifications, however, it edged closer to the democratic claim that there was a personal right to vote, although with one or two exceptions every member of the British House of Commons in 1832 rejected the idea that an abstract right to vote existed.

In identifying those to whom the franchise should be given, whether because of their individual capacity or their membership in a given class, English liberals used several criteria. They talked about property, about independence, and about intelligence/education (usually treated as synonymous) as means of identifying a voting public capable of participating in politics without endangering society, capable of giving political and social legitimacy and strength to the government. Of these criteria property was undoubtedly pre-eminent. For all kinds of liberals, property was an important part of the definition of political capacity. The demand that the voter possess property was first of all a demand that he provide a guaranty that it would be safe for society if he were allowed to vote. As Lord Stanley, one of the Whig grandees, said, admission to the suffrage ought to be broadened "to as low a scale of property as would be consistent with the safety of the
State.” From the point of view of Brougham, perhaps the most radical member of the Grey Cabinet, an important reason to broaden the suffrage was precisely to “admit those whose interests and feelings... were most adverse to any violent change, to assist in giving stability to the Constitution.” A good suffrage should not merely be harmless, it should increase political stability. It was by admitting to the franchise the “superior” parts of the lower classes, such as the factory overseers or the more successful tradesmen, that influence could be obtained over those who formed, in Brougham’s terms, the “populace”, rather than the “people”. These were voters who would not use their votes to make revolution, and whose influence would help prevent their inferiors from attempting it.

The possession of property was seen by liberals of all kinds as a guaranty of “independence.” Independence was desired as the antidote to coercion, whether from above or below. The voters’ ability to resist coercion was an antidote to revolution, and a way of insuring progress. Thus Sir James Graham argued that the best representative system was that which gave representation to the “largest number of persons whose circumstances were independent; and that system, on the contrary, was the worst, which embraced the largest number of voters, who, from being in independent circumstances, were incapable of deliberation, and must act as they were commanded.” Since there were more independent people in the modern world, there should be more voters.

Independence, however, was not construed by English liberals to mean that voters should be indifferent to the opinion of others. Rather the superior parts of society ought to use their capacity to influence their inferiors. Inside and outside the voting classes, those on top should be able to influence, although not command, those below. The point of the Reform Bill, and the desire of the liberals who supported it, was not to reduce deference. The liberal program was to replace illegitimate deference enforced by coercion with legitimate deference to superior reason and/or social position. By creating new voters the Bill aimed to increase deference and the legitimacy of the political system where at present it was missing. Among the lower classes the Bill “offered an opportunity of reclaiming these misguided individuals, by placing among them persons [now given the vote] capable of controlling them by their influence, and of gaining them over, by their advice...”. It is in this light that the liberal rhetoric about “independence”, plentiful in England as in France and Germany, is to be seen. The independent could and should still defer. There was no assumption among liberals that independence meant equality, however natural this connection may seem from a democratic twentieth-century point of view. Not all voters were intended to be equal, even if their votes were counted equally.

Liberalism meant the Enlightenment without revolution. It meant the Enlightenment with safety, and that was what liberal discourse and these Parliamentary debates aimed at. Property was one guaranty of safety and
capacity, but it was not the only way of determining who had the capacity for political participation. Many liberals also talked about intelligence or education as determining political capacity. For Russell the capacity to make a political choice was the crucial issue: “the electors should . . . be intelligent, incorrupt and independent. In other words, they should have the capacity to make a choice, the wish to make a good choice, and the power to carry that wish into effect.” As Macaulay argued, it was the incapacity of the lower classes to understand what policies were actually in their best interests that made it imperative that the middle class get the vote, and not they.

Many liberals based their arguments on intellectual capacity, on intelligence, defined not solely as talent and education, but also as a certain kind of life-experience. It was commonly argued that the inhabitants of big cities, especially London, had more “intelligence” than those with similar property and formal education who lived in the countryside. Their interest in politics and their understanding of its relevance to their daily lives were increased by their urban experience, and especially by life in a great capital or manufacturing center. This kind of intelligence could naturally be expected to increase with social and economic progress, as Francis Jeffrey, editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, foresaw: “The great question, therefore, is whether it can be seriously doubted that . . . there has been generated and developed among the people of this country, a vast mass, not of intelligence and independence only, but of political capacity and interest; a power to understand, and a desire to possess, their constitutional rights . . .”

The people Jeffrey talked about were not merely competent. Even more important was the fact that they were now convinced of their own capacity, and this made it dangerous to oppose them. Macaulay argued that to insure political stability one needed to deprive the dissatisfied of intelligent leadership, which could be accomplished by giving intelligent people the vote, which would satisfy them.

Here there is a different kind of vocabulary in use than that seen earlier in connection with property in itself as a criterion of political capacity. Nevertheless, property and intelligence were not opposed terms. Russell can be cited in both contexts simultaneously: he argued for expanding the suffrage to “bring into the constituency those who are best qualified to exercise the important privilege, from their education, from their general intelligence, and from the stake [i.e. property] which they have in the country.” Earl Grey argued in the House of Lords: “Our principle is . . . to give the nation contentment, and to all future governments the support of the respectability, the wealth, and the intelligence of the country; which is the surest ground of stability, and nothing short of which can enable a government to make a stand, upon the principles of the constitution, against all wild and unreasonable attempts at innovation.” The most frequent phrase found in the debates is “property and intelligence,” stated in various
formulas (as by Russell and Grey above) and used in much the same way many German liberals liked to use Bildung und Besitz.

But the seeming unity and symmetry revealed by the pairing of property and education conceals a conceptual difference that lies beneath the surface. For some, often but not always speakers who emphasized property, the phrase property and education was merely a way of expressing a view that the task of politics was the correct representation of existing social powers. For others, usually but not always speakers who emphasize intelligence and education, the phrase property and education was a means of stating the view that politics was about the expression of rational individual opinions. As an example of the first view, Russell combined property and intelligence to get the correct representation of social interests. The “best qualified” were qualified by their relation to “the present state of society” and their stake in it, and their ability to make good choices was more representative of this social fact than of their own individual merits.66

On the other hand the Attorney-General, Sir Thomas Denman, revealed different concerns when he used the words “property and intelligence”. He was not interested in finding a means to represent social classes as such. For him the extension of voting rights was guarantied by the independence of the voters as individuals, which guarantied that they would make good individual choices.67 Thomas F. Kennedy also spoke for this point of view: “A great deal has been said about the agricultural interests, and the commercial interests, and the manufacturing interests, and of the relative proportion of Members which each of these should have, but it was not consistent to talk in this way, when the Representation of the people was in question. It was the people of the country that should be represented, without reference to their occupations.”68 But although this view existed in the 1831/32 debates, it was the language of a minority of English parliamentary liberals. As will be seen in the discussion of representing the middle class, it was the social version of capacity that overwhelmingly dominated the 1831/32 debates.

For English liberals in 1832, the middle classes met all the criteria for political participation described above. They were independent, they possessed property and education. They had “increased in skill, talent, political intelligence and wealth, to such an extent that they are, and feel that they are, competent to the performance of higher duties.”69 Thus Lord Durham praised the middle class’s political capacity. For many speakers, the Reform Bill was a middle-class relief act, designed to relieve the pressures caused by the rising middle class through a rearrangement of political representation:

The rapid and astonishing influx of wealth had absolutely changed the whole state of the middle classes of society. Those middle classes now consisted of persons well acquainted with every useful branch of art and science; they were fully capable of forming enlightened views and sound
principles upon all political and moral questions, and upon all points connected with the State. This class of persons had been raised in England into astonishing power, and they now came forward and demanded reform with an irresistible pressure.”

It was the middle classes they had in mind when these speakers used the term “property and intelligence”. The “hourly increasing knowledge of the middle classes, and their hourly increasing sense of their own right and importance in the State,” made suffrage extension imperative. The middle class was the most “virtuous, intelligent and patriotic,” the “educated and respectable part” of the people. The suffrage extension of 1832 was intended to give this large, enlightened, wealthy and well-educated portion of the community, as Brougham described them, a larger share in representation. “If there is the mob, there is the people also. I speak now of the middle classes. . . . Who are . . . the genuine repositories of sober, rational, intelligent, and honest English feeling,” and above all, supremely competent. In practice in 1832 the rights of property and intelligence, whether seen from a social or an individual viewpoint, amounted to the same thing: the right of the middle classes to the suffrage.

However, agreement among liberals that the political weight of the middle classes ought to be increased did not imply agreement about the extent of the increase. The dominant liberal rhetoric of social representation allowed for disagreement in this respect, and there was some dissension on this score. To dispel any bad impressions, Lord Brougham reassured the House of Lords that they would still exercise great influence over the lesser-endowed voters enfranchised by the Bill. Lord Althorp, Government spokesman for the Reform Bill in the Commons, argued that new wealth and new intelligence had to be represented in Parliament, but that at the same time the Bill did not diminish “the just influence of property and the Aristocracy,” that the manufacturing interest would not be allowed to “overwhelm the agriculturists,” while industrial property would be given its due weight in the large towns.

On the other hand, supporters of commerce and industry lauded “the practical knowledge of merchants” over the formal education received by aristocrats. Even Russell, who sought to reject the existence of such conflicts, acknowledged that it was with particular reference to the manufacturing and commercial interests of society that places like Manchester and Birmingham had been given their own representation. It greatly helped to mitigate the differences that most parliamentary liberals saw all property as essentially equal in merit, the different species requiring only to be placed in proper balance. Earl Grey rejected the distinction among types of property utterly: “[some make] a most unfortunate and a most unfounded distinction between the interest of the trading and commercial, as separate from, if not opposed to the landed and agricultural interests. Convinced
as he was of the necessity of the union of the two . . . , he could not help calling that distinction to which he had alluded a most unfortunate one. 78

Althorp and Grey agreed that political power ought to be proportional to property, and thought that the Reform Bill in effect opened up political influence to all the wealthy, i.e. in large part the traditional aristocracy and landed gentry of England, not as hitherto solely to the proprietors of rotten boroughs. 79

Outside parliament the distinction perhaps carried more weight than Grey was willing to admit, but there were very few within the House of Commons who in 1832 were prepared to speak as the avowed advocates of industry against agriculture. Liberals were not being regressive in refusing to accord the middle class predominance, but representing the social situation as it really was at the time – dominated by real estate. They demanded a share in power, not hegemony, for the new economic sectors. Liberalism was central in nineteenth-century political life in part because its language was flexible enough to bridge material divisions between land and commerce.

In the liberal view, politics had to represent the real situation of the society in which it was practiced, the real capacities, social and individual, as they existed at any given time. The suffrage ought to be seen as a means of obtaining the “adequate Representation of the interests of all classes,” 80 as Earl Grey put it. For Macaulay “the cause of all commotions in States had been, that the natural and artificial powers did not correspond with each other . . . That danger this Bill was intended to rectify. It gave to the people a place in the Government like to that which they must have in society.” 81 In this way all interests would have their due influence on the state. 82 By increasing the legitimacy of Parliament, the power of the state was increased. Reform was crucial not only for the negative reason that it averted revolution, but for the positive reason that it raised the reputation of Parliament in public opinion, and thus created the precondition for a more active government, one capable of fulfilling the new functions many liberals envisaged for it. 83

How could one ensure that Parliament would mirror society? Liberals attempted to answer this question first by choosing the right kind of voters, voters who would have the capacity to accurately represent property and education as they were distributed in contemporary society. To do this the voters must transmit public opinion to the government, introducing motion to the static surface of the mirror. For this a good representation of public opinion, that is a well-constituted Parliament, was essential. 84

Public opinion was a broader category than just those qualified to vote. Although it was not universal (not everyone was part of the public, in liberal eyes), it was made up of more than just the electorate. The voters were a selected part of the public, privileged precisely because they could efficiently represent public opinion and respond to its influence, while rejecting that of the mob. One of the capacities needed to exercise the franchise was the
capacity to represent public opinion. The voters’ property and education were supposed to enable them to do this.

English liberals recognized that public opinion had more than a theoretical claim to political consideration. As Edward Lytton-Bulwer put it “power was at this date solely the creature of public opinion, and ... it was only in proportion to as it lost or gained in public opinion that power could really be said to be lessened or increased”. It was through the recognized importance of public opinion that liberalism was pulled away from social representation and towards the representation of individuals. Through the notion that political legitimacy was acquired by the representation of public opinion, the opinion of those with the capacity to judge, some liberals were drawn to emphasize individual judgement rather than social representation.

For most liberals, however, the middle class had a special role to play in the transmission of public opinion, as in the integration of new forms of property and intelligence into politics. Public opinion was often described as the opinion of the middle classes (and of a broader section of them than would receive the franchise). As Earl Grey said: “What was public opinion? He presumed Gentlemen did not mean to confound it with a mere popular cry. Was not public opinion an abstract of the sentiments which prevailed through the intelligent, educated, observant, reflecting classes of the community?”

Another effect of the representation of public opinion was to lead some liberals away from the yardstick of property and towards the representation of intelligence and education. Education enabled one to form an opinion worth taking into account. From this perspective the growth of education required the growth of suffrage: “Education had made a mighty difference. ... Knowledge was power; and those persons were getting more and more knowledge every day,” even among the lower classes. Liberals liked education, not least because they thought it worked in their favor: “the progress of liberal opinions was in exact proportion to the progress of education,” and as education progressed it might be expected to produce liberal voters. The result of such enfranchisement of intelligent and educated individuals would be, Brougham claimed, in words that would have done credit to any French doctrinaire, “a House of Commons not dictated to by the caprice or even the feelings of the people, but faithfully representing the opinions of the rational part of society.” Thus it was good that a few lower-class factory-workers be brought into the franchise because of the vagaries of local property-values, not merely on social grounds, but because they were really part of public opinion.

Thus the right to vote and represent public opinion ought, from the perspective of this dialect of liberalism, to be derived from education and intelligence. At the extreme of logical purity in this view of the franchise, we find John Williams proclaiming that intelligence was the only valid criterion for the franchise. Williams allowed that in a country without a system of
public education, such as England, the only method of ascertaining intelligence was the indirect one of property. He put his argument to good use, however, by suggesting that although the 10-pound house that qualified one for the borough suffrage represented a different economic status in Manchester, where a well-off workman might own it, than in Cornwall, where it meant real wealth, it represented the same amount of intelligence or education, because the city-dweller benefited from the educational aspects of urban life. An intelligent worker in Manchester was as well-suited for the suffrage as a moderately wealthy farmer in the depths of Cornwall. He might also represent equal social influence – the intelligent worker in Manchester influenced 50 fellow-workers at his factory just as the Cornish farmer influenced 50 peasants.

It is noteworthy how in this view the Reform Act of 1832, often described as an example of uniformity imposing itself on heterogeneity, actually created a real and intended diversity through the apparently uniform property qualifications for voting rights – and how from the point of view of the representation of public opinion, this did not matter. The £10 suffrage meant very different things about the economic standing of those who occupied 10-pound homes in different parts of the country. The Act was not intended to create economic uniformity in the suffrage, except insofar as it was intended to increase the middle-class character of the electorate in the boroughs. In this regard, where previously a number of boroughs, for example Preston, Pans or Westminster, had been dominated by a lower-class electorate, the new £10 suffrage, once the effects of the grandfather clause for "ancient rights" voters were overcome, would tend to decrease lower-class electoral strength. It was widely effective in this. For example in the borough of Oldham, 13.7 per cent of the adult male population voted in 1832, just after the Reform Act. By 1866, only 8.4 per cent did. In Boston the numbers declined from 38.5 to 23.7 per cent, and in Lewes from 37.9 to 28.8 per cent, as the number of "ancient rights" voters declined. In 1833 "ancient rights" voters were about 25 per cent of the electorate, in 1865–66, about 10 per cent. Similarly, in those boroughs where a small, often hereditary oligarchy had existed, the new law would open up electoral influence to the middle class, and for that matter to hitherto excluded portions of the aristocracy and gentry. In places like London and Birmingham, a £10 suffrage let in a few lower-class voters. The Reform Act thus united property and intelligence to the state, and so provided a middle-class bulwark against revolution. The legitimacy of government thus assured by the reform of the suffrage and the redistribution of parliamentary seats, English liberals could rest easy that revolution would remain a spectator sport.

The credo that the vote was a trust that should only be given to those with the capacity to exercise it properly covered a broad range of positions. Although socially and individually oriented liberal parliamentarians used the same language, the language of capacity, to come to their solution for
the suffrage problem, they used somewhat different dictionaries to construct their common conclusion. Underneath terms like “middle class,” “public opinion,” or “property and education” that represent a certain consensus, there were, as we have seen, two broadly diffused dialects of liberal language, one based on the idea of the vote as a means to represent social interests, the other based on the idea that the vote was meant to represent individuals. For those who saw voting as the representation of society, the ideal electoral system was meant to provide a mirror of power, a perfect fit between the relative social weights, the real power, of various interests in society on the one hand, and political representation on the other. These liberals saw themselves as geographers attempting to map the existing social world in their electoral geography, not philosophers trying to change it. A good map would assure the fit between real power and power as represented in Parliament, and so assure the legitimacy and stability of politics.

From the individualist perspective, the goal of political representation was to create not a mirror of society, or of class interests, but of the enlightened, intelligent, individual views that made up public opinion. Some people were the “reasonable”. To enfranchise them was to empower public opinion, to allay “reasonable discontent”, and to help government to resist the “unreasonable.” The enlightened public would give legitimacy to such a government precisely because it saw itself reflected in it. Both liberalisms saw government as a mirror, both strove to avoid distortion, although of different things. The suffrage defined whose opinion would be directly reflected in government. The representation of society gave priority to the power of property and interest, and in particular gave notice of the new power of the middle class. The language of individual representation emphasized rationality, personal choice, independence and responsibility, and exalted bourgeois culture as that which was worthy of the name of public opinion. Both linguistic systems aimed at achieving rational government, and defined as irrational any government which distorted the mirror-like representation they sought to achieve, or which chose to reflect the wrong parts of society, opaque to the light of reason and unendowed with property. Both groups used property as a criterion of capacity. Those whose liberalism emphasized social interests were often biased towards a suffrage based on property in itself, whereas a suffrage based on intelligence used property as an indirect test of the possession of intelligence.93

Even in England, the native land of Anglo-Saxon individualism, it was the vocabulary of social representation that was dominant in 1832. Most liberals would speak either dialect as occasion demanded. But most liberals, most of the time, spoke in terms of social representation rather than individual representation. This is yet another argument against the identification of liberalism with individualism. English liberals in 1832 did not, for the most part, see the public realm as the free play of isolated individuals, but as the mirror of society as a whole, built up from pre-existing constituent interests.
Neither of these two broadly-spoken dialects of liberal political language was uniform. Even within the dominant liberal discourse that understood the suffrage as a representation of society there was significant potential for internal conflict. Which part of society ought to dominate in the representation? A certain amount of sparring on this question took place in the debates, as liberals’ need to reassure the gentry that the Reform was not intended to deprive them of all political influence indicates. This potential conflict was defused in 1831/32 by the role which the middle classes played in contemporary liberal thought. The representation of those with capacity was generally recognized in the debates to mean the enfranchisement of at least a portion of the middle class. By giving votes to members of the middle classes and increased representation to middle-class constituencies, Reform was to bring the government into a better, more direct and transparent relationship to society. The middle classes had to be integrated into the political system because it was unsafe to leave their capacity, as a class and as individuals, outside it. There has been considerable recent debate about the real role of the middle class(es) in British society and politics in the nineteenth century. Whatever the merits of these arguments, the 1831/32 Reform debates effectively demonstrate that there was a general belief that the middle class could not be ignored. Furthermore, the fact that liberal leadership largely came from the traditional gentry can be seen not as a symptom of middle-class weakness, but of the broad strength of liberalism as a movement and as a political discourse extending across class lines. In 1832 English liberalism was one tongue with several dialects. This sounds like a weakness, but in practice, at least in the first half of the century, it formed part of liberalism’s strength, its ability to muster a broad appeal and bridge the various disagreements in its own ranks and those of society. The multiple pillars of liberalism served to diffuse the strains that a rapidly changing society put on political stability and political language.

In the short term the Reform Act was a triumph for the Party of Change within liberalism. They had avoided Revolution and Reformed the suffrage. Yet in the medium term 1832 was also a triumph for the Party of Resistance within liberalism. The Reform of 1832 insured that there was no significant Parliamentary debate over suffrage for the rest of the fifteen-year period covered in this chapter. Chartism, which demanded universal manhood suffrage, never succeeded in attracting significant parliamentary support – unlike republican movements in France. One of the watchwords of the 1832 debates was “finality.” That is, that Reform, once enacted, ought not to be lightly tampered with. After all, the last previous significant reform of the English electoral system had been 300 years before. The system of 1832 did not last 300 years, but the 35 years for which it survived unaltered was considerably longer than any other contemporary European suffrage.

After the Reform Act was passed, many Englishmen prided themselves that they had had their July Revolution without revolution. French liberalism
was not so lucky, in either circumstances or results. French liberals had had to join a revolution in 1830, and then to face the onerous task of ending it. If some still remained on the side of movement, by the time of the French National Assembly's suffrage debates in 1831 the majority of liberals were firmly convinced that the time had come for resistance to further change. But liberal resistance had to be couched in liberal language. This was all the more important as the language of rights, silent in the British Parliament, rang loud in France. From the very beginning, French liberalism had to struggle against a democratic discourse of rights that was stronger in France than anywhere else in Europe. It was because they were confronted with an alternative language of politics on their left that French liberals were so forceful in articulating an elaborate language of capacity in response.

**Founding the July Monarchy in France: the suffrage debates of 1831**

The French political situation was considerably different from the English. For the French, revolution was a very present fact, not merely a distant thundercloud. French liberals lacked the tradition of political stability that was the English politician's birthright. In England, suffrage reform was a means of averting revolution. In France the suffrage question was a critical obstacle to be overcome in order to end a revolution. In 1831 the new monarchy of King Louis-Philippe, the former Duke of Orleans, was still very shaky. The Bourbon Restoration had come to an end with the “Three Glorious Days” of July 1830, a name that deliberately echoed England's “Glorious Revolution” of 1688. French liberals hoped that the three glorious days would usher in an indefinite period of political peace and progress under a truly constitutional monarchy, as 1688 had in England. They hoped to put an end to the French Revolution now that the Bourbons had been swept away. To succeed, they had to broaden the suffrage in such a way as to legitimate the July Monarchy without bringing about the danger of renewed revolution.

The task was not easy. French liberals were faced by a living revolutionary tradition with deep roots in French political thought and power in the streets of Paris. No member of the British Parliament in 1832 uttered the words “right to vote” with anything but contempt: in France, such a “right” could not be so easily dismissed. French liberals were just as convinced as other European liberals that no such right existed, but more than any others the French had to deal with a real political challenge from democracy. This challenge was embodied not only in the occasional barricade in the street, but by a permanent Republican/democratic presence in the French parliament, even if, during the July Monarchy, it was a permanent minority.

The situation in the Paris street could not be ignored, however, in the way the British parliament managed to ignore Chartist demonstrations. The
social situation in the French provinces also differed from England. In England, the landowners, whether conservative or liberal, were supporters of the constitutional order. In France, a considerable portion of the aristocracy were still Legitimists, supporters of the ousted Bourbons who could not be relied upon. The different historical, political and social context of France shaped the way in which French liberals pronounced the vocabulary of capacity. Faced by strong challenges from left and right, French liberalism in 1831 was particularly concerned with stability, and thereafter took on a predominantly defensive stance in regard to change, especially political and above all electoral change. To its opponents, even within the liberal camp, the right-liberal government’s concern with stability seemed to degenerate into stagnation. French liberals outside the dominant faction continued to press for political change and limited increases in the suffrage. After 1835 even some of the right-liberal “doctrinaires,” e.g. Rémusat, moved from resistance to movement, a development which helped bring about the suffrage reform debates of 1842 and 1847.

There were three major suffrage debates in France during the July Monarchy (1830–48). One in 1831, shortly after the downfall of the Bourbons, which resulted in new national and municipal suffrage laws for France, and two unsuccessful attempts to reform the national suffrage, in 1842 and 1847. All three of these debates developed themes sounded in the English debates, but with important contrasts. The two great suffrage debates of 1831 set out the basic terms in which French liberalism was expressed. There were two debates in 1831 because in France there were two suffrage laws passed by the National Assembly, one for national elections and one for local elections. In England local elections were carried out in a myriad of ways, depending on their purpose, many of which were dictated by ancient practices left unregulated by parliament in 1832. France, accustomed to centralized authority, established uniform laws for local elections at the same time as for national elections, but they were structured differently.

The starting point for the French debate on the national suffrage was the electoral system of the Restoration. That system had required that each voter pay at least FF300/year in certain taxes, chiefly the tax on land. Under this law only 80,000–90,000 French men voted. In many rural districts there were only a handful of men who qualified, which made them easy marks for government pressure. The July Monarchy was going to broaden this system. But the liberals who controlled the National Assembly had relatively limited reforms in mind. The two alternatives chiefly in contention were a reduction to FF240 in taxes and a reduction to FF200, the eventual winner. The proposed reduction in the property suffrage to FF240 was considered to be a return to the original standard of property required in 1814, since tax rates had declined. The generally accepted equation was FF247 in taxes in 1830 represented wealth equal to FF300 in taxes in 1814. The government proposed FF240 to round this off, and eventually accepted a reduction to
The French shared the universal confusion about the real effects of suffrage laws. The government and the Assembly believed a FF200 suffrage would result in 200,000 voters. In fact, it resulted in only 160,000 in 1831, which increased to 240,000 by 1847. In addition the government proposed the “adjunction of capacities,” that is, creating a relatively small number of voters, distinguished on the basis of their educational and professional qualifications, who would vote without reference to their taxes. Most of these adjunctions were rejected for the national vote, although accepted for local voting.

For local elections the liberals of the July Monarchy swept away the system of government inherited by the Restoration from the Empire. The suffrage envisaged by the proposed local government law was much broader than on the national level. The final result under the 1831 law was that almost 3,000,000 Frenchmen had the vote in local elections, over 33 per cent of all adult French males. They were chosen on the basis of a sliding scale of property qualifications, lowest in the small towns and rural areas where most of the population lived. This was a far broader suffrage than existed in most English localities until the English reformed their municipal suffrage laws in 1835, and even thereafter. However, the English national suffrage after 1832 was much broader than the French, 15–20 per cent of adult males vs 2–3 per cent.

In the French parliamentary discussions of 1831, liberals used the same kinds of rhetoric in both local and national suffrage law debates. In both debates it was crucial to establish the doctrine that voting was to be attributed to capacity, not to a right. As in the English debates, the capacity to vote then had to be defined in debate. In 1842 and 1847 French left-liberals attempted to broaden the suffrage by arguing that the real interests of French society, and those who really possessed political capacity, were not being represented. They claimed they were trying to once again bring the representative body to mirror the real interests and ideas of the politically capable portions of French society, whether defined as individuals or as social groups. But the Guizot government rejected the idea that French society was not correctly represented, and the suffrage reforms failed.

What was at stake in these arguments about who had political capacity, in 1831 as well as in 1842 and 1847, was the government’s legitimacy and stability. For liberals it was essential to political stability to ensure that those with real political capacity could participate in politics. French liberalism’s inability to solve this problem, its inability to integrate a wider portion of French society by reforming the suffrage in time, would lead to the Revolution of 1848. But the French parliamentary debates of 1831 show how liberals thought they could avoid revolution by restricting suffrage to those with political capacity, and what guaranties for a voter’s capacity they
sought. The words “capacity” and “guaranty” flow insensibly into one another in the French debates. Guaranty is a word used often enough in the English debates, but it is repeated with particular emphasis in France, as is natural given the more defensive orientation of French liberals. It was necessary to have a guaranty of the capacity and intelligence of the voters. The vote ought to go only to those who could provide such guaranties. French liberals found these guaranties chiefly in property and education, which were seen as means of identifying both individual capacities and social interests. Although individualist language was more common in France than in England, it was the language of social representation that had the upper hand in Paris as well as London.

French liberals (in particular the doctrinaires but by no means only they) treated voting as a *fonction*, that is as a political office. It ought to be held only by those capable of exercising it. This view of voting as an office was the French equivalent to the English idea of voting as a trust. In both cases the voter was seen not as merely a private citizen but as a part of the state. Whether trust or office, possession of the franchise required guaranties that one had the capacity to exercise it properly. In France this idea faced direct opposition from democrats that English liberals were spared. The principle of capacity could not merely be stated, it had to be defended at length against democratic alternatives. Thus Guizot:

> It is always capacity which is the source of the right to vote and the conditions of capacity are the same almost everywhere, education, independence, the spirit of order and conservation. . . . This is not the moment to abandon this principle, . . . to return to the principle of universal suffrage, which brought us only lies and tyranny in the name of the people.

Duvergier de Hauranne, another leading liberal politician and theorist, argued it was for the good of the people that the suffrage was limited to those with capacity: “What is the purpose of society? It is the good administration of the public interest, the maintenance of order, the security of persons and property. But to attain this purpose the electoral office must be limited to those who are presumed capable of making good choices.” As Gauthier succinctly put it, “the right of political participation exists, . . . for the sole purpose of the common utility.”

If it was not useful to society for someone to vote, as demonstrated by his capacity, then that person ought not to have the vote. The point of arguing about the relative capacity of voters was to discover whom it would be useful to admit to political participation. The language of capacity was based on a fundamentally utilitarian approach to politics, as distinguished from one based on rights or appeals to justice, history, etc. This utilitarianism is present in the English debates, but is not stressed there, as pragmatism was the common currency of English politics and the trust theory needed little
defense. Not so in France. In France utility, although the basis of much Enlightenment thought, had been discredited during the Revolution, replaced by virtue. French liberalism had therefore to rehabilitate utility, or rather to re-establish it in political discourse. For liberals, political rights came after the proof of political capacity had justified their utility, or at least demonstrated that they would not endanger society. Therefore the French made repeated reference to whether it would be useful for such and such a type of person to have the vote. The goal of politics was good government – as the German proverb went, *Ein gute Verwaltung ist die beste Verfassung*, a good administration is the best constitution – and the best way to achieve good government was through popular participation. But the people, as ever in liberal discourse, meant an elite, chosen on the basis of their capacity, not a crowd entitled to participate on the basis of their rights. “Your commission has looked for the electoral rules which could best obtain good government for the towns . . . if they [the elections] were more democratic, the election would be less good.”

French liberals argued about what classes or individuals were most useful to society. Duvergier de Hauranne and Tracy supported lowering the municipal suffrage qualification to FFS/year in direct taxes, on the grounds that otherwise the most useful peasants would be excluded. Humblot-Conté objected to giving members of France’s official learned societies a right to vote in local elections, because intelligence wasn’t enough; one ought prove one’s usefulness and common sense. Others added all kinds of professionals and degree-holders (Academicians, PhDs, lycée graduates if they taught school, members of boards of lycées, members of charity boards, chambers of commerce, etc.), on the grounds that they were sufficiently useful to deserve the local vote.

It was clear to all French liberals that relatively few people could usefully participate in politics – the capacity to vote was not widespread. As Felix Faure put it, everyone in the Assembly was “too enlightened” to believe that political rights could belong to more than a minority. But French Liberals had to respond to democratic claims that basing the vote on property or education created a new form of aristocratic privilege. Voting was not a privilege, because privilege was an exception to the common law. Capacity was the demonstration of personal accomplishment and ability, established by laws to which all were equally subject. Having capacity meant possessing the guaranties that society had a right to demand of a voter:

The present law is common law; it is general law, without distinction of castes, without distinction of personal responsibilities. . . . therefore is it to create a privilege, to demand proofs of capacity from everyone who wishes to exercise a public office? . . . Look at the facts, and you will see that all professions demand conditions of those who wish to enter them.
Participation in public life could not and should not demand less. It did not matter how many people had the vote, “what is important to know is that everywhere those who are capable of being good voters can vote, and those who are incapable cannot.”

French liberals often looked to the possession of property as the best assurance that a man possessed the necessary capacity to vote. Property gave citizens an immediate interest in the preservation of the social order, and this guaranty made individuals capable of being politically useful rather than politically dangerous to society. Those who paid the most in local taxes were the most interested in local government. Indeed, the Assembly was sufficiently concerned with the representation of property as such that it allowed widows who paid taxes to assign the electoral credit for them, at their discretion, to their sons, grandsons, nephews or grand-nephews, so that the interests of the property would not go unrepresented.

But some left-liberals attacked the idea that it was property that gave one a stake or interest in society. Odilon Barrot argued that the poor were just as personally interested in local government as the rich. For Barrot, wherever there was both knowledge and interest, there ought to be a right to vote, and the poor possessed both in questions of local government. Direct attacks by some liberals on property as a criterion of political capacity distinguished French liberalism from English liberalism. Yet their importance ought not to be over-estimated. Even Barrot favored only a very limited suffrage extension, and his arguments did not meet with much favor. For Dupin, “if the poor ought to help run the poor-houses because they have an interest in them, then therefore it follows that the prisoners ought to help run the prisons, for no one is more interested in them than they are!”

French liberals, like English liberals, thus used property ownership to indicate several kinds of capacity. Property-ownership indicated an interest in stability, the capacity to choose, and a stake in the outcome. Property was both a defensive limit and an encouragement to self-government. French liberals took special pains to emphasize the latter; property-ownership had as its natural corollary society’s desire and need to participate in its own administration, according to Gauthier, here foreshadowing Tocqueville. It was the prerequisite for self-government for both the individual and society. The growing division of property, which Gauthier saw as natural to modern society (and encouraged by the Napoleonic Code), increased the demand for political participation as well as the number of people capable of participating in politics. This rhetoric displays both sides of the liberal coin, the promise for the future, bright with ever-greater division of property, and the limits in the present. The mobility of wealth was enough to ensure that there would be “stability without stasis, and without exclusion.” Liberalism always counted on individual social mobility to make all wrongs right in the end and French liberals were particularly likely to stress this in opposi-
tion to charges that they themselves were advocating an aristocratic political privilege.

As well as debate over how much property ought to be required, there was discussion of what kind of property, and about what possession of property signified. Under the Restoration land-ownership had been privileged over other forms of property. Several orators made a point of declaring that all kinds of property were equal, even that rentiers were the best citizens of all. In this way one could justify admitting practicing members of the liberal professions to the vote without requiring any property, regarding their degrees and licenses as representing a certain capital sum, i.e. property. But the majority rejected this, on the grounds that the only possible way of calculating this capital was through the earnings it realized and the taxes it paid.111

For others still there were and ought to be two separate bases for the ability to vote: “property, and the capacity resulting from certain liberal professions.” From this point of view, the real guaranty of interest in the preservation of the social order was not property, but education.112 Gauthier was very careful to say that for him, one did not vote because one owned something, one voted because ownership of something was the sign that you possessed these other qualities which made you capable of political participation, that is, made it useful to society that you should vote.113 When the Assembly chose the lower national suffrage qualification of FF200, it did so, in the view of some leading members, on the grounds that political education had progressed since 1814, and therefore political rights could be extended to a slightly lower social stratum than before.114 The argument of capacity from education was deployed in a way that paralleled the argument of capacity from property. Just as the increasing division of property, as well as individual habits of thrift, etc, would lead to a broader suffrage in the future, so too the increasing spread of education could give hope that:

Yes, gentlemen, it is possible to foresee the right to vote generally exercised, and men no longer equal solely before the law, but before Reason as well. It is sweet to think that one day the most humble citizen, after having drawn his plow all day, will in the evening dry the sweat off his face, and go to confer on the interests of the village, better perhaps than the owner of the field he cultivates.115

This was the liberal equivalent of the man who hunted and fished in the morning, cultivated his garden in the afternoon, and read Hegel at night, Marx’s vision of the ideal Communist society. It was far more prominent in French liberalism than in English. Like Laborde, numerous liberal speakers in the French debates in 1831 dwelt upon the eventual coming of universal suffrage. The explanation for this is partly tactical – English liberals downplayed it to reassure conservatives, while French liberals emphasized
it in order to reconcile revolutionaries to the regime. Further, when talking about eventual universal manhood suffrage, the English tended to suggest that over time more and more people, eventually everybody, would have enough property to enter the existing suffrage. French liberals stressed that with time the property threshold could be lowered to take into account the progress of education. The cens was just a temporary measure until the wished-for time should arrive. Meanwhile, of course, most of the population lacked the capacity to vote. The “people” should vote, but “people” was defined as “the classes sufficiently enlightened . . .”.

Meanwhile, until education made universal suffrage safe, guaranties were needed, but along with those of property those of intelligence were equally good, or better, in the minds of many French liberals. Who then should vote on the basis of their education? Central to all the lists of adjunctions, whether from government or opposition, were the liberal professions. As Berenger put it, landowners and industrialists might enrich a nation, but “the liberal professions instruct, enlighten, soften mores, spread with profusion riches of another kind, necessary to the happiness of all, and without which the enjoyment of other goods would be as barbarous as unworthy of man in society.” Intellect was needed to prevent politics from becoming prey to “sterile and cold egoism.” At the same time it was dangerous to leave people of intellect without votes, because experience had shown that they were a power in France. They must be assimilated to the system for the sake of stability. Laborde amused the Assembly by the story of two children, one smart, one stupid. To the intelligent child the father gave 20,000 francs to pay for his education. For the stupid child he bought a 20,000 franc estate: “Gentlemen, look, of these two children, it will be the imbecile who will be called upon to choose the town officials,” whereas the child who was really important to the state would not vote.

Oddly, the adjunctions proposed by the government for the national suffrage were not proposed by the government for the local vote. The Assembly largely reversed this conclusion, adding the adjunctions for the local vote while rejecting most of them for the national vote, and tempering those it did accept with a FF100/year tax requirement. An amendment by Salverte to include all the adjunctions proposed for the national suffrage in the local suffrage bill, with some residence requirements, passed handily. Attempts to broaden the adjunctions still further on the local level, and include pharmacists, health officers (an inferior level of medical practitioner), all teachers with university training after ten years’ experience, all principals of primary or secondary schools, failed. On the other hand graduates of the Ecole Polytechnique received the local vote after two years’ residence.

On the national level there was considerable argument as to the respective validity of property vs education as proof of capacity, but in France as elsewhere in Europe most liberals were content to see the two as going hand in hand. “Property supposes independence and education, and in conse-
quence enlightenment.” Those for whom property represented a presumption of education, rather than merely wealth, argued that as property gave the presumption of education and independence and interest, so did other signs such as membership of a liberal profession. Kerbertin argued that two conditions had to be met by voters: 1) “capacity or the intelligence to make a good choice”; 2) “interest in conservation”. Property clearly gave the second and was presumed to give the first. For those in the liberal professions, doctors, lawyers, etc., there was a presumption they possessed the first, and Kerbertin went on to argue that notaries, lawyers and even men of letters had at least as much interest in the defense of the social order as the wealthy.

Of course, to regard property as a synonym for education did not mean that one had to favor the adjunctions – one could just as well argue that property, not a university degree, indicated real education. Many argued that the vote belonged to those with intelligence and independence, and that this was to be found in those with property alone. From this point of view there was no need for further criteria of capacity based purely on education and the adjunctions were unnecessary. Property gave a guaranty for order and stability, and one that all could attain by hard work, saving their money, and orderly habits, whereas those with a degree need not practice any of these virtues in order to obtain a vote.

Those who defended property as the sole criterion of capacity used the argument against privilege to attack the defenders of educational qualifications, portraying advocates of the adjunctions as defenders of aristocracy. Pataille exclaimed: “What are we doing now? We are creating a nobility. The old nobility of birth, based on force, will be replaced by the nobility of the professions, founded on intelligence...a real nobility with the distinctive double character of an aristocracy, that is, special privileges beyond the common law...”. One could lose property and hence one’s vote, but a degree would make one a voter for life, and thus create a permanent privilege.

Another argument used by the defenders of property as sole criterion noted that property and taxes paid were measurable, but how was intelligence to be measured? “Was the possession of a university degree or a professional license really a sure guaranty of anything?” If those with degrees could not amass sufficient fortunes to qualify for the vote in the ordinary way, then that proved they lacked the necessary capacity. Real superiority “is revealed by riches, and it is wealth which is its least equivocal sign.” Even if one could ascertain intelligence, many were not convinced that that would bring any reassurance. Daumont cited Benjamin Constant to the effect that intellectuals without property were the most dangerous class in society.

The close association of capacity with property in most French liberal minds can be seen in the compromise amendment adopted by the
Assembly to require all those added to the national electorate for their intellectual capacity to pay at least half the taxes demanded of ordinary voters, that is at least FF100/year. However, when the vote came down to the actual list of professions to be given the vote, the democratic left combined with those liberals who opposed adjunctions to eliminate judges, objectionable to the left because they were appointed by the King. This so incensed the majority of liberals that almost all the other proposed adjunctions were voted down because the left favored them. All who remained, in the end, were the members of the Institut de France and high-ranking retired Army officers.

The debate over adjunctions signals that from a very early date there were voices within French liberalism that were uncomfortable about property as a guaranty of capacity. Habermas suggests that the bourgeois idea of politics was based on the identity of two roles: that of property-owner and that of human being as such. He notes it was easy to make this identification since property-owners were also usually men of education. Although this is a good characterization of much liberal rhetoric it does not encompass all of it. Liberalism does not always identify property and humanity, it does accept other definitions of what makes one fully human, and it can even be hostile to property. This unease about property, besides making life difficult for those who would associate liberalism too closely with the bourgeoisie as an economic class, is a sign of the early strength of an anti-commercial streak in French liberalism. Tocqueville was a prominent representative of this tendency, and we shall see Duvergier de Hauranne converted to it in the 1842 debates. But while this attitude did exist in the Assembly, it was not the dominant form of liberal rhetoric there.

A suffrage based on the intellectual capacity of the voter found more adherents in France than in England. Nevertheless, it remained in the minority. Among French liberals as among English, property was the predominant means of defining capacity in 1831. But the English Parliament in 1832 did not consider anything but a property-based suffrage requirement. There were no adjunctions. Further, although real differences existed in how English liberals construed the £10-suffrage, whether it meant property as such or represented something else, the debate over the meaning of the property-based franchise never grew as fierce in England in 1832 as in France in 1831, and French ideas of a suffrage based on something other than wealth never appeared in the English debate at all. The July Revolution (and French history) encouraged much more awareness of the real power of ideas and intelligence, since for many the revolution had been inspired by these. Thus the common liberal concern that government should mirror the social distribution of power led some in France to argue that since events had demonstrated power lay with the intellectuals, they should be specially represented.

Property and intelligence were the means by which French liberals found guaranties of the capacity of the voter and his ability to participate in
politics. These guaranties, however, were understood differently by different liberals, depending on whether they took an individualist or a social view of capacity. Notions favoring the representation of individuals were stronger in France than in England, but in France too they were outnumbered by those who spoke in terms of the representation of society. The theory of the representation of social interests, however, was challenged more in France. Salverte claimed that interests were abstractions, that all he had ever seen were individual men, good or bad, and the purpose of the suffrage was to give the good ones votes. Humblot-Conté wanted to see the representation of interests in local government, but the representation of individual opinion in national government. But Cunin-Gridaine summed up the feeling of the majority when he combined the liberal struggle on two fronts with the issue of representation: “Let us recognize that society, in order to govern itself, must be governed not by the numerical majority of individuals, too often exploited by an aristocracy that is the enemy of freedom, and by intrigues which are the enemy of order, but by the majority of real powers, whose independence offers society the most secure guaranties.”

Among those who saw politics as the representation of social interests, the desire to include the working classes as such in political life was very weak. For Daunou, assemblies should be meetings of the “stockholders of society” (an image Marx would have loved to quote). It was as representatives of social interests, of “real powers,” that individuals received the vote in the eyes of the majority of French liberals.

The suffrage law as a whole was finally adopted by the National Assembly, by a vote of 290–62, on 4 March 1831. The opposition consisted of a handful of left-liberals who thought the property limit was too high, a few democrats who wanted universal suffrage, and some Legitimists who wanted universal suffrage combined with indirect elections. On the whole therefore it was successful in attracting the support of the great majority of liberal members of the Assembly. It was not able to retain this success for long.

Attempts to reform the suffrage in France: 1842 and 1847

While in England it was the government who stressed that the Reform of 1832 would be “final”, in France it was the left-liberal opposition who called for “finality” in 1831. Barrot argued that as many as possible should be allowed to vote right away, so that it would not be necessary to talk about suffrage again for a long time. It was the supporters of the government who mentioned the possibility of making changes as time and progress allowed. As history would show, it was Barrot and the English who were correct. The 1831 suffrage law rapidly became the object of considerable criticism inside and outside France (German liberals found it particularly objectionable). In the Assembly criticism was led by the more reform-minded fraction of the liberal movement headed by Barrot and eventually supported
by men such as Tocqueville, Duvergier de Hauranne, Rémusat and other
well-known figures. There were a number of serious attempts to reform the
suffrage which, though defeated, gave rise to considerable parliamentary
debate, and helped spark the fall of the July Monarchy in February 1848.
Although unsuccessful, the new tendencies in French liberalism in the 1840s
foreshadow a general trend in European liberalism at mid-century towards
the increased importance of individualist language.

The reformers proposed three means of increasing the electorate: 1) to
reverse the decision of 1831, and admit the “adjunctions,” the liberal pro-
fessions, etc., to the vote; 2) to increase the minimum number of voters in
a district from 150 to 400; 3) most importantly, to lower the cens from
FF200/year to FF100/year. The tax was to be calculated somewhat differently,
which effectively meant the reduction, especially in real terms adjusted for
inflation and lower taxation, was not as great as it seemed, indeed perhaps
as little as FF20.139 The reformers also proposed forbidding civil servants from
holding seats in the assembly. Finally, the electoral districts of 1831 had fol-
lowed the Restoration practice of favoring rural areas. The 1847 reform pro-
posals added 70 seats to the more highly populated urban districts.

The increase in the suffrage suggested by the reformers was relatively
modest. The English reformer Richard Cobden expressed surprise that the
proposed reforms would only add about 200,000 voters (about 19,000 of
these from the adjunctions, another 14,000 from voters who paid under
FF100 but would be chosen to make up the minimum number of 400
voters/district, and the rest from the lowering of the cens). Barrot replied
that the mass of the people were not sufficiently educated for the suffrage
to be extended any further.140 It is noteworthy that no one proposed extend-
ing the municipal suffrage, which had been shown by experience to produce
perfectly conservative administrations, to the national level. Even the
reform wing of French liberalism was extremely cautious. This relative rigid-
ity was characteristic of French liberalism.

The most extensive debates about suffrage reform took place in 1842
and 1847, and the reformers were consistently defeated. In 1842 Ducos gave
the keynote speech in favor of the adjunctions. It is worth summarizing
in detail. He opened by attacking the general “materialism and egoism” in
France. Having set the tone, he cited precedent: the then-government’s argu-
ments for the adjunctions in 1830/31, and the Bérenger Report to the Assem-
bly. Ducos claimed it was no longer possible to deny the “superiority” of
intelligence, its power and capacity, and that it was unsafe to exclude it from
political participation. Intellect was already influencing politics; it must be
brought within the fold: “There is more danger in excluding them from the
electoral body than in including them within the law.” He stressed that the
adjunctons would not change the base of the French electoral system, but
only build on its foundations. Property could not be the only support of the
government, the government could not do without intelligence. “The aris-
tocracy of wealth..., pales before the aristocracy of intelligence and genius. And furthermore do you think that much study, an education laboriously acquired... does not constitute in the eyes of the legislator a moral wealth at least equivalent to landed riches?” How could governments do their best to educate citizens and then deny that the educated had the capacity to vote? By concentrating all rights of suffrage in property the system excited against property all the evil instincts in society. There came into being too strong a line between those who possessed and those who did not. This was dangerous. By attaching the right to vote to something in addition to property, passions would be calmed. What one needed was the combination of the two criteria, property and intelligence, through a suffrage that would give each a means to vote. Only by combining the two could one both “conserve” and “progress”.141

Capacity could not be excluded without danger. Power must participate, and intellect was power. The distrust of property as a sufficient source of legitimacy, present in 1831, now became the theme of a larger number of French liberals. They were combating the view that possession of property meant capacity, in favor of the view that property was only a sign of other capacities. Thus Billault, a supporter of reform, to the government: “According to you, electoral rights belong solely to property; according to us, electoral rights belong to the person, to the capacity; when there is sufficient indication of capacity, persons will exercise the right to vote.”142

There was thus more emphasis on the gap between property and education. Billault, like Ducos and Dufaure, assaulted the materialism of French society, and laid the responsibility for this flaw on the suffrage. In response to the attack advocates of the intelligenzia have always faced, that they are aristocrats at heart, Billault argued that educational qualifications were a proof of capacity that did not disappear – that is why they could be permanent, whereas when the only sign of an individual’s capacity was his money, all proof of capacity disappeared when the money did. Dufaure spoke of the need to keep capacity from becoming a question of class, and argued that if the vote was based purely on money, then it was a class function, not a function of capacity. To prove this was not the case, other criteria were needed. It was better to encourage people to go to school than to encourage them to get rich.143 Billault and Dufaure waged their attack on behalf of the liberal professions, that is on behalf, as Billault proclaimed, of a portion of the middle class who lacked land yet ought to be the strength of the regime.

Different value systems coexisting within bourgeois culture were manifested here. In the 1830s Bildung und Besitz were fairly comfortable bedfellows for most French liberals. In the 1840s they began to become estranged in the eyes of a growing minority, a precedent that would gradually gain force throughout Europe in the later nineteenth century, and do much to disintegrate the unifying power of the discourse of capacity.
But in 1842 the discourse of capacity was still the glue of liberalism and sufficed for the task. Most liberals who supported the reform used rhetoric reconcilable with property and the representation of social interests. Bechard denied that the electoral system represented individuals. But precisely because it represented interests, it needed to allow political access to the liberal professions. In fact Bechard hesitated between the two liberal rhetorics, for he also said that the system was founded on “political capacity, the personal aptitude of individuals.” It was always common for speeches to mix different aspects of liberalism, both on the opportunist grounds that it would catch more ears and votes, and because political language in action is apt to be more confused than in the grammars constructed by historians.

Guizot, Minister of Foreign Affairs and leading spirit of the government, answered on the government’s behalf. The Moniteur notes that “there was a general expression of curiosity – the session remained suspended for a long time.” It was in this speech that Guizot abandoned liberalism and moved to a conservative position, the position that would be his downfall and that of the July Monarchy in 1848. Guizot abandoned the Utopian element in liberalism. The task of the government, he said, was simply to competently conduct the ordinary affairs of the country. Guizot hastened to dismiss Billault’s suggestions that it was only the spirit of faction that prevented the Assembly from unanimously accepting the adjunctions. When he looked at the question of suffrage reform in the abstract, he said, there was not even a question. Electoral reform meant that classes hitherto unrepresented sought representation. That was not the case in France. Guizot dismissed the call for reform on utilitarian grounds. Since there were no real problems in France, there was no real need for a solution: “An innovation is only an improvement when it provides an effective remedy to a real ill, when it gives satisfaction to a real need. In my opinion, the ill which is spoken of is not real in France, it does not exist; the need for electoral reform is not real either.” Guizot thus anticipated many of the arguments Robert Lowe would use to oppose further suffrage reform in England in 1866. Unfortunately for French liberals it was Guizot’s position, seconded by that of King Louis-Philippe, that counted. Unlike Lowe, Guizot was successful in staving off reform.

Guizot refuted liberal demands for reform with the liberal defense that society was already well-represented in the government. But in an illiberal fashion he alleged that there was no need for progress, because there was nothing to progress towards. This passive conception of his role was more than the element of resistance to change always present in the liberal mix; it was a practical refusal of any change ever, not merely putting off universal suffrage indefinitely, but putting off progress indefinitely. This was not a liberal position. Other liberal opponents of reform in 1842 did not take this line – they repeated the arguments of 1831 that degrees were not a sign
of capacity, that anyone with capacity would also make money, that the adjunctions would create a permanent nobility of voters, etc.\textsuperscript{148}

In the 1847 debates many anti-reform speakers attempted to move themselves back onto liberal territory by saying that they did not forever exclude the idea of electoral reform, while the reformers insisted that this was their position, resistance “become dogma, limit become God”.\textsuperscript{149} The reformers of 1847 again exhibited the new emphasis on the representation of competent individuals found in 1842, along with a demand for real social interests to be better represented. This time the keynote speech was given by Duvergier de Hauranne. He repeated the claim made in England in 1832, that the number of voters ought to be increased wherever it could be done without danger to society, and went on to demand the vote for anyone who could be presumed to have “a free and enlightened judgement,” citing the doctrinaire Royer-Collard. Property was not to vote for its own sake, otherwise all property-owners, in whatever amount, would have a right to vote, property represented a sign of capacity, of possessing a “free and enlightened” judgement – “the tax paid is the sign of the income, as the income is the sign of capacity”. He disassociated himself from those who saw reform as merely a step towards universal suffrage, and as a staunch liberal denied that there was no alternative to immobilism or a slippery slope to universal suffrage.\textsuperscript{150}

Notable too was the speech of Gustave de Beaumont, Tocqueville’s great friend, pointing out that the demand for electoral reform had disappeared in England after 1832, because there all interests really were represented and thus necessary reforms could be made by Parliament. In France, because the electoral system was flawed, many interests went unrepresented and this allowed the Assembly to ignore the pressing social questions of the day, above all the material sufferings of the masses. For Beaumont, the one remedy against universal suffrage was to make sure that all interests were represented, which he believed the proposed reform would do. Barrot on the other hand attacked the idea of a majority that represented interests, and appealed to opinion alone as the true force of parties and government, thus underlining the tendency of the representation of opinion to become the representation of individuals.\textsuperscript{151}

In Duvergier de Hauranne, Beaumont and Barrot we see one rhetoric that stressed individual capacity and another that stressed the representation of social interests, both liberal and both deployed on the side of reform, but it is individualist language that dominates on the reform side. On the side of Resistance it is the language of social representation that dominates. Interestingly, two speakers who opposed the reform in general laid all the blame for reform agitation on the elimination of the adjunctions from the suffrage. They argued that it was the exclusion of these real capacities that was causing trouble, and therefore they supported that aspect of reform while rejecting the rest.\textsuperscript{152}
But Guizot was no longer a liberal. He responded by saying: “I think today what I thought and what I said in 1842 on this same question.” Guizot proclaimed again, a little later in the same speech, his definitive departure from liberalism when he said that universal suffrage would never exist: “The principle of universal suffrage is in itself so absurd that none of even its partisans dare accept it or support it completely. None. (interjection: ‘its day will come’) There will never be a day for universal suffrage. There will never be a time when all human beings, whatever they are, can be called to exercise political rights.”

He then distinguished between intellectual capacity, which he correctly saw as the foundation of Duvergier de Hauranne’s arguments, and political capacity. Political capacity required that intelligence be informed by a certain social situation, controlled by it. It was the lack of this control that was the great malady of the era, lamented Guizot. Guizot thus returned to the rhetoric of social representation that had been central to most liberal rhetoric in the 1830s, but now showed how this rhetoric could slide over into a purely conservative defense of the status quo when it lacked liberalism’s concurrent progressive impulse.

The 1847 attempt to reform the French suffrage was voted down 252–154. The Opposition despaired of succeeding through ordinary parliamentary means, and began a campaign of public banquets to agitate for suffrage reform. The campaign soon snowballed, and it was the banning of a public banquet for suffrage reform in Paris that led directly to the revolution of February 1848. The brief history of French liberalism as the undisputed party in power came to an end.

Overall French liberalism used the same language as English liberalism, but with important variations. French liberalism differed from English liberalism in the greater weight it put on education as a criterion of capacity, and in the greater strength of individualist language. Paradoxically, this was combined with greater rigidity by most speakers of the language of social representation and those who emphasized property. French liberal politics was thus characterized internally by principled opposition and struggle, rather than compromise and adaptability. This made the opportunistic conduct of a number of French liberal politicians of the period, when the chance of office beckoned, still more discrediting to liberalism.

**Liberalism and the suffrage in Germany, 1830–47**

The political, social and institutional context of Germany in 1830–47 was naturally different from that of France or England. There was no Germany, for one thing, only several dozen German states. National unity was a goal of German liberals without direct parallel in France or England. Further, the leading German states had no parliament at all, and where one existed, its powers were much smaller than those of the French and English parliaments. Finally, feudal, military and bureaucratic privileges were much more
important in Germany, and the war against despotism from above thus had a different significance for German liberals. These differences contributed to the fact that if English liberalism was (mostly) the Party of Movement, and French liberalism (mostly) the Party of Resistance, then German liberalism was (mostly) the Party of Criticism. Or as David Blackbourn puts it, “England had an industrial revolution, France a political revolution – and Germany a reading revolution.” Of course, from a liberal perspective, if one must have a revolution at all, the German variety was to be preferred. It allowed the most scope for rational reflection, and the least for violent intervention from above or below. German liberals were especially interested in ideas and especially active in writing about and discussing politics. They dominated the public debate of politics. But at the same time German liberals had the least opportunity, and the least success, at actually influencing government in this period.

German liberals’ opportunities for practical reform were limited, but their goals were no less ambitious than those of French or English liberals. Rather the contrary: German liberals were committed not merely to political reform, which in the 1830s and 1840s seemed attainable and even inevitable, but also to the apparently chimeric goal of national unification. In Germany liberals identified themselves with nationalism, with the idea of creating a unified German state. German liberals were even more interested in creating a national state because no individual German state possessed a liberal government. Germany possessed neither freedom nor unity, as liberals liked to say. With regard to unity, their nationalism sometimes led German liberals to the brink of supporting the kind of violent change that liberals usually abhorred. This contributed to making them the most contradictory of all European liberals.

Such power as liberalism exercised in Germany in the Vormärz, as historians of Germany anachronistically describe the period from 1815 until the revolutions of March 1848, came from bureaucratic liberalism, occasionally from local government, but above all from the shadowy influence of public opinion. Critical writing was the only means for most German liberals to express themselves, and through their writings liberals succeeded in dominating German public opinion. The reasons German liberals emphasized the importance of the press and the power of ideas went beyond their unfavorable circumstances, however. The power of ideas to transform reality was by no means a recent discovery for Germans. The Reformation had created a special faith in the power of the mind; while faith in the transforming power of ideas was a common liberal heritage from the Enlightenment, it was at its strongest in Germany. Furthermore, German liberals had only recently seen their country overrun by the ideas of the French Revolution forged into bayonets. Related to German liberals’ belief in the power of ideas was the relative strength of political language based on individuals rather than classes.
German liberalism was a response to German history and the German political situation—just as French liberalism was a response to the French situation, and English liberalism a response to the English situation. But this did not prevent German liberalism, any more than French or English liberalism, from sharing the common political culture or speaking the common language of European liberalism, although accents and emphases differed. The common political language of European liberalism was the language of capacity, and German liberals spoke it with as much fluency as anyone else. Where they spoke it, however, was different. The paucity of German parliamentary debate in this period means that in describing how Vormärz German liberals used the language of capacity one must turn to German political literature, supplemented by limited evidence from political practice.

Despite, or perhaps because of their relative lack of real parliamentary institutions, German liberals spilled much ink discussing who should vote. They founded their ideas about the suffrage on the common liberal assumption that political participation must be based on capacity. More like their French neighbors than the English in this respect, German liberals felt the need to justify themselves against egalitarian arguments. The widely read liberal author Paul Pfizer argued that equality must not be considered abstractly and philosophically, but rather within the limits of existing education and mores, taking account of Germany’s existing laws and the natural inequalities of men. The Rhenish industrialist and liberal leader David Hansemann noted that supporters of political equality claimed it was a necessary consequence of the general rights of man. While he conceded this was true, he added that experience taught that the rights of man should be recognized only insofar as compatible with utility, reason and stability. Everyone spoke of equality, but, said Hansemann in words that could have served as a banner for liberals throughout Europe, “equality must be made compatible with reason.” Reason and experience showed that political freedom could not be equally distributed without fatally weakening the state.

Limiting political participation on the basis of capacity was thus an essential part of legislation in a “democracy”, at least in what the liberal author of the article on “democracy” in the Staatslexikon described as democracy. “Thus in the democratic mind personal CAPACITY [emphasis original] to exercise political rights is the only criterion for their limitation.” This liberal, identified only as “S,” laid claim to the word “democracy” on behalf of liberalism, on the grounds that “democracy” based its limitation of political participation on capacity and independence rather than “on the accident of birth and inheritance or on power . . .”. It was “in the equal interest of all that the various offices of public life be given to the most capable,” and so this system was democratic, provided these capacities were chosen by election. Thus “S” effectively repeated the liberal credo that voting was a trust or office to be exercised for the common good.
German liberals were more interested than French or English liberals in laying claim to the title of “democrat”. In England in 1832 “democrat” was likely enough to be a conservative term of abuse for liberals. In France, liberals did sometimes attempt to stake a claim to the word, but only after carefully distancing it from its revolutionary associations. German liberals also redefined it, but they were particularly eager to embrace it. Rotteck defined democracy as the hegemony of the true, rational general will, “thus the democratic principle… is not opposed to a practical inequality of political influence based on differences of talent, moral power, wealth, etc.”.162

What preoccupied German liberals, as it did all liberals, was “what should the principle of exclusion [from suffrage] be?” In which classes were “the majority of their members incapable or unreliable, or at least give good grounds for doubt of the rationality or honesty of their votes?”163 German liberals, like the English and French, emphasized utility as the deciding factor in who should vote. What mattered to Rotteck and other Germans was “getting good results.”164 Utilitarian political thinking was widespread in Germany.165 Hansemann was the most utilitarian of Vormärz liberals: for him the problem with aristocratic political privileges was not that they were unjust, but that they were no longer useful. He went so far as to say that rights were subordinate to utility, although a power in themselves.166 But the appeal to utility extended right across the German liberal spectrum.167 Liberalism’s “leading thought always remains the greatest possible amount of freedom compatible with the secure and complete attainment of a rational political end.” Thus Pfizer defined liberalism in the Staatslexikon.

German liberalism had two main tendencies. These are the familiar two main types of French and English liberalism, electoral politics as the representation of social groups and as the representation of individuals. Other historians have previously described German liberal attitudes to the suffrage in this way. Klotzbach suggests that one group of German liberals based suffrage on a theory of organic social representation in which the government ought to mirror the social composition of society, and the other on reason and the rational individual.168 Nipperdey describes one type of German liberalism in general as historically based, and the other as based on reason, and his historical group fits well enough with social representation, and his rationalists with individualist liberals.169 Both kinds of liberalism appealed to reason; they just defined it differently. Both groups also appealed to public opinion, although they constituted the public differently, one group from social classes and interests, the other group from rational individuals. Thus in Germany too there were theories of suffrage based on classes and property on the one hand, and on the other hand theories of suffrage based on education and the individual (even if property-ownership was also, as in the rest of Europe, used as a sign of education and individual independence). A third historian, Böckenförde, uses the same dichotomy to claim that liberalisms based on theories of social representation were a uniquely German
(and particularly inferior) type of liberalism, without realizing that this idea was dominant throughout European liberalism.\textsuperscript{170}

To weigh the relative strengths of these groups in Germany is more difficult than in France and England, because the lack of parliamentary debate makes it difficult to find a comparable measure, but it seems that liberals who understood suffrage as the representation of classes and social interests were still the majority in Germany, if not in as great a proportion as elsewhere. Among German liberals who wished to see government based on the representation of interests, some favored a modernized version of the old corporations and estates, and so on, most notably Dahlmann. But what modernized theories of Estates often barely concealed behind their medieval trappings was a justification for middle-class political power, at least in the proposed lower house. For most German liberals it was clear that the middle class ought to dominate the suffrage, “because then the middle class will preserve the upper hand in elections ... which overall is the most desirable thing, because among the middle class in the rule efficiency and reliability is most encountered ...”.\textsuperscript{171}

A good example of a liberal who aimed directly at establishing the power of the middle class in \textit{Vormärz} Germany is David Hansemann.\textsuperscript{172} He was in some respects the German Guizot. Hansemann believed in rule by the majority – that is, by the majority of the real social powers of the nation, whose rule he thought would be in the common interest. All classes sought political power. Which was capable of exercising it? The middle class. The middle class was the most powerful class in Prussia, based on its numbers (large in relation to aristocracy and bureaucracy, even if small compared to the rest of the population), its wealth, and its education.\textsuperscript{173} Hansemann was in many ways a unique figure, but his admiration of the middle class was by no means unusual, particularly in the Rhineland. Dahlmann also stressed the leading role of the middle class in the state. The middle class was the heart of the modern state because it had inherited the education of the medieval clergy and the money of the medieval nobility, thus combining \textit{Bildung und Besitz}, property and education, in its own hands.\textsuperscript{174} Not even the July Monarchy was sufficiently middle-class for many German liberals. When they criticized the July Monarchy, as they often did, it was because in their eyes the suffrage of the July Monarchy insufficiently represented the middle class.\textsuperscript{175}

Most Rhenish liberals were concerned to see that groups outside the middle class got some representation, although always a minority one. In this concern for inclusion early German liberals resemble the English a few decades later. Unfortunately for German liberalism, this precocious concern for lower-class political participation diminished over time rather than increasing as in England. The Bonn historian Sybel wanted all powers to be represented. Voting should represent the real socio-political composition of the country, in which the lower class had a real importance, if a lesser one.
The Rhenish industrialist Mevissen wanted representation to be based “on the true present importance” of social groups, which could be discovered based on the amount of taxes they paid. This representation would be carefully balanced so that the lower classes would never have a majority.\textsuperscript{176} In this view lay the seeds of liberal acceptance of the Prussian three-class suffrage of 1850–1918, itself an importation from the liberal Rhineland. Even in the 1830s, however, many German liberals were willing to completely exclude the lower classes from the suffrage. In order to insure the common good, political participation had to be limited to those with a certain level of personal independence, according to K. T. Welcker in the \textit{Staatslexikon}. Rotteck excluded those dependent on daily wages from the vote as a matter of course.\textsuperscript{177}

In Germany as elsewhere it was property \textit{and} education that most liberals looked for as signs of political capacity. “Independence” was a key criterion of political capacity for German liberals. Independence was often defined to include both an educated judgement \textit{and} material independence. Jürgen Kocka cites a liberal political dictionary of 1827 that combined economic independence and rationality as the twin desiderata in a voter, and this remained typical of the ways German liberals defined capacity.\textsuperscript{178} However, a relatively large, compared to France and England, number of German liberals were willing to leave property behind altogether as a criterion of capacity, or else put it second to education. Wolfgang Kaschuba suggests that German liberals in general were more taken with cultural criteria of capacity like education than English or French liberals.\textsuperscript{179} The author of the article on “democracy” in the \textit{Staatslexikon} suggested that in one state it will be in accord with the democratic principle if one excludes some people from the exercise of political rights because they are personally completely dependent on another individual for their economic existence; but on the other hand in another state, where a higher level of general political education exists, it would be contrary to the democratic spirit to exclude the \textit{same} category of citizens.\textsuperscript{180}

Rotteck joined him in emphasizing that the details of any suffrage would have to depend on the educational situation of the people.\textsuperscript{181} This naturally led to a rhetorical emphasis on the eventual expansion of the suffrage. Rotteck argued that democracy, as understood by a liberal like him, demanded increasing the political education and overall intelligence of all classes.\textsuperscript{182} The Hessian Murhard, like many French and English liberals, saw a broad local suffrage as a means of politically educating the lower classes. Only education would fit them for political participation.\textsuperscript{183} In the \textit{Staatslexikon “S,”} an unusually pure example of the rhetoric of individual representation and the intellectual definition of capacity, was extremely optimistic about the future possibilities of education. The progress of tech-
ology would mean that more and more time was available for even the poorest to pursue intellectual activities. This would “develop the capacity for a general participation in public affairs, and so in future the machines of modern nations would become what the slaves of the ancients had been: the condition which made possible the blossoming of political freedom.” S represented liberal optimism in its strongest and most appealing form, one based on a universal capacity and desire for education. The degree of S’s optimism was by no means universal even among liberals who relied on education – he stands out for his refusal to set any limits on who should get an education in the present and what kind they should receive. In the meantime, of course, as a liberal S limited suffrage to those whose intellectual independence had already given them the necessary “personal capacity” to participate in politics. Far removed along the liberal spectrum from S, Dahlmann also devoted the concluding chapter of his Politics to education. Insuring the education of its people was a primary duty of the liberal state, for only an educated people would possess the capacity to create a liberal state. Dahlmann also thought the continuing education of the citizen, even after the end of formal schooling, to be the essence of politics.

The German liberal emphasis on education and cultural criteria logically accompanied an emphasis on the representation of individuals. Unlike French and English liberals, as we have seen above, German liberals used individualist language almost as much as they used socially oriented language. Welcker, a relatively conservative liberal, criticized conservative defenders of traditional Estates because they spoke in terms of interests, and not in terms of individuals or the nation, “as if things were more important than men!” For Welcker to speak of the representation of interests was merely to justify traditional historical privileges. The comparatively strong emphasis on education and the representation of individuals in German liberalism paralleled the dominant position of the Bildungsbürgertum, the university-educated segment of the middle class, within Vormärz German liberalism as well as among the contemporary German middle class. It also reflected the continuing strength of aristocratic institutions and thus of liberal hostility to them.

An interesting corollary of individualist-oriented liberalism was the German liberal attitude to Jewish Emancipation, including Jewish suffrage. Here we can follow Volkov, who suggests that the emancipation of the Jews can be seen as paradigmatic of German liberal attitudes in general. She finds that no German liberal was interested in enfranchising the Jews as a social group. As a group they often continued to be despised. But most German liberals in the Vormärz wanted to enfranchise individuals who might happen to be Jewish, because what mattered was their personal capacity. Since the Jews were enfranchised this would suggest the dominant influence of individualist theories of representation.
As in France, many German liberals wanted to use a system of adjunctions to combine the advantages of representing individuals with those of representing classes. Dahlmann suggested that a census was necessary, but he also wished to give voting rights, at least in towns, to “all those who give public proof of their activity on the community’s behalf,” among whom he included town officials, professors, clergy, Gymnasium teachers, and judges, without any census being required of them. Dahlmann declined to give those with higher education (as opposed to individuals exercising particular social functions) voting rights in his suffrage scheme, but he did think it would be good if universities and learned societies were allowed to elect representatives as separate constituencies. Mevissen also wanted to see special representation for universities, along with clergy and the higher bureaucracy, although he too gave predominance to property.

The emphasis on education led individually oriented German liberals, like some socially oriented ones, towards a system of universal weighted suffrage, in order to take into account the fact that large numbers of people had some education, some intelligence or some property. Sylvester Jordan thought that a division among voters according to the amount of property owned would represent different levels of “political maturity”, and so justify giving universal but unequal votes to all who met the basic criterion of independence. Pfizer saw in weighted voting the means to correlate political maturity with political participation. This was a common solution in Germany. It owed something to both Kant and Hegel, and we have already seen it proposed by socially oriented liberals. Freedom had to be limited according to capacity, but the stress on the individual, the stress on education as an indication of rationality, made it hard to justify the complete exclusion from political participation of those who had even a slight capacity for it. German liberalism was unique in resolving the problem by widely adopting a universal but unequal suffrage. Thus the idea behind the Prussian three-class suffrage had widespread support among Vormärz liberals, independent of the political context of Prussia in 1850 when it was adopted.

Why did German liberals often opt for universal weighted suffrage, when the English and French did not seriously consider it? In France the strong egalitarian traditions inherited from the French Revolution militated against suggesting that some voters were better than others. By creating a hierarchy within the voting public it would have made the suffrage seem more aristocratic, and discredited liberalism. English society was more aristocratic than French, but the English also rejected weighted votes, at least for Parliament. Here the explanation lies partly in tradition – it would have been an innovation in Parliamentary elections that would have shocked. Also, English liberals relied on a working system of political deference to serve the functions German liberals performed with weighted votes. Deference made the vote of the English squire or factory-owner count for twenty when multiplied by the influence it would have. The German liberal did not count on
this to work, at least not in a liberal direction. The German system formalized relations that remained informal in England and illegitimate in France.

The bureaucracy played a special role in German liberalism that demands special discussion. Like individually oriented liberals, bureaucratic liberals also had a strong attachment to rationality as the heart of politics, and education as the means of attaining rationality (throughout Germany bureaucrats were usually required to have a university degree and to pass state examinations as well), but here the similarities stop. Individualist exponents of education were not sure they wanted to include bureaucrats within their cultural definition of the educated middle class at all, despite their university educations and bourgeois lifestyles. Socially oriented advocates of the middle class often saw the bureaucracy as their enemy. These were reasons that acted to make bureaucratic liberalism uncommon in France and England, and it can easily be seen why some historians wish to deny the enlightened bureaucracy standing within the liberal movement. Where liberalism limited political participation to those citizens with capacity, bureaucratic reformers excluded the citizenry from full participation because none but the bureaucracy possessed real capacity. Some historians, noting the antipathy of many early German liberals to the bureaucracy, have denied the existence of bureaucratic liberalism as a form of liberalism.

But there was much that might attract German liberals to the bureaucracy. State employees, especially university professors, made up a large proportion of liberals. It was the state bureaucracy that offered German liberalism its chief opportunity for practical application in the\textit{ Vormärz}. The “revolutions from above” carried out in many German states after 1800 had been made in large part by a liberal and liberalizing bureaucracy: “The state liberalized itself to a certain extent, stronger certainly in administration and administrative activity than constitutionally, . . . bureaucratic liberalism became characteristic as a way between feudal reaction and intellectual revolution.” Bureaucratic liberals attacked inherited privilege, did their best to establish and maintain civil equality, and often made cautious efforts to broaden freedom of expression. They also favored economic liberalization. The bureaucracy thus seemed to some liberals to offer the way liberals were searching for to pursue the Enlightenment while avoiding revolution. As one historian puts it, “the importance of bureaucratic reform for the liberal constitutional movement cannot be overlooked.”

There were two distinct aspects of bureaucratic liberalism in Germany: firstly the liberalism of bureaucrats, which was widespread and involved participation in all forms of liberal discourse, but flavored its participation with a higher estimation of the bureaucracy than was to be found in most other liberalisms. High opinions of the bureaucracy could be found among a wide spectrum of German liberals. The majority of nineteenth-century German liberals were more or less inclined to see the bureaucracy as a class that was specially endowed with liberal virtues. Even in the Rhineland, where anti-
bureaucratic sentiment was at its strongest, Ludwig Camphausen could write to his bureaucrat brother Otto that local opinion held that the Prussian bureaucracy had done great things for the Prussian state, “that on the whole it has always maintained a democratic tendency, and that today it still contains a great number of capacities, who with untiring effort use their considerable intellectual gifts for the good of the province, even if this kind of thing is partly outgrown and partly must be outgrown in future.”200 His brother meanwhile thought the bureaucracy was “an aristocracy of capacity.” For liberals like Camphausen, and Droysen who saw in the bureaucracy “the most noble intellectual forces of our nation,” the bureaucracy represented an elite, and thus were among those best-suited to political participation and activity.201

The second kind of bureaucratic liberalism emphasized the special capacity of the bureaucracy as an institution. Capacity was seen as concentrated solely in the hands of the bureaucracy. A good administration was identical with a good constitution, because it carried out the utilitarian goals of liberalism and embodied rational authority.202 This kind of reformer might oppose feudal society, but could not be called a liberal. Unless, that is, he wished to bring the population out of its state of rigor mortis, as many bureaucrats did – one need only think of Baron vom Stein, the great Prussian reformer. What set bureaucratic liberals apart from other liberals was the fact that they defined rational understanding of the common good as the unique possession of the bureaucracy. “The highest bureaucrats necessarily have a deeper and more comprehensive insight into the nature of trends [Einrichtungen] and the needs of the state.”203 Public opinion for all liberalisms was the opinion of those who possessed the capacity to form rational opinions. For bureaucratic liberalism this capacity in its highest form was reserved to the bureaucracy. As the bureaucracy was part of the state, this meant that for bureaucratic liberals the state itself had a special role to play as an enlightened force in politics. Bureaucratic liberals preserved liberal commitments to a free press, the rule of law, civil equality, and so on, as well as to the existence of political assemblies. They, and public opinion in general, were all a means of instructing and informing the bureaucracy, not of replacing it. Thus the enlightened absolutism of the eighteenth century was transformed into the centralizing bureaucratic liberalism of the nineteenth.

German liberalism possessed a considerable bureaucratic element in addition to its socially and individually oriented wings. It is if anything surprising that it appears less common than individualist and socially oriented variants of liberal discourse, but then, neither political literature nor even parliamentary debates were its natural venue, and so perhaps it is the nature of the evidence used here that makes it appear weaker than it was in reality. It is hard to know how to judge its relative importance without some forum in which the dialects of German liberalism can be measured against one
another, and that forum, a national parliament, was precisely what German liberalism lacked.

However, there is some *Vormärz* political practice which can illustrate how German liberals defined capacity in practice. Three examples are Württemberg, Electoral Hesse, and Prussia. Even here, actual parliamentary debate over the suffrage was largely absent, or else its record is inaccessible. Nevertheless, examination of their suffrage laws or, in the case of Prussia, of liberal attempts at reforming them, contributes to understanding German liberals’ attitudes towards the suffrage.

Württemberg was one of the southern states endowed with a new constitution after 1815. Elections in Württemberg were indirect. First, electors were chosen and then the electors voted for the representative. The suffrage at the lowest level was very broad – anyone who paid direct taxes could vote for an elector. In practice this meant about 75 per cent of adult males could vote. However, only one-third of the electors were selected in this way. The other two-thirds of the electors were made up of those who paid the most taxes in the district, i.e. the wealthiest local citizens. The only taxes that counted in defining this group were land, house and business franchise taxes. A liberal attempt in 1833 to include income and capital taxes in the calculations was rejected by the government. This system was not as restrictive as it appears, however, because there was a large number of electors – one for every seven voters, on average 500 per district. Since the number of electors was so large, the social strata represented among the electors chosen for their wealth as well as those elected were quite wide, extending well into the lower middle classes.

For the actual representatives in the lower house there was no property requirement. Universal eligibility had almost unanimous support among German liberals: even Hansemann supported it. For German liberals, repeating an argument heard in French left-liberal circles but absent from English Parliamentary debates, to limit passive suffrage was to deny the capacity of the voters to make a good choice, and to deny the importance of allowing political capacity a legitimate place in politics wherever it might be found; even the poor of sterling merit ought to be recognized. A good census, as Rotteck pointed out, should eliminate any danger from this quarter because the voters could be trusted to make good choices. Nevertheless representatives came overwhelmingly from the middle classes, over half from the bureaucracy broadly defined, often including bureaucrats who did not themselves possess a right to vote, since in Württemberg civil servants were often provided with tax-free housing, which meant they paid no direct taxes. One of the reasons German liberals favored universal eligibility was to allow bureaucrats to be elected, as they often were in *Vormärz* assemblies, and indeed long thereafter. Along with the 97 regularly chosen representatives in the lower house, there were an additional 13 representatives elected by the nobility and 10 chosen by the Catholic and Protestant churches and
the University of Tübingen. All elections were by public ballot, with considerable and largely successful pressure exercised by the conservative government.206

Württemberg is valuable chiefly as an example of the kind of suffrage that existed in Germany, and formed the basis for liberal discussions. A broad suffrage was tapered through the institution of indirect election, yet nevertheless remained socially fairly comprehensive by comparison with contemporary France or even England. \textit{Vormärz} German liberalism had broad social roots. \textit{Vormärz} representation was nevertheless dominated by the middle class, with strong bureaucratic participation. In other words, the “capacities” were able to exercise a leading role without much difficulty, which contributed to German liberal optimism.

The Württemberg constitution and suffrage laws were not a liberal creation. The constitution of Electoral Hesse, imposed on the Elector in 1831 after considerable civic unrest, was largely written by liberals. Like the Württemberg constitution, there was special representation for the nobility, but this time within a single-chamber representative assembly. The commoners guaranteed themselves a permanent majority, 32 votes to 8 for the nobility. Half the 32 commoners represented town districts (one of these being the University of Marburg), half rural ones. Interestingly, the nobility offered to give up its guaranteed seats in return for a high landed-property requirement for eligibility for election in rural districts. This was rejected by the liberals for fear it would lead to greater aristocratic influence, since aristocrats still made up a majority of large landowners.

Once again the suffrage was broad and indirect: roughly 50 per cent of adult males had votes, based on a property qualification that excluded day-laborers, apprentices and landless peasants. The Hessian voters chose all the electors. Compared to Württemberg, however, the property requirements to serve as an elector in Hesse were high. In city districts they had to belong to the top one-sixth of taxpayers or else satisfy high absolute property requirements. In rural districts similar requirements existed. As for the representatives themselves, there was originally considerable sentiment in Hesse to ban bureaucrats, but this was given up as impossible in 1831 because of the lack of political experience among the rest of the population. Bureaucrats soon became the core of liberal leadership, but a relic of the original distrust of the bureaucracy was a constitutional provision that required any bureaucrat who received a promotion to run for re-election, a provision similar to that of the July Monarchy in France. Half the representatives from city districts had to be either veterans of local government or possess high property qualifications. The other half were elected without any requirements other than current residence and the right to vote. In the rural districts half had to possess property and derive most of their income from agriculture. Except for the University of Marburg’s seat, voting for electors was public, but electors chose the representative by secret ballot.
The Hessian constitution presents a typical liberal mix between property and education. Despite a seat for the University of Marburg and extra seats for some towns because of their “intelligence,” the dominant emphasis was on property, although whether property was seen as evidence of one’s individual capacity or one’s capacity to represent a class cannot be determined. Nevertheless the Hessian suffrage left open to all individuals of political capacity the possibility of serving as a representative. It followed the common German pattern of a relatively broad primary suffrage, and represented a compromise over eligibility, since half the representatives did not have to satisfy any requirements beyond residence, and the other half had to possess a high property qualification. At the key intermediate stage of the electors, however, there was a high property suffrage.

The final arena to be considered here is Prussia. Unlike Württemberg and Electoral Hesse, Prussia did not possess a constitution in this period, and the first Prussian national representative body did not meet until 1847, almost on the eve of the revolutions of 1848. Prussia did however possess provincial estates, organized on a traditional basis, with separate chambers for the nobility and the commons; the commons sometimes divided into two separate chambers representing towns and rural areas. The right to vote for the commons was based on landownership, and to serve as a representative there was a requirement of 10-year residency and ownership of the same land or business. The length of time was resented because it excluded almost all bureaucrats and many other citizens as well, despite their wealth.

The King of Prussia’s strict adherence to a notion of representation based on traditional estates dictated the form of liberal attempts to revise the system. It was pointless to suggest that representation be based on individual rather than group criteria, for example. Nevertheless, there were efforts to reform the system. Representatives of several cities in various provinces petitioned that the requirement of land or business ownership be replaced by a simple income qualification. Many wished to replace the 10-year requirement with a requirement of three-to-five years. In 1845 there was a petition by 23 professors at the University of Bonn in the Rhineland asking that they be granted electoral eligibility, and that the requirement of business-ownership or a farm directly farmed by the owner be abolished. Other petitions from the Rhineland in the 1840s asked for representation based on population, rather than estates, or on the amount of taxes paid. It was noted, for example, that the owners of noble estates paid 4 per cent of the land taxes but received 33 per cent of the representatives.

The Rhineland was the most liberal province, and held a relatively extended debate on the suffrage in March 1845, as part of an unsuccessful attempt to petition the King to hold a national assembly. Beckerath, one of the leading Rhenish liberals, argued that the state needed representative institutions to avoid revolution, and that it needed the help of the power of public opinion. The participation of the people in the state would be in
accord with reason, and in that pursuit the “best and most insightful” should participate. Camphausen, a liberal entrepreneur with family connections in the bureaucracy, extended this theme, arguing that the national representative body had to have the different elements of the state properly represented: the power of wealth and the power of intellect, that is, of property and education. He suggested two ways to do this. One way was through a two-chamber assembly in which the lower chamber would have universal eligibility and voting rights limited to those who paid a certain level of taxes, based on geographical districts (that is, not estates), with the upper chamber named for life by the King. A second way would be a one-chamber assembly, elected by voters divided into three classes based on taxes, each class electing only members of their own class and electoral district. But either way, the national assembly was to be constituted so as to represent the majority of the material and intellectual power of the nation. This meant that no type of property was to be privileged or excluded. Sybel argued that capitalists and merchants were now more important than farmers, whether or not they owned a house. Prussia, the most educated nation of Europe, must not exclude intelligence – and thus not prevent bureaucrats or university professors from being elected.

The Rhenish liberals thus aligned themselves squarely with the dominant discourse within European liberalism, one based on representing the real powers of society, in which power was acknowledged to come from both wealth and education, but with a predominant bias towards wealth. To this standard mix they added the German twist of a preference for universal passive suffrage, to give independent intelligence its due and allow bureaucrats to serve. The conservatives attacked them on the grounds that they really wanted to base representation on individuals, not interests, as the King wanted, and to reduce all distinctions among people to that of personal wealth alone.

The United Prussian Landtag of 1847 continued the themes sounded in the provincial debates of the 1840s. Here again discussion of the suffrage was hemmed in both by King’s known unwillingness to consider anything but representation based on the traditional estates, and because suffrage was not formally on the agenda. Nevertheless a number of petitions on the suffrage question were presented to the assembly which indicate something about the state of liberal discourse. Commercial Councillor Abegg asked unsuccessfully for the elimination of the 10-year requirement for service in the assembly, because it prevented citizens from electing the most virtuous or intelligent men. The only people whom it was “natural” to exclude from the suffrage were those “whose whole activity must be directed towards earning their living.” The three representatives of the city of Berlin also presented a memorandum to the assembly asking for changes in the electoral system. They agreed one needed a guaranty of a representative’s interest in his town, but argued that a 10-year residence requirement was not the
way to achieve this. Property-ownership was a sufficient guaranty of interest, along with the interest of the voters to choose whomever “possessed the most interest and the most capacity.” This change would allow towns to elect not only representatives of the nation’s material interests, but “also those who have directly devoted themselves to the state or to science and art. In our day one cannot claim that the bureaucracy and the intelligentsia, . . . are not concerned with the general national interest, nor that they hold themselves apart from the more and more felt importance of the corporate life of the cities.” The petition suggested that the property requirement for representatives be waived for those who could give the “guaranty” of previous participation in town government (the theme of “guaranties” was common to other petitions as well, and familiar from French and English liberalism). While justifying a complete abolition of residency requirements in the argument, however, the petition cautiously demanded only the reduction of the residency requirement to five years.\(^{211}\) Liberal failure to persuade the King at the United Landtag in 1847 was followed by the Prussian revolution of 1848. This revolution was not the direct attack on Prussian liberals that the Revolution of February 1848 was on French liberals, and in many respects it justified their previous demands. The revolution also eliminated all further need to maintain the fiction of maintaining a traditional corporate form of representation in order to please the King, and in post-March Prussia such systems were marginal to liberal discourse.

German political practice, therefore, as opposed to German political literature, emphasized the relative strength of socially oriented, property-based dialects of liberalism, and brought German liberalism closer to that of France and England. What can be gleaned from *Vormärz* German parliamentary practice thus confirms that German liberalism’s use of the language of capacity in this period largely paralleled English and French usage. There was indeed a common dominant political culture in Europe, that of liberalism, and it employed the language of capacity in one form or another everywhere it went in order to justify itself. But within the common language of European liberalism certain national particularities are already evident in 1830–47. In England socially oriented liberal language is particularly strong, and yet whereas socially oriented liberals elsewhere tend more towards resistance than movement, in England liberals show a particular concern for social inclusion. French liberalism presents a minority of strongly individualist, even anti-commercial liberals among its reformers, faced by a majority of extremely rigid, socially oriented liberals in power. In Germany we see, perhaps because of the nature of the evidence used, relatively the strongest use of individualist language among European liberals, although it still remains the talk of a minority. German liberalism also presents the particularity of bureaucratic liberalism, elsewhere largely absent. As the next chapter will show, once German liberals had parliamentary forums in which to speak in 1848–50, they continued to emphasize property, but at the same
time language emphasizing the representation of individuals remained relatively strong, as did an emphasis on education.

All European liberalisms faced difficult new challenges at mid-century. They continued to use the language of capacity in response. How that language developed, or failed to develop, in the period from 1848 to 1865 is the subject of the next chapter. Liberals had to justify themselves again in the face of new threats from both above and below. The task of justifying themselves had been relatively easy for German liberals in 1815–47, in part because they exercised no responsibility for government. The only forum in which they contended was that of public opinion, where they were dominant. Justifying their position grew harder during and after the revolutions of 1848. They were placed in a difficult position by those revolutions, and yet nowhere else did the actual political influence of liberalism increase so much by comparison with the Vormärz as in Germany. It is thus the German suffrage debates of 1848 that will be examined first in Chapter 2, when, after 1848, the language of capacity faced an increasing challenge from the language of rights.
The revolutions of 1848 were the kind of events liberalism was supposed to prevent. Revolution meant that liberalism had failed to achieve its goals, although this was not necessarily its fault – liberals were not the only ones influencing events. The relationship between liberalism and revolution varied in 1848. English liberals congratulated themselves that their timely Reform in 1832 had enabled the political system to avoid revolution entirely and to ward off the challenge of Chartism. For French liberals, on the other hand, the Revolution of February 1848 was a disaster for which they had only themselves to blame. Their defeat was briefly retrieved by the repression of the June 1848 Paris workers’ revolt, the reconquest of a parliamentary majority and renewed limitation of the suffrage in 1850. But the triumph of the “Party of Order” was turned to dust and ashes by the coup d’état of Napoleon III in 1852.

It is one of the particularities of nineteenth-century German history that events rarely seem to be quite as clear-cut in Germany as elsewhere. For German liberals the meaning of 1848 was not so clear as it was for the French and English. Liberals had not made the March 1848 revolutions in Germany. However, unlike the February Revolution of 1848 in France, the March revolutions in Germany advanced many liberal goals. During the revolutionary period in Germany liberalism waged its customary war on two fronts, and thus played a role as both party of movement against the old regime and party of resistance against democratic attempts to outflank liberalism. Even after the attempts to unify Germany had failed, and the internal politics of the German states had receded from their democratic high-water marks (not a bad thing from a liberal standpoint), considerable accomplishments remained. Most German states, including Prussia (although not Austria) emerged with a written constitution and a representative assembly after 1848. The question for German liberals was therefore one of deciding whether their glass was half-full or half-empty.

The events of 1848 caused the language of capacity to evolve, but it was an evolution, not a revolution, that it experienced. One effect of the rever-
olutions of 1848 was to differentiate much more sharply than before liberals from democrats, that is liberals from the partisans of universal suffrage (this is especially true in Germany). British liberals now had Chartists to fight, at least for a little while. French left-liberals had united with democrats in the Banquet Campaign for suffrage reform in 1847/48 that unexpectedly turned into a revolution. After February 1848, however, the difference between a democrat and even a left-liberal like Barrot was clear, and cooperation was impossible until Napoleon III once again transformed political circumstances. Even then cooperation between French liberals and democrats in the 1860s was brief.

**Liberalism and revolution, 1848–50: Germany and Prussia**

In Germany, the debates at the Frankfurt Parliament in 1848 made the split within the once vaguely united German left obvious. Liberals and democrats clashed over every aspect of what was intended to be the constitution of a newly united Germany, and over two issues above all: the question of suffrage, and whether Germany should have an hereditary Emperor. In the end the Frankfurt liberals, recognizing that they were playing with a weak hand, compromised and accepted universal suffrage in return for an hereditary Emperor. Here the German liberals, so often accused of selling out their political principles to the right in exchange for the satisfaction of their nationalism, might be accused of selling out to the left, with the same motive. In the event the compromise remained a dead letter, and served only to harden later German liberal opposition to universal suffrage.

The Frankfurt debates are a good example of the ways in which the events of 1848 did or did not influence liberalism. Before the eventual compromise the full spectrum of German liberal positions on the suffrage was represented. For the first time the various attitudes and rhetorics of German liberalism met one another in an assembly. The historian is in the unusually favorable position of being able to follow the suffrage debates at Frankfurt in two stages. For the first stage we have the minutes of the constitutional committee’s debates on the draft suffrage law. The committee, unlike the Parliament itself, was dominated by liberals, and liberals of a relatively conservative stripe.

The draft suffrage law the committee considered was written by the liberal historian and political theorist Professor Georg Waitz, a member of the “Casino” group at Frankfurt, that is, relatively right-wing liberals, supported by his fellow Casino-member Scheller, an official in the Prussian judiciary. According to the draft prepared by Waitz, voters had to be men 25 years old, legally resident in their electoral district, not previously convicted of a serious crime or of selling their vote, and “independent.” The key to the suffrage law was the definition of independence. There were six grounds of exclusion under this heading:
1. Persons under guardianship or the jurisdiction of a bankruptcy court.
2. Servants.
3. Employees.
4. Anyone who received daily, weekly or monthly wages.
5. Anyone who had received poor relief from public funds during the year before the election.
6. Anyone who had not been required to pay income tax in areas where an income tax existed, or where an income tax did not exist, could not show a yearly income of 300 Gulden.

In keeping with German liberal tradition, there was wide eligibility for election – any German voter who was at least 30 years old was eligible. Inherent in the proposed draft was a compromise on the subject of direct vs indirect voting. Both systems had been practiced in German elections. There was broad agreement among liberals that, if the relatively democratic form of direct election were adopted, then suffrage must be more limited than if an indirect suffrage was instituted. At the same time the committee's liberals shared a strong preference, possibly because some of its leading members came from Holstein where it was the practice (Waitz, Beseler), in favor of direct voting. Thus direct voting and a more restricted suffrage were proposed. No serious attempt was made in committee to substitute indirect election for the draft’s proposal of direct election.

This proposed suffrage law excluded a large majority of the adult male population from the vote. The committee majority justified this exclusion on utilitarian grounds, while the democrats on the committee rejected considerations of utility in the name of rights. But on the committee the liberals were in the majority and could reject the idea of political rights. Beseler stated the liberal position: “If you looked at people as individuals, then this general right [to vote] was natural, but if you looked at the interest of the whole, then he found it impossible to come to universal suffrage.” Von Soiron noted that all rights could be exercised only for the common good, and if it was not in the common interest for certain classes of citizen to vote, then they had no right to do so. The committee liberals claimed that most people lacked the capacity to participate usefully in politics. The left-liberal Beseler argued that universal suffrage ignored all the claims of experience and reason. Universal suffrage was too dangerous. The Bavarian von Rotenhan repeated the typical liberal argument that political participation had to be disassociated from other kinds of freedoms and rights-claims: “It was certainly one of the greatest dangers for Germany, that people considered participation in political power to be equivalent to freedom. If this viewpoint prevailed, it would be the grave of freedom and our hopes...it was as if schoolchildren were to be asked to decide how to run the schools.”

The committee liberals fought to limit the suffrage as part of the usual liberal battle on two fronts. Suffrage had to be limited not just to
protect society from radicalism, but from reaction as well. Those excluded were:

not politically independent and mature, however much people might talk about the political maturity of the people. These kind of people are subject to all kinds of influence, which now perhaps might serve demagogues to influence them in a popular direction, so that elections could give very liberal results. But soon more quiet and relaxed times would come, and then these voters would be the most servile.216

Indeed, maintained Welcker, co-editor of the *Staatslexikon* and another member of the Casino group, it was in the interest of those excluded from the vote to be excluded, because they were the people who would most benefit from freedom, which could be preserved only if they were excluded.217

It remained for the committee to examine more closely the criteria for “independence”. The exclusions from suffrage imposed by the draft were of several not entirely compatible varieties. They included form of income (daily, weekly, monthly wages), amount of income (minimum established in point 6), and occupation (servant, employee). In later debate in the general assembly Waitz would say that it was above all certain ways of life that were envisaged as defining political incapacity. Waitz’s suffrage law based an individual’s capacity less on the individual himself than on his relation to the larger social structure through his type of employment or form of wages, and more broadly on whether he participated in bourgeois culture.

Many of the disagreements among the committee can be laid to contrasting understandings of what kind of capacity was at issue, the capacity of individuals or of the class or social group. Beseler argued that the chief merit of the English suffrage was that you could belong to any class or social group and still be individually respectable and vote, through the ownership of property. Even members of the lower classes ought to be able to become politically respectable individuals.218 Beseler’s criteria of capacity were based on property alone. While adopting the exclusion in principle of servants, apprentices, and those paid daily wages, he wished to allow even members of those categories to vote provided they either owned land, had an unspecified amount of money in a savings bank, or paid income tax. He gave the example of a married cook, with his own household and a savings account, as the kind of voter he had in mind. For Beseler the individual’s personal capacity, as evidenced by cash in the bank, took precedence over his social position.219

The draft thus encountered objections and modifications from liberals who wanted to base political participation more directly on property, from an individualist perspective. Other individually oriented liberals on the
committee were less generous than Beseler and Mittermaier. Soiron cited Baden, where all but servants had been allowed to vote, as proving that the best representatives had been elected by the richest districts. The Silesian left-liberal Tellkampf (Württemburger Hof group) announced his preference for an ancient Roman-style plural vote, where all would have votes, but the rich would have far more votes than the poor. For Tellkampf, taxation and representation must go hand in hand – the more taxes paid, the more representation. For Tellkampf and Soiron, Waitz’s proposed suffrage did not give enough weight to property, and its basis thus needed to be revised.220

Scheller responded on behalf of the draft bill that money in the bank was no guarantee of intelligence, and servants with savings accounts were not necessarily any more independent than those without. But if servants found little favor, bureaucrats found more.221 Indeed, given the high proportion of government officials and other members of the educated middle classes who received monthly salaries, the surprising thing is that an exclusion of those with monthly incomes was proposed. Even though the committee did eventually strike it, it is evidence for the considerable hostility to the bureaucracy that persisted among some German liberals.222

The committee eventually moved away from the idea of a census, that is a particular sum of money as the index of capacity, and instead chose to single out certain kinds of occupation and income. A well-paid artisan who received daily wages was excluded from suffrage, whereas one who was paid badly by the week was not. In fact, in most cases this kind of absurdity would be purely theoretical, as typically the poor were paid daily. Many of the lower classes who were not excluded by the limitation on daily wages would be taken care of by the exclusion on factory workers, apprentices and servants.

The evolution of German liberalism towards individual criteria of capacity and away from social or class-based ones is apparent in the committee’s debates, despite the results of the voting there. Those who used individual criteria, like Beseler, were powerful voices, and this evolution would be confirmed in the general assembly debates. Already in Beseler’s own discussion we can see the difficulties individualist language, if generally accepted, might create in the long run for the language of capacity. Beseler himself said that if one looked at the individual, then suffrage was a right, and it was only from a social perspective that limiting it could be justified. Beseler then limited the suffrage on the basis of the individual’s property, which indicated the good to society as a whole of enfranchising him. But Beseler assumed that right rather than capacity was the presumptive standard when looking at individuals, and that liberal criteria were the ones that needed special justification.

Striking in the committee’s debate, particularly given its majority emphasis on social representation, is the absence of mention of the middle class. The middle class was largely missing from the general assembly’s debates as
well. The various German equivalents are virtually never used. Indeed the only time there is any extended mention of them is a comment by Soiron that reaction was gaining ground among them (the Bürger) because they were frightened by democracy, and thus restrictions on suffrage were needed to reassure them. Committee Liberals were very frank about alleging the incapacity of their fellow citizens, which makes it seem unlikely they were intimidated by revolutionary pressure from avowing their allegiance to the middle class. More likely the explanation lies in a reluctance, emphasized by the revolutionary circumstances, to suggest that the middle classes were in any way separate from the nation in general. In the general debate the liberal leader Bassermann angrily rejected both the idea that industrialists and professors were not workers, and that there was any difference between the “people” and the “middle class.” Rather, for him the “true representatives of the people” were to be sought “in the burgers, in the middle classes, which people now denigrate as the bourgeoisie.” The middle class was explicitly mentioned more often during the floor debates, but not very frequently. This fear of the middle class being separated from the people, denigrated and cut off as “the bourgeoisie,” was a reflection of the weakness of German liberals in the early months of 1849.

The draft bill was sent to the floor of the assembly for consideration and general debate. In the general assembly, however, even most liberals completely rejected the constitutional committee’s draft. It received only 21 votes. More importantly, in the assembly the suffrage question rapidly escaped from liberal control, and especially from the control of the type of liberal who had dominated the constitutional committee. The committee was dominated by the rhetoric of social representation and by variations on the theme of property as a criterion of capacity. The assembly debates saw much more individualist language and a renewed emphasis on education and intelligence. Fifteen Amendments were proposed by the Assembly’s liberals (not all of which were debated), 11 modifying the social categories for exclusion, four proposing a census, and four proposing universal but unequal suffrage or a partly direct, partly indirect election. The closest any liberal proposal got to passage was the Biedermann amendment for a low census which failed by a vote of 248 to 204. Instead, universal male suffrage was instituted on the first reading of the suffrage law, but the eventual issue remained doubtful, given the close vote on Biedermann’s proposition and the considerable number of absences during the vote.

Liberals rehearsed all the familiar justifications of voting as a question of political capacity on the assembly floor. Political rights were neither property (vs aristocracy) nor a question of freedom or natural rights (vs democrats), but a matter of the common good and utility. It was not like the right to a free press, or to free assembly, civil rights that belonged to everyone, argued Karl Mathy; that was why it was not included in the Bill of Rights that opened the draft German Constitution. Precisely because the franchise
was determined by utility it could not be determined once and for all (thus keeping the door open to eventual universal suffrage), and depending on different conditions different suffrages could contribute to the good of the state. Liberal speakers emphasized again and again that who received the franchise was a question of utility. The liberal leader v. Gagern defined the liberal position in a nutshell: “I belong to the party which believes that universal suffrage is not compatible with the demands of the common welfare.” Therefore the vote was not a “right” but an office or duty or trust. Society was entitled to determine matters that affected the general good, like political participation. Equality meant “equal opportunity” to get the vote, not an equal right to political participation. The nation’s will, in the present state of political education and social conditions, was not the same thing as the will of the majority, which would not recognize reason. Deciding who should vote meant deciding about the capacity of those who would exercise it. One of the leading democrats at Frankfurt, Simon of Trier, summed up the liberal position even better than Gagern, perhaps: “Political rights are not to be seen as rights which really belong to the individual, it is not individual freedom which ought to be protected and satisfied in politics, but the good of the community must determine who is suitable to appear as the bearer of this right.”

The constitutional committee had settled on the catch-all criterion of “independence” as the central determinant of capacity. The committee had given it a particular twist, however, by relying mostly on occupational categories, rather than income levels, to exclude the uncapacitated. The exclusion of servants was a matter of course for liberals and even for many democrats at the time, but otherwise the committee’s actions in excluding “trade apprentices and factory-workers” and “those paid daily wages” were unique, not in their effects, but in the way they were conceived: “if the stated difference has any foundation, it lies in the situation of life of the designated classes,” as Waitz argued on the assembly floor. It was not good politics to specify the excluded classes rather than the included ones, as any English politician would have told Waitz, and to specify them in such a way that obtaining a vote would seem near impossible to those concerned. Indeed, most liberals on the assembly floor preferred to substitute a census for definitions based on kind of employment or income.

The committee had emphasized property and occupations, with little reference to education in either the draft bill or its debates. On the Assembly floor, education was more prominent in the debate, although property and education were often combined. For Beckerath what should be represented was “what the nation possesses of education, wealth, power and reputation.” Indeed for Beckerath it was chiefly education that mattered, and it was the state’s duty to educate the poor and thus try to actively increase the number of people fit for political participation, “not only through creating schools, but also through other educational institutions, . . . to spread insight and
capacity in ever wider circles” so that eventually all people would be capable of fulfilling the universal call to political participation. Thus the familiar blend of property and education, Bildung und Besitz, was strongly represented at Frankfurt. 235 There was even an attempt to institute a system very much like that of a census with adjunctions as often proposed in the July Monarchy: the proposed amendment by v. Wulssen, who wanted a suffrage qualification based on ownership of either land or a business, as well as votes for all clergy, lawyers, doctors, community officials and state bureaucrats. 236

Where the Frankfurt liberals differed from their French and English liberal counterparts was in the serious consideration they gave to two other forms of limiting the suffrage: indirect voting, and universal unequal suffrage, which were eventually combined in the Lette amendment at Frankfurt and then in the actual Prussian suffrage system of 1850–1918. 237 Many German liberals agreed with Gagern that if universal suffrage or something closely approaching it was adopted, indirect elections were essential. Like Gagern, they may have preferred a census, but indirect elections were nevertheless considered a guaranty that capacity would win out in the end. Other liberals favored direct election and universal but weighted suffrage. The rhetoric of individual representation, dominant among liberals at Frankfurt, lent itself to the notion that all citizens should play a part in politics, although that part might vary. Plathner argued that since everyone had some duties towards the state, everyone ought to have some rights in it, but that as burdens varied “for that reason all citizens certainly ought to have a vote, but the vote ought to be quantitatively different [emphasis original].” Plathner compared voting and property-ownership – everyone had equal rights to their own property but not to an equal amount of property. Just as in civil law a right to equal things would mean Communism, in public affairs a right to an equal vote would mean Anarchy. Plathner did not shrink from comparing politics to a joint-stock company, in which shareholders voted according to the number of shares they held. At the same time, it was necessary that the share of the poor in the state be recognized, because it was among the poor that it was most necessary that a sense of participation and inclusion be spread. At any rate, after the Revolutions of March 1848, no one would accept political exclusion – all must be allowed to participate in some manner. Thus one could move ahead “not further on the road to Revolution, but further on the road to Reform”. 238

Plathner combined a defence of liberalism as egalitarianism with a defence of liberalism as hierarchy, neatly making the traditional liberal equation between unequal property and unequal political capacity. His language was purely individualist and his criterion of individual capacity was taxation, i.e. property. German individually oriented liberals in 1848 used property (rather than education) as an index of capacity more often than the individually oriented liberalism of the Vormärz. This is the dominant liberal rhetoric at Frankfurt. But along with an individualist rhetoric to justify
universal weighted suffrage there were strong socially oriented arguments about the need to represent all classes in the state, in proportion to their weight. Thus the preponderance of the educated and propertied would be balanced by some direct representation of the poor. These different rhetorics appealed to different liberals, but both worked in favor of a system of weighted universal suffrage. The Lette amendment at Frankfurt and the Prussian three-class suffrage of 1850–1918 recognized the slippery slope of capacity spread throughout the population, and rather than drawing a clear demarcation line of participation and non-participation, sought to relativize the question through a weighted vote.

A variety of systems to implement weighted voting were proposed. The version which was put to a vote was that of Lette from Berlin, which gave a direct vote to all who paid direct taxes of 3 Thaler or could show an annual income of 200 Thaler, thus to roughly a third of the eligible adult males, according to contemporary estimates. The remaining two-thirds of the population would choose one elector for every 10 voters, thus reducing their influence from 66 per cent of the population to about 17 per cent of the electors. This amendment received 125 votes, less than those willing to vote for the lowest census proposed (Biedermann, which got 204 votes), but more than those willing to vote for a somewhat higher census (Beseler, which got 117).239

Analysis of the voting rolls for the three leading liberal amendments (none of the others received enough support to justify a roll-call vote) produces interesting results. The Lette Amendment gained very little support among those who rejected a census. Only four of the 125 votes for the Lette amendment came from men who had voted against both the Beseler and Biedermann censuses. Those who rejected the liberal language of capacity could not be won over by being told everyone had a little capacity, though not as much as some others. Had the Lette amendment limited itself to proposing an indirect suffrage for all, without weighting the votes of those with more money, it might have attracted more votes than it did.

On the other hand, 17 liberals who had voted in favor of the Beseler amendment (the more restrictive of the census-based suffrage amendments) voted against the Lette amendment, and it is reasonable to assume that still more pro-Beseler liberals would have voted against a less restrictive version of Lette. A number of prominent liberals who favored a census, as shown by their voting for either the Beseler or Biedermann amendments, voted against the Lette amendment for universal weighted suffrage. They included Dahlmann, Biedermann, Droysen, and Mathy (Mathy because he favored indirect suffrage without weighted votes).240 Thus while many liberals did prefer an indirect suffrage along the lines of the Lette amendment to any kind of census (statements to this effect were made by Tellkampf and v. Gagern) a weighted universal indirect suffrage did not have appeal beyond the liberal camp, and indeed had on the whole less support within the liberal
camp than a straightforward property/income qualification – the Biedermann household suffrage amendment outpolled Lette by 80 votes. Pro-Lette liberals were also not necessarily enamored of the more restrictive Beseler amendment – 25 voted against it, and another 15 abstained. However, 120 of the 125 Lette voters also voted for the Biedermann amendment. The main objective of the pro-Lette liberals, therefore, seems to have been to allow a certain amount of lower-class influence on politics, provided that it remain subordinate. Both the Lette and Biedermann amendments would have accomplished this. It is easy to imagine, had the Lette amendment passed, later attempts to amend it to move those with the requisite educational qualifications into the class that voted for electors directly, regardless of their income, in imitation of the French system of adjunctions. How such an amendment would have fared is impossible to say.

But most liberals were determined to deny any political capacity at all to a large part of the population. Biedermann attracted many more votes than Lette. Furthermore it is notable that almost all the most prominent liberals at Frankfurt voted in favor of the Beseler amendment – Bassermann, Beckerath, Dahlmann, Droysen, Duncker, Gagern, Haym, Mathy, Mevissen, Raumer, Rümelin, Schwerin, and Waitz. The liberal leadership formed a hard core of support for the most restrictive suffrage proposal on the floor. After the Beseler Amendment had been rejected, the same core of liberal leaders voted for the less restrictive Biedermann amendment (except for the absent Schwerin). Only the Lette amendment brought the defections from their ranks noted above.

Liberal rhetoric remained unchanged from the Vormärz. But German liberals recognized that their position on suffrage had suddenly moved them from the left to the right, from the Party of Movement to the Party of Resistance. As good liberals, the seeming contradiction bothered them much less than it has bothered some of their historians. Bassermann, replying to the charge that what he was proposing was a “conservative suffrage law,” responded:

Well, gentlemen, when we still didn’t have freedom of the press, when no Bill of Rights yet spoke freedom of religion and freedom of association, when the German people had not yet gathered in a general assembly, then no one could say he was “conservative”, and the only one who strove for freedom was the one who stood on the destroying side. But... If it is rational to strive for a good not yet achieved, so it is still more reasonable, when one has striven for it, to preserve it, to conserve it... because of the now rational principle of conservation I would like to implore you not to accept the principle of universal suffrage.241

Unlike in Frankfurt, in Prussia a system that had much in common with the Lette amendment was enacted, albeit not by a liberal regime. The
Prussian suffrage, and with it the Prussian Revolution of 1848, was lost to liberal control early on. The Liberal Camphausen–Hansemann ministry was forced by popular pressure to institute universal suffrage for the Prussian National Assembly, salvaging only an indirect voting procedure that proved ineffective in stemming the democratic tide. The National Assembly that resulted was dominated by democrats. Attempts to restrict the suffrage were clearly hopeless, and even the government's attempt to bar domestic servants from the vote was handily rejected. For many liberals the left-leaning Prussian Assembly produced by universal suffrage was directly to blame for bringing on the collapse of the progressive movement in Prussia and creating a critical level of support among the middle classes for the King’s coup d’etat of November 1848. In the immediate aftermath of the coup a number of previously democratic Prussian politicians, e.g. Waldeck and Schulze-Delitzsch, abandoned their support of universal suffrage in favor of modest limitations on suffrage rights.

Nevertheless most Prussian liberals, echoing Plathner at Frankfurt, felt that it was impossible to take away the vote from people who had once exercised it, and thus favored some form of unequal suffrage. The new conservative Manteuffel government consulted a number of people about what suffrage to institute in the constitution they would impose, including the Rhenish liberal Hansemann, and eventually came up with the three-class system, which had precedent in Rhenish urban elections.242 There was also support for this kind of system from liberals outside the Rhineland, as demonstrated at Frankfurt. Indeed it is notable that both Beckerath and Tellkampf (Beckerath from the Rhineland, Tellkampf from Silesia), important liberal figures at Frankfurt in 1848, were important liberal figures in the Prussian lower house in 1849 (Lette himself was a member from Berlin).

The Prussian system was based on indirect weighted suffrage. The voting population, males over 25, was divided into three groups. Which group you belonged to depended on how much you paid in direct taxes. The richest group, that is, the smallest number of individuals who could be chosen who together paid one-third of the total direct taxes collected in the electoral district, chose one-third of the electors. The next smallest group who paid one-third of the taxes formed the second class, who also chose one-third of the electors. Everyone else, who together necessarily paid the remaining third of the taxes, chose the final third of the electors. All groups voted publicly. The electors then chose the representative. The superficial equality in the number of electors chosen by each group did not disguise the fact that, on average, about 3 per cent of the voters belonged to the first class, 12 per cent to the second class, and the remaining 85 per cent to the third class. Thus one voter in the first class was worth roughly 30 voters in the third, a figure that actually underestimates the dominance of the wealthy in the electoral process. In some districts five or 10 individuals, even sometimes one person,
would make up the entire first class of voters because of their huge tax-payments.

The Prussian suffrage system, radically different from any suffrage law adopted in France or England, was arguably the most successful of the liberal suffrage laws of the nineteenth century. It lasted longest, until 1918, and once relatively free elections were allowed after 1858, it assured liberal electoral dominance until 1879 and a significant liberal presence in the Prussian House of Delegates until the end of the Prussian Monarchy in 1918. It is ironic, however, that it was not, strictly speaking, a liberal creation, nor in its formative stages subject to serious parliamentary debate. The constitution was ratified by the new Prussian representative bodies, but there was little discussion of the articles relating to suffrage for the lower house. The suffrage for the second chamber was simply too dangerous for liberals to discuss. Beckerath, reporter for the suffrage articles of the constitution in the House of Delegates, regretted this:

The system of direct election has a lot for it, and I confess that it has disturbed me, that in the present assembly it has not been discussed. . . . The system of direct representation rests on the foundation that the State is entitled to indicate the level of civil society where in general the capacity is available to use the suffrage in a way that will help and not harm. It follows from this, that the state is entitled to decide the criteria of capacity. . . . It further follows that among those thus entitled no further division of rights may take place, but that they all, . . . are equal to one another. . . .

The system [of weighted universal indirect suffrage] . . . has this in principle for it, that everyone exercises the vote to the extent to which he contributes to the burdens of the state. I concede that this standard is not entirely accurate . . . since tax payments are mostly determined by property, and property alone can’t completely be the standard for the highest political right [Beckerath was a property and education liberal]. . . . I will only say, that from the experience we have had it at least gives a guaranty for a conservative tendency in the vote, which in the present situation of our state is desirable in the highest degree.243

As Beckerath’s speech demonstrates, Prussian liberals were chiefly relieved to have escaped from revolution in 1849. Nevertheless, the liberal content of the three-class system should not be underestimated. If, for example, one looks only at the number of voters in the first two classes, in 1861 this amounted to 159,000 voters in the first class and 454,000 voters in the second class, a total of 613,000 in the classes whose votes were more or less decisive. England in 1866 had 1,000,000 voters, for a population more than double that of Prussia in 1861. Thus the Prussian suffrage in the first two
classes was broader than the English suffrage created by the Reform Act of 1832, despite the greater fear of revolution felt by Prussians in 1850. The Prussian suffrage was the most socially inclusive limited suffrage in Europe (which is why John Stuart Mill preferred it to the English suffrage of 1832–66), and yet preserved political dominance for an elite of capacity based on property. It could be understood in either socially oriented or individually oriented terms, which was another advantage. These facts encouraged its acceptance by a majority of Prussian liberals down to 1918.

Thus German liberalism continued down the path it had followed in the Vormärz, with its individualist tendency and its peculiar solution of universal indirect weighted suffrage to solve the problem of defining political capacity. The chief change observable in German liberal rhetoric in 1848–50 is the relative decline of talk about education. One is tempted to say that in revolutionary circumstances, all that counted for liberals was property. But this was not the case elsewhere. French liberals in 1831 were in as revolutionary a situation as Prussian liberals in 1850, if not more so, but they still talked a great deal about education as the true guarantee of political capacity. Germans did not. Perhaps this is evidence that the emphasis on education in Vormärz German liberalism may owe more to the nature of the available evidence (literary) than to a real particularity of German liberalism.

French liberalism in the aftermath of 1848 was also looking for a lasting guarantee of stability when revising the universal suffrage imposed by the February Revolution. Unlike the Prussian liberals, the French did not succeed in finding one. French liberals were eager to strike back at the “vile multitude” that had overthrown the July Monarchy. In doing so they turned their backs on both the individualist-oriented dialect of liberalism, and on education as a criterion of capacity, too much associated in France with reform. They nevertheless enacted a suffrage law broader even than England’s Second Reform Act of 1867. But in their circumstances, it was not enough.

Liberalism and counter-revolution: the French suffrage law of 1850

The German March Revolutions of 1848 had been made, if not by liberals, at least partly in order to further goals liberals shared. The February Revolution in France, although triggered by the liberal-supported Banquet Campaign for suffrage reform, was made against an essentially liberal regime. Thus, whereas the German revolutions received a mixed response from German liberalism, the February Revolution in France was unwelcome to French liberals, for most of whom the idea of a Republic remained anathema. Most French liberals never felt that the Second Republic was theirs. The Provisional Government of the Republic proclaimed universal male suffrage at age 21 as one of its first acts in February. French liberals got their breath back after the crushing of the revolt of the Paris workers in June 1848, but the new
constitution of November nevertheless mandated universal direct male suffrage at 21 and forbade any future property-based limitations.

The elections of May 1849 brought a large conservative majority, roughly 500 of 700 representatives, into the new single-chamber National Assembly. As in Germany, the circumstances of 1848 had made liberals into “conservatives” in their own words and in everyone else’s. The leadership of the conservative bloc was liberal, although it included many Legitimists, some of whom were also liberals, like Montalembert, and some of whom were not. Despite their large majority, elected by universal suffrage, universal suffrage did not find favor in liberal ranks. As Thiers put it in the Assembly, “Neither my friends nor I have ever hidden from ourselves the dangers of universal suffrage, such as it is organized today in France; but do you know what these two elections have done? [Thiers referred also to the Presidential elections of December 1848] They have given so much proof of danger that this proof has become an opportunity [to change the law].”

Those who were incapable of voting, because they endangered state and society, must be excluded—“Yes, everything for the poor, except the government!” It was fear of the poor, and of socialism, which dominated liberal discourse during these debates. More was said about socialism than about suffrage by many liberal speakers on the suffrage law. No secret was made of the fact that the new law was designed to take votes away from the radical left. Montalembert saw the suffrage law as the means of resisting “the flagrant progress of socialism.” For Baroche, any society that allowed socialists to be elected to its National Assembly was a society in danger, and “I say that the electoral system that assures the victory of such doctrines is a bad electoral system.

Universal suffrage as it is presently organized, [is] necessarily leading, sooner or later, to the triumph of those appalling ideas that are called socialism.” To cap all the anti-socialist rhetoric Thiers gave the long-remembered speech in which he distinguished between the people, on the one hand, and the “vile multitude” on the other, the kind of persons who had surrendered the Roman Republic to the Caesars for bread and circuses.

Liberals, divided during the July Monarchy between the Party of Movement and the Party of Resistance, were solidly in the Party of Resistance in 1850. As liberals, they were prepared to make great efforts to limit the suffrage, as soon as this seemed politically possible. Unfortunately, from a liberal perspective, the Constitution of 1848 prescribed universal, equal and direct suffrage, and forbade all modifications of itself until 1852, and even then only by a difficult procedure. Thus liberals had to find a means of modifying the suffrage while maintaining it as universal and direct. The German solution of an indirect suffrage, for which a number of liberals expressed a preference (including both Thiers and Barrot), was barred to them. The solution of weighted votes, based on property, would also have been unconstitutional, since the constitution expressly forbade the use of any census for voters. What was needed was some other guaranty of capacity.
The new suffrage law was directly inspired by Thiers and officially created by a committee of 17 dominated by liberals. The chief innovation was in appearance merely an extension of a feature of the previous suffrage law, which had required six months’ residence in one’s district in order to register to vote. The new law required three years’ continuous legal residence to register. The justification for choosing three years as a residency requirement was that three years were necessary for a citizen and his family to really join a community. Residency was to be established, not more or less by declaration as in the preceding law, but either by proof of continuous payment of direct taxes, or by a certificate from one’s employer that one had lived on his property. The new suffrage law avoided infringing on the letter of the Constitution while still excluding a large number of poor voters who were frequently mobile or would have difficulty in proving their residence.

Liberals justified the new law in the language of social representation. They saw voting as a social act, one that was supposed to take place in the sight of the community and with the community’s approval. Voting was not the representation of individual wills – it was the representation of social interests. The vote as the mirror of society, much more than as the representation of individual opinions, was at the center of French liberal discourse in 1850, unlike in Germany and as much or more than in England.

The new residency requirement did not require any property-ownership, and while in one sense it was, indirectly, a property-based suffrage (the poor tended to move most often), it also included elements of an education-based suffrage (the illiterate would find it hard to register). Like the household suffrage introduced into England by the Third Reform Act, the residency requirement founded political capacity on what might be thought of as education or culture in a very broad sense. It was based on the respectability of the head of a stable household, on the presumption that such stability implied acceptance of the kind of values that would make it safe for society for such a head of household to vote. As such it was based on a socially rather than individually based conception of political participation. Faucher, in his report to the Assembly explaining the reasons for the new suffrage law, was a forceful exponent of voting as a social rather than a personal act:

The voter, in expressing his personal opinion, also gives a collective vote. He is inspired, he ought to be inspired by the opinions and interests amidst which he is accustomed to live. There is no citizenship outside the community. We no longer understand the right to vote when it is given to an individual who isolates himself, and who does not in reality belong to any social aggregation, who wanders in his country like a stranger; for then he ceases to represent for his part that solidarity of interests which is the political link between men.
For Béchard the "people" was not merely "a flock of individuals with no other link but a chance and accidental" political contact. It was "an organized body living a common life, . . . a meeting of families and towns linked with one another by duty and interest simultaneously; . . . an ensemble of social aggregations, from the family up to the State, which express not individual ambitions or passions, but collective interest," which together inspired a spirit of solidarity, "public spirit," which was the soul of society.\textsuperscript{252} Sovereignty belonged to the nation, not to the individual.\textsuperscript{253}

This socially oriented liberal condemnation of individualism was used to attack socialism, which appealed to the desire to improve one's personal well-being at the community's expense, and also used to oppose the democratic claim of an individual right to vote. Béchard in condemning the previous suffrage law exclaimed that it was "the most powerful auxiliary that could be found in our society for the permanent and disciplined coalition of all the bad passions, of all the subversive passions born of egoism, that illness of old peoples; it is individualism pushed to its highest power . . .".\textsuperscript{254} While few socialists would have accepted this interpretation of socialism, this was very much the view of socialism taken by many liberals. Socialists in turn often accused the liberals of being the real individualists, the real egoists. Both sides attempted to wave the communitarian banner on their own behalf. It was the espousal of political individualism which was rare in France at mid-century.

Thus all voters should represent a social interest, typically defined in 1850 as either property or, in a bow to the streets of Paris, labor. Whether inspired by fear of socialism, or by a new recognition of the real political capacities of the lower classes, work and workers had acquired a right to rhetorical respect. Thus the three-year residency requirement was justified in terms of either property or work. It provided "the guaranty that results from work," or "the guaranty that results not from a census, for it is not a census [or it would have been unconstitutional], but from an establishment."\textsuperscript{255} Many liberal orators characterized residency as a moral guaranty, because the voter's relationship to his community would place before him "the double barrier of respect for himself and respect for others," which would enable him to judge the candidates and prevent him from being carried away by bad influences.\textsuperscript{256}

The liberal majority naturally rejected the claim that those excluded had a right to vote. Vatimesnil, a member of the left-liberal opposition during the July Monarchy, made the argument that alongside rights must go duties, and voters must be in a position to fulfill those duties. For the citizen, especially the poor and uneducated citizen, to exercise his right to vote properly he must know his community and be part of it. While avoiding language that would be too redolent of the July Monarchy and too unconstitutional, Vatimesnil was essentially saying that voters had to have the capacity to exercise the suffrage.\textsuperscript{257} Béchard saw the question of residence as a means to
roughly measure the political capacity of the voter. Those who could not prove long attachment to a particular place were “incapable or unworthy” of exercising the suffrage – “He who has nothing and does not work is incapable of exercising any influence whatsoever on the fate of his country.” 258 As Thiers said, “Everything must be done for the poor man, except however to let him decide the great questions which affect the future of the country”. The constitution allowed the Assembly “to recognize the capacity, the aptitude for choosing good or bad advocates of the public interest.” 259

This was to return the debate to the question of capacity, where liberals wanted it. Thus Faucher: “Individuals only take part in the exercise of sovereignty in conditions which are compatible with the security, with the independence, with the morality of the country. Beyond that there is no claim . . .”260 Political participation had to be useful to society before it was justified. Baroche, another old left-liberal who was now Minister of the Interior, cited Lamartine on how to reconcile the idea of a right to vote with the requirement of capacity: “Thus the electoral law refuses to exclude any class of rich or poor citizens. . . . But [society] has a right to ask of any man who presents himself to exercise that right: Are you a man to the full extent and in all the dignity of that word?”261 Habermas’s suggestion that the bourgeois idea of politics was based on the property-owner being identical with the human being as such is incarnated here.262

If the law of 1850 appealed to the familiar liberal categories of “guarantee”, “capacity”, and “social interest,” it was not justified by an appeal to the middle class. Just as in Germany (and England), the words “middle class(es)” disappear from French suffrage debates in the aftermath of 1848. The middle class was no longer vaunted in public discourse: “What we want is neither the success of a political party nor the domination of a class of citizens; it is the union of all parties and all classes in a grand whole of national unity”.263 Ending the revolution was the liberal goal. Now it meant not the incorporation of the middle classes but of the laborer. The criterion of capacity and the idea of a guarantee were maintained, but were broadened to include groups beyond the middle class. No matter how many voters were excluded by the three-year residency act, it was pointed out, the vast majority of voters would be poor people.264

It was an open question just how many people the three year-residency requirement would weed out. As with all nineteenth-century suffrage laws, no one was certain of their effects in advance. There had been roughly 10 million registered voters in 1849. How many did not meet the residency requirement, or would be unable to prove it satisfactorily under the terms of the law? The parliamentary left suggested that as few as 5 million voters would remain. Faucher, speaking on behalf of the suffrage-law committee, argued that the issue of numbers was irrelevant, that what mattered was to remove incapable voters. He thought it was impossible to tell in advance how many voters would really be disqualified. What he was sure of was that
the Paris rabble would lose their votes, and that was a good thing. Berryer guessed there would be 7–8 million voters under the new law, but he too didn’t really care about the numbers.265 The liberals knew that a very considerable number of people who had been given the vote in 1848 were going to lose it. Unlike contemporary German liberals, they felt strong enough to disfranchise these people completely. In fact, there were about 7 million voters left under the new law, and thus about 30 per cent of the adult male population was disfranchised. The effects varied considerably by locality, however, as they were intended to do. In Paris about 56 per cent of the population lost their votes, as did 69.5 per cent at Lille, 80 per cent at Roubaix, 59 per cent at Nimes, 52 per cent at Creuset – the industrial cities. In the department of the Moselle only about 15 per cent did.266

The suffrage law of 1850 instituted a very broad suffrage by liberal standards. No liberal would have dreamed of it under the July Monarchy, and if it had been instituted in 1847 there would have been no revolution in 1848, or at the very least no Banquet Campaign. But in politics context is everything, and in 1850 the new suffrage law was seen for an attack on democracy (which it was), an attack on the Republic (more dubious), and an assault on the sovereignty of the nation (which depends upon one’s point of view). It aroused immense political opposition. As it turned out, the German liberals were right, and it was too dangerous to deprive people of the franchise once they had exercised it. The liberals’ attempt to limit suffrage was one of the chief weapons used against them in the campaign waged by President Bonaparte, soon to become Emperor Napoleon III, as will be seen below.

Liberals recognized their danger, and in 1851 began to consider modifying the suffrage again. But in 1850 it seemed that the language of social representation had been vindicated. Perhaps it was the incautious use of individualist language by the left-liberals of the July Monarchy that had encouraged revolution. In Germany too, individualist-oriented liberals had failed at Frankfurt, and the Prussian suffrage could be interpreted as a means of representing social interests through its three classes. In England, the language of social representation continued to reign supreme in 1848. But it is the political language of English liberalism that perhaps evolved the most between 1848 and 1865. Even in England, liberals had to face the challenge of democracy, if not of revolution.

Liberalism in the absence of revolution: England, 1848–65

England was the liberal success-story of the mid-century. There was no revolution. Instead in 1848 England experienced the culmination of the Chartist movement, whose “People’s Charter” included universal male suffrage and the secret ballot among its demands. All of London trembled at the approach of the Chartist masses in April 1848, and the government
massed troops and enrolled thousands of volunteer constables. But the mass meetings fizzled, and the government held firm – the one European power (besides Russia) able to surmount the crisis of 1848 without significant change. The brief debate on the suffrage held in the House of Commons in June/July of 1848, after the crisis was passed, is testimony to the power of English liberalism. The supporters of suffrage reform could muster only 84 votes, and a minimum of 100 was the indicator of a serious proposal. The debate on it is an indication of how different from France and Germany the political situation of English liberalism was.

The 1848 suffrage bill was introduced by the old Radical war-horse Hume. He did indeed speak of the right to vote, but not “of natural rights, which was a phrase no one understood, but of constitutional rights – of those rights which our constitution, according to the best authorities, had given to every Englishman . . .”. Voting as a constitutional right was a way of enshrining a broad suffrage in history without too much fear of being refuted. The sometime Benthamite Villiers also declared that “high authority,” presumably constitutional rather than divine, said that suffrage was a right. But Villiers made haste to express opposition to universal suffrage, and indeed said that as long as there was a free press and free discussion, the legislation passed would be very much the same regardless of the suffrage (he even suggested the irrelevance of the 1832 Reform). Cobden, another supporter of reform, also rejected “natural rights” talk: “I concur with those who say that they do not stand on any natural right at all. I know of no natural right to elect a member of this house.”

Opponents of reform nevertheless tried to paint its supporters as in favor of a right to vote and universal suffrage. In 1848 this was still, in England, a black mark no MP would willingly bear. According to Russell, the only political right people possessed, was a right to “the best government and the best kind of representation which it is possible for the Legislature to give them. The main object of our institutions is good government and the welfare of the people; and we ought not, for the sake of some abstract principles, to lose sight of that object.” He had used the same language back in 1832, although then in favor of reform. Thus Russell, who had upheld the sovereign utility of Reform in 1832, rejected it, along with any claims based on rights, in 1848. So far, he sounds much like Guizot. But in his further statements he distinguished himself sharply from the no-longer-liberal Frenchman. English reformers argued that there was a danger of revolution if nothing was done. The Reform of 1832 had saved England from the revolutions of 1848, while France’s refusal to reform had cost her a revolution. This argument had effect. When Russell rose to answer Hume’s introductory speech and state the Government’s position, he took out an insurance policy with respect to suffrage reform. One of the great slogans of 1832 had been “finality”. If the suffrage was reformed, it should not be meddled with for a long time to come. While refusing to
reform the suffrage in 1848, Russell acknowledged that the time for further reform was coming. He accepted that it was “desirable to admit . . . from time to time, such alterations and improvements as experience and knowledge may suggest.” He suggested that a right to vote based on Savings Bank deposits, or allowing certain guilds to elect MPs, might be desirable (Russell characteristically combined individually and socially oriented language). But to reform now, while all Europe was still in revolutionary circumstances, and the current constitution had just proved its strength in repelling the Chartists, would be a mistake. Other liberals also approved of Russell’s explicit renunciation of finality, while rejecting the current plan of reform. This was a cardinal difference from Guizot’s refusal to ever consider suffrage reform, a refusal which contributed so much to the French Revolution of 1848.270

The majority of English liberals rejected calls for reform in 1848. One change had taken place, however: just as in France and Germany, discussion of the middle classes was largely absent from these debates (only Cobden spoke of the middle classes, arguing that they favored reform). This phenomenon was Europe-wide, a circumstance that has been unremarked in this as so many other cases. The 1830s and 1840s, the “early Victorian period” in English terminology, was a period when class-oriented, especially middle-class-oriented language flourished throughout Europe. In the mid-Victorian era references to the middle classes declined. In the 1850s reference was increasingly to individuals, on the one hand, and the lower classes on the other. There was a brief revival of references to the middle class in the early 1860s, but the focus of debate, and the focus of liberal language, had shifted elsewhere.271 The class that was discussed was the lower class. Some of the explanation for this lies in the threat of revolution. Much lies in the general acceptance that the middle class deserved to participate in politics, or at least could not be entirely excluded. Their capacity was no longer in question. The question for liberals was, what was the political capacity of the rest of society, and how was it to be measured?

It did not take long for this question to come up again. Russell, after opposing reform in 1848, soon became an ardent reformer. In 1852 he introduced his own suffrage reform, one of a long series of reform measures debated between then and 1867. Relatively considerable debates took place in 1852, 1854, 1857, 1858, 1859, 1860, 1861, 1864, and 1865. The governments concerned did not make the question of Reform a question of confidence, however, and allowed the measures to drop without pushing them to a conclusion. This did not arouse serious objection from any but the extreme left of liberalism. Nevertheless, the reforms proposed, and the rhetoric they were debated in, show the evolution of English liberal attitudes in this period. They underwent considerable change.

The 1852 debates marked the beginning of a new effort by English liberals to use inclusive language towards the working class, and even to
include a few of them among the voters. They were aided by England’s political stability, which gave English liberals the leisure to take 15 years (from 1852 until 1867) before acting. Had the liberals of the July Monarchy had 15 years to debate instead of six (from 1842 to 1848), perhaps they too would have ended up by reforming the suffrage and averting revolution.

In 1852 Russell proposed to cut the property requirement for the borough, that is urban, suffrage in half, to £5. He estimated this would increase the borough suffrage by 60 per cent. In counties the suffrage requirement would be lowered for short-term land-rentals from £50/year to £20/year. The required value of land in counties held on long leases was to be halved. Finally, anyone, living anywhere, who paid at least 40 shillings/year in income tax was to be given the vote. All boroughs were to have at least 500 voters, a number to be reached not by adding voters in the French manner, but by annexing contiguous geographic areas until the necessary number was reached. The property qualification for being an MP for England or Ireland was to be abolished (it had never existed for Scottish MPs).

The real issue that concerned liberals in 1852 was incorporating a portion of society below what was commonly accepted to be middle class. For Russell the current franchise was too exclusively middle-class, and it would be better to include some artisans.272 These men, “earning by their labor and skill competent wages, who have intelligence and integrity fully entitling them to possess the elective franchise,” would be dangerous to exclude. Many other speakers also made the traditional argument that artisans were fitted for the vote by their property and intelligence.273 But a few were no longer attached to the old rhetoric. In 1852 the right to vote was stated for the first time in Parliament. Hume, who in 1848 distinguished between natural and constitutional rights, was not so careful in 1852. He explicitly rejected the doctrine of capacity. He attacked Russell for saying that he “was ready to vote for an extension of the suffrage to all who were worthy of it. His answer was, that he would not accept the suffrage as a favour, as it was the right of every Englishman . . .”274

Democracy had arrived in Parliament. But most reformers still rejected rights-talk. Sir W. P. Wood, considered an “advanced liberal,” made clear that he founded his vision of suffrage reform on more solid principles. He denied “the abstract right of anybody to anything in this country or in any other.” While denying abstract rights, he admitted the need for some general principle of suffrage, and found it in trusting in the people insofar as they were capable. The language of capacity and fitness, that is liberalism, still dominated the pro-reform speeches of 1852.275 Many reformers also still used socially oriented language in 1852. But in Wood and many other liberal reformers there was a new emphasis on the capacity of individuals, on individual education and character.

In the 1850s definitions of capacity based chiefly on education became increasingly prominent in Parliamentary discussion. This confirms Vincent's
observation of a shift in political rhetoric from the right of property to
govern to the right of education to govern.276 Thus Roebuck pleaded for the
vote for the "instructed artisans":

If you want this intelligence represented, you must get other means of
doing it than by the interests of land and wealth. . . . Here I have a body
of men, numerous in this country, who are neither the possessors of land
nor of accumulated wealth; but they are intelligent, well-trained, pos-
sessing instructed minds and instructed hands. . . . Possessing these three
qualities – independence obtained by individual exertion, intellect to
guide him in the judgement he ought to form respecting the government
of the country; and morality – that man ought to be a portion of the con-
stituency of the country.277

This moved the debate over capacity to different terrain, and created dif-
ferent criteria for capacity which emphasized the individual and education
more, although education was still mostly discovered through indirect cri-
teria like tax-payments and residence. Wood spoke of the necessity for the
people to be "politically educated," by which he meant accustomed to the
process of public meetings, decisions taken by majority, and so on, as well
as schooled. The purpose of enabling people from the lower classes to vote
was to integrate them as educated individuals into the liberal system of
political participation.278 In the 1850s individually oriented liberal language
became a real force in England, only to decline again in the mid-1860s. It
is worth noting that Roebuck, the Benthamite Radical, and Wood, a leading
Dissentee, were the speakers. This wing of Nonconformist/Radical English
liberalism would continue to provide the leading spokesmen for individu-
ally oriented criteria of capacity based on education.

Part of the new emphasis on education was an argument based on the
educational effects of voting itself. This was not a novel argument in
extra-parliamentary circles, but after mid-century it began to be heard
more and more within Parliament, although it was still the rhetoric of a
minority. Thus John Bright, speaking of the rural population, said that
"There could be no doubt that the more of this class we could bring within
the franchise, the more self-respect would be given to them, the more inter-
est they would take in public questions . . . ". The suffrage was not just to be
the sign of political capacity, but an agent in creating it. Bright justified
this on the good liberal grounds of safety and preserving society from rev-
olution – “the more they were stimulated to inquire into and comprehend
public affairs, the more firm would be the basis on which the House
stood, and the greater authority would its resolutions have with the
people.”279 Legitimate government was the result of allowing those with
political capacity to participate, and now, it seemed, of helping to spread
that capacity as well. British liberals were increasingly interested in finding
ways in which government could actively help those without capacity to acquire it.280

The suffrage debates of 1852 thus saw a change in the discourse of English liberalism, an evolution confirmed by the reform proposals once more brought forward by Russell in 1854. He abandoned his previous reform proposal, which centered on halving the existing property franchise, and instead suggested multiple new ways of obtaining the suffrage. Votes were to be given to those who: 1) received £100/year salary from any employment, public or private, provided it was paid no more frequently than quarterly;281 2) received an income of at least £10/year from government bonds or East India Company stock, representing a capital of roughly £300; 3) paid 40 shillings a year in income tax or certain other direct taxes; 4) were graduates of any university in the United Kingdom; 5) had maintained a deposit of at least £50 in a savings bank for a minimum of three years. Russell furthermore proposed to extend the £10 rate-payer qualification to the counties and to lower the borough qualification to £6, rather than £5 as in his previous proposal, with a two-and-a-half-year residency requirement (the residency requirement for £10 householders was to remain unchanged at one year). This change was expressly in order to let in some, but not too many, of the working classes.282

Several significant developments were apparent in this proposal. For the first time in English suffrage debates criteria other than property appear as sufficient proof of political capacity for the vote. If the reforms seemed to lessen the emphasis on property, they maintained their emphasis on the traditional values of bourgeois culture – savings, stability, education, financial independence. They moved away from class representation and toward a more individualist perspective, to a certain extent, but they remained firmly tied to bourgeois ideas of individual status. If the middle class was no longer discussed, that did not mean that it had ceased to count.

Russell’s proposal was the first of a series of proposals for so-called “fancy franchises,” the last of which were embodied in Disraeli’s original draft of the Reform Act of 1867, but never enacted. They are the British equivalent to the adjunctions of the July Monarchy, or various proposed schemes for giving extra voting strength to certain groups in Germany. This kind of idea occurred throughout European liberalism, yet was generally unable to win acceptance by the majority of liberals. In the abstract Russell’s proposal appeared very attractive. It included those sectors of the middle class, the educated and the highly paid but unlanded, who were the rising new social powers of the future. It allowed in a token number of workmen, enough to counteract the declining numbers of lower-class voters grandfathered in 1832, but not enough to scare liberals or allow the workers to dominate any constituency. Yet the proposal satisfied few MPs. Left-liberals thought that the main point of any suffrage reform must be to integrate the working classes into the political system. Not enough was done to satisfy them. Right-
Liberals saw no need to allow any incompetent workers at all into the system, and some also objected to leaving the safe foundation of property as a basis for capacity. The proposed redistricting, a sensitive issue in any elective assembly, was enough to anger many and not enough to satisfy more than a few. The liberals of the 1850s had little enthusiasm for reform, yet did not like to be seen resisting it. Thus most debates of the period were brief, and the Reform Bill of 1854 was no exception. Like attempts later in the decade, it died a rapid and little-lamented death, displaced from public attention by the Crimean War.

But a few years later the suffrage question returned again to Parliamentary debate, in a novel form – a Reform Bill presented by a Conservative government, that of Derby and Disraeli. Its failure, after long debate, was followed by another attempt by a Russell government to pass Reform in 1859/60, which also failed. The debates over the two bills show continued strengthening of the newer emphases in liberal language – the need to integrate a portion of the lower classes and the increased emphasis on education, often associated with an understanding of capacity based on individual rather than social categories. The old standard of “property and education” was espoused in debate by relatively few, although the continued rejection of reform may indicate that the silent majority had more regard for it than the speakers. Discussion of the middle class was, however, more common in 1859 than it had been in the past decade, partly because the terms of the 1859 Reform seemed more directed at them.

Although references to the middle class made a limited return to Parliamentary rhetoric in 1859/60, the main emphasis of a growing number of liberal speakers after mid-century was education and the representation of individuals. While a few speakers referred to the increased property of the lower classes, Sir Charles Wood, Bright, E. James, E. C. Egerton, Gilpin, Baxter, Stansfeld, Monckton Milnes, Moncrieff, Denman, Aderley, Caird and Pollard-Urquhart all spoke of their increased education in supporting reform, while Bulwer-Lytton, Stanley, Beresford Hope and Lord Elcho emphasized above all their lack of education in opposing it. The continued interest in “fancy franchises”, evident down to 1867, was based on the new attractiveness of educational criteria of political capacity.

The liberal leadership however, Russell and Palmerston, still habitually combined property with education (as did some of those mentioned above, but to a lesser degree) in discussing the franchise. Palmerston’s statement in 1859 that he was now “of the opinion that it would be desirable to lower that amount [£10] for the purpose of admitting to the franchise the better, the more instructed, and the more respectable class of working men” was an important step in the evolution of Whig opinion towards the integration of the working class, but Palmerston himself notoriously had little interest in reforming the suffrage. He also insisted that not just intelligence but also property was necessary to the capacity for exercising the suffrage. Some
speakers also expressed hostility to interpretations of capacity that were based wholly on education. But it must always be remembered that individuals were by no means bound to use one kind of rhetoric exclusively. Slaney and Baines also talked of both property and education as grounds for giving the lower classes, or some portion of them, the vote. What had become rare in 1859/60 was not the reference to property, but attacks on education as an independent criterion of capacity. Only Stanley and Graham were willing to reject it completely.

But the really striking part of the 1859/60 suffrage debates was noted by Gladstone in 1859:

It appears to me, Sir, that there are other remarkable features in this great debate... I know none so remarkable as the singular accordance of opinion on both sides of the House – I may say, with the exception of official speakers, among all those who have spoken – with respect to the great question of Parliamentary Reform... The truth is, Sir, there is no substantial difference of opinion traceable to the differences in this House between political parties upon this great and transcendent subject...

Conservatives were talking like Liberals and even Radicals, and Liberals were talking like Conservatives. Everyone was now speaking the same language, the language of capacity, and this was as true in 1860 as in 1859. This observation about political language confirms Parry's observation that "by the late 1850s, the Liberal party had become the natural, respectable ruling force in Britain." England in 1860 represented the zenith of liberal political discourse. It was not merely dominant, it was nearly universal.

If the language of capacity was spoken by nearly everyone, why wasn't a reform passed? Partly because some liberals, most importantly Palmerston, did not want to reform the suffrage – although in debating the Conservatives' 1859 proposal he said otherwise. Partly because, as E. Ellice noted at the time, while almost all liberals were in favor of reform in principle, no majority could be found to pass any of the details. Sidney Herbert summed up the difficulty, notably without proposing a solution: "The first end is to bring the best men into this House; the second, the importance of which I do not undervalue, is, that the mass of the population should have the sense of contributing to the common welfare. But we must not sacrifice the first principle to the second; we may reconcile both, and that is what I want the Government to do.

Thus the difficulty. There were three related problems. 1) What was the capacity of the lower classes – how many of them possessed sufficient political capacity to vote and how were they to be identified? 2) How much weight ought their capacity to be given relative to the rest of society? 3) Was it really important to include them? Solving all these problems at once must have seemed like squaring the circle to the supporters of reform who saw
one bill after another go down to defeat in the 1850s and 1860s. The English suffrage debates of 1859/60, which essentially continued through the Second Reform Act of 1867, show a dominant liberalism trying to adapt to the changing “modern” world. The 1859/60 debates show the gradual development of a liberal consensus in Britain favorable to the inclusion of segments of the lower classes within the political Pale. There was a strong feeling among “liberals” on both sides of the party divide that something had to be done, sooner rather than later, to integrate the lower classes into the political system, for two related reasons. Firstly, because they deserved the vote on the grounds of their capacity, and secondly because it was dangerous not to give them the vote, in large part precisely because of their capacity. “Everybody felt that it was desirable, to some extent at least, to admit the working classes to a participation in the franchise.”\textsuperscript{293} Some went further, and suggested that it would be a good thing if some members of the lower classes actually became MPs, “if some artisan, for instance, who had made himself respected among his own class for intelligence and wisdom, were to be sent there.” It was even suggested that “supposing that their preponderating power in certain constituencies should lead to the return of sixty or eighty Members under the influence of the working classes, would that be too large a representation for them in an Assembly composed of 658 Members?”\textsuperscript{294}

Fear of the consequences of inaction was a considerable motivation. Viscount Bury “was quite sure if Reform was withheld there would be a dangerous agitation.” Bright worried that if a Reform without considerable working-class enfranchisement were passed, it would “tend to create discontent, which this House would have great difficulty hereafter in allaying.” The safe course, the course that would avoid the threat of revolutionary unrest, i.e. the liberal course, was to admit some part of the lower classes to the vote.\textsuperscript{295} In 1859 this led many liberals to oppose the Conservative Reform Bill because its provisions did not include the working classes.

But opposing the desire to include the lower classes was considerable fear of its consequences. Fear of the lower classes among English liberals at mid-century was deep and widespread. There was considerable discussion of the need to avoid a situation in which the lower classes could dominate Parliamentary representation on the basis of their numbers. Lord Stanley, a Whig of 1832 who had become a Conservative, noted that “the real difficulty of the case . . . is, how to admit the working classes on any principle of selection to a share of the representation without admitting them indiscriminately as a body. Are these illiberal or retrograde views? . . . on the contrary, they are not confined to those who sit on this side of the House.” And Stanley went on to cite John Stuart Mill.\textsuperscript{296} For some MPs it seemed as if working-class domination of even a single constituency would be too many. Near the other end of the liberal spectrum, Ellice “was not prepared, at the present moment, looking to the state of education in this country, to say
that it would be safe to give the whole power to the working classes or the holders of small tenements throughout the country." The fear of many liberals, repeatedly stated, was that the working class would vote as a bloc to impose socialist measures.297

Liberals who supported reform denied that it would give the lower classes political hegemony. Few were willing to follow W. J. Fox in pointing out that if rule by a single class was a bad idea, then it applied to rule by the middle class as well.298 Rather, Baines pointed out that if one took the common notion that the aristocracy and middle class together represented 25 per cent of the population, then enfranchising 33 per cent, as the 1860 Bill did in his opinion, would still leave them with a comfortable overall majority.299 Russell did his best to reassure Parliament that the working class would by no means hold a monopoly of power after reform, and that in fact the bill would only give the vote to 4–5 per cent of the working class. In any case, he argued, in England the old ties of ties of deference would still restrain the lower classes from unwise actions.300 Reliance on deference was part of English liberalism.301

However, opposition to Reform in 1859/60 was sufficient to preclude any legislation, and this remained the case in 1866, to be surmounted only by a Conservative Reform in 1867. The 1860s were thus both the zenith of English liberalism and a warning. Liberals’ inability to act on crucial issues while maintaining the unity of their coalition was a warning of the danger of eventual decline, a harbinger of a time when the grand liberal rhetorical coalition would no longer be able to agree on a common course of action. Eventually, the coalition would split into its constituent parts, and liberalism would cease to be the dominant political language in England. But for the time that fate was still far off, and it was by no means clear that it was inevitable. English liberalism still retained enough of its progressive impulse relative to its society to escape the epithet of “conservative” regularly applied to French liberals and occasionally to Germans.

The rise of individually oriented liberal language, the existence of a liberal faction that emphasized education rather than property, the need to face challenges from rights-talk, all these brought English liberalism closer to the concerns and language of French and German liberalism. Yet, from the late 1840s on, English liberalism seems to be out of tune with its French and German counterparts. In 1848, English liberalism appears to be happily stuck somewhere back in the 1830s. Although the concerns of English liberalism after 1852 were once more those of French and German liberalism, the ways in which English liberal language developed to deal with them was the inverse of that of France and Germany. Whereas English liberalism was for the first time moving towards individually oriented vocabulary and emphasizing education, French and German liberals seemed to have largely given up using those dialects of liberal language. Different national liberalisms, while remaining recognizably liberal, were choosing
increasingly different strategies for dealing with their respective national situations.

But the differences between national liberalisms can be over-emphasized even more easily than the similarities. Just as English liberalism reached its high point around 1860, the period of the late 1650s and the 1860s can also be seen as the zenith of German, or more accurately Prussian liberalism. There is something to be said for David Blackbourn’s suggestion that the third quarter of the nineteenth century was the peak of European liberalism, although this suggestion seems more plausible in regard to England and Germany than it does for France, where Napoleon III was no liberal, the “Liberal Empire” lasted barely a year, and the new Third Republic very quickly left its liberal/Orleanist origins behind.302 German liberalism emerged from the revolutions of 1848 with a stronger institutional base than it had previously – parliaments and a relatively free press were now available for liberals to use, despite bouts of government repression. How did German liberalism react?

**Prussian liberalism and the three-class suffrage, 1850–65**

The early 1850s were a period of reaction in Germany when liberals withdrew to lick their wounds and think over their mistakes. But the 1850s were not a period of decline for German liberalism, as has sometimes been alleged. The strength with which liberalism reappeared on the German political scene in 1858–59, when the “New Era” brought free elections and a moderately liberal ministry to Prussia, as well as to many other German states, is testimony to the way in which liberalism had consolidated its hold on the electorate, at least as constituted by the Prussian three-class suffrage system and the restricted suffrages of other states. Liberalism proved capable of attracting democrats who had split off from it in the 1840s and been chastened by the events of 1848–51.303 But if the 1850s were a time of liberal strength, historians have wondered whether the 1860s were not the Waterloo of German liberalism.304

The great test for German liberalism in the 1860s was the “Constitutional Conflict” in Prussia. In 1862 the Prussian New Era came to an end and the period known as the “Prussian Constitutional Conflict” or the “Conflict Period,” began, a conflict not closed until 1866. The Prussian liberals who controlled the House of Delegates (the lower house of the Prussian National Assembly) refused to accept the Army reform wanted by the King. The liberal ministry resigned and were replaced by Otto v. Bismarck, and after the failure of his attempt to compromise with the liberals, Bismarck reformed the Army and ran the government in defiance of parliament’s refusal to pass the budget. For the noted German historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler, the events of 1863 were a decisive battle between parliamentary monarchy and plebiscitary quasi-dictatorship which the Prussian liberals
lost decisively. The Prussian Constitutional Conflict was the second great turning-point of modern German history (the first being 1848), according to Wehler. The failure of German liberalism then determined German history until 1918.305

There are two separate questions to be distinguished here. One, whether German liberalism was defeated in the 1860s, and when. The second, whether the 1860s were not, nevertheless, its high point. Both make distinctions too sharply. From the 1840s to the 1870s liberal triumph often seemed possible: liberals still expected to win after 1863. Indeed, except for times of government repression or revolutionary upheaval, liberal electoral strength was assured through the mid-1870s.306 In the Vormärz, German liberals had had confidence, but little power. Confidence and power ebbed after 1879 and still more after 1887. In the middle period discussed in this chapter, German liberals possessed some of each. In no other period was the potential and in part actual (it must always be remembered that national unification was a liberal goal) fulfillment of liberal aims so clearly on the political horizon. Bismarck took the Prussian liberals very seriously as opponents in the Constitutional Conflict. Compromise was the first way out of that conflict that Bismarck tried, and even after the Danish (1864) and Austrian (1866) Wars, Bismarck thought it worthwhile to compromise with Prussian liberalism with the Indemnity Bill in 1866, admitting the illegality of earlier government actions over the budget and asking parliamentary pardon for them, with the implicit promise not to do it again. For most Prussian and especially non-Prussian German liberals, the Indemnity Bill was a victory, or at least an honorable compromise that left everything to hope for and expect from the future. In the historian Nipperdey’s view it was a defeat, but also an alliance that left open the opportunity for further progress from a liberal perspective, as was the 1867 Constitution of the North German Confederation.307 But this is to get ahead of our argument and enter issues that will be addressed in the following chapters. What seems evident is that for most of the period from 1850 to 1865 German liberalism forms the middle ground, behind England but ahead of France, in terms of strength and power.

The issue of nationalism requires special mention here because, as before 1850, nationalism in 1850–65 was a central focus of German liberalism. In the debates over national unity and the best strategies to obtain it, the issue of suffrage may seem to have taken a back seat among German liberal concerns. But in fact it was a central and determining factor in strategies for unification. The liberals’ war on two fronts and their rejection of universal suffrage meant that liberals had to reject revolutionary tactics for German unification. Their conception of Innenpolitik, to use one of those German words that English-language historians of Germany seem unable to do without, that is, their conception of internal politics, dictated limits to their options in Aussenpolitik, foreign policy.
How did Prussian liberals use their opportunity to deal with suffrage questions at the height of their influence? In 1858 Frederick William IV fell terminally ill, and his brother, the future William I, became Regent. The Regent dismissed the reactionary Manteuffel government and called new elections, the first to be carried out under the three-class suffrage without government interference. The result was a series of crushing liberal victories. They held a dominating majority of 55–70 per cent of the seats in the lower house from 1858 to 1863. This was the only time when Prussian liberals could address the crucial issue of the suffrage relatively free from overwhelming external pressure. The three-class suffrage for the Prussian Lower House never came up directly for debate in Parliament, but a good equivalent for it was found in the municipal suffrage debate held relative to the local government law proposed in 1861. The local suffrage debate served as a substitute for a Parliamentary debate on constitutional reform that the government (and the majority of the representatives) wanted to avoid. Most of the chief liberal figures in the Prussian House spoke: Duncker, Gneist, Vincke, Waldeck, Lette, Schulze, and Forckenbeck, as well as the Interior Minister Schwerin.

One of the major aims of Prussian liberals was a new local government law that would curb the administrative and political powers of the Prussian aristocracy. Such a law was proposed by the liberal Interior Minister, v. Schwerin, one of the so-called “German Whigs,” that is, liberal Prussian aristocrats. Schwerin did not suggest any alterations in the local suffrage in his bill. Until 1853 Prussian local suffrage followed one of two patterns. In the Rhineland and a few cities outside it suffrage was based on a three-class system similar to the Prussian national suffrage. In the remainder of Prussia there was usually a fairly low census, and all voters were equal. After 1853 a three-class system was introduced in much of Prussia. The committee of the House of Delegates, however, led by Max Duncker, modified the government’s draft and introduced a suffrage reform. The great change proposed by the committee was the abolition of the three-class suffrage. Despite the fact that the three-class system was producing good electoral results for the liberals, both in local and Prussian elections, it was by no means a favorite.

The attack on the three-class suffrage for urban government, which served as a transparent assault on the national suffrage as well, was the point of departure for many speakers. Duncker, spokesman for the committee that reported on the proposed law, led the way in attacking it. He argued that “the three-class suffrage system leads to social and political enmity within the citizenry . . .”, whereas forty years’ experience in the eastern provinces had shown that an equal vote for all those with the franchise resulted in perfectly good and conservative administrations. Duncker noted that while members from the Rhineland liked the three-class system, the members from the rest of Prussia were unanimous in opposing it. The problem was
that they were not nearly so unanimous in finding a substitute for it. But he hoped it would be admitted that it was impossible to reform local government without founding it on a secure suffrage. Suffrage was the crucial question of the law for the towns. Speaking for the majority of the committee, he proposed changes in the urban suffrage.309

By implication the suffrage law was also crucial for the nation, and the government, whose foundations were shaky in both Court and Parliament, was not prepared to go into this question. Minister Schwerin noted that it was precisely in regard to the suffrage that “the deepest political differences” were to be found, and that this was not the time to change the existing system. If it was changed, would that not be an incentive for the proposal of constitutional amendments by the left, that is, proposals to change the national suffrage law? Schwerin thus gave the debate its true significance, and sought to frighten the moderate liberal majority with the specter of universal or at least very broad suffrage proposals. He meanwhile urged those on the left to consider that the census proposed by the committee would mean the end of the almost universal if unequal suffrage embodied in the present law, and the exclusion altogether of a portion of the lower classes. Thus “the present electoral law is, in my opinion, the best possible under current conditions that we can have, and therefore we consider it our duty to maintain it.” (emphasis original).310

The committee, however, proposed to abolish the three-class suffrage, and replace it with a new sliding-scale census varying according to town population. The traditional census, based on the Stein law of 1808, had been an income of 150 thaler, 200 for larger towns. The committee noted that there had been considerable inflation since 1808, and proposed that the census be altered: towns with population under 10,000, a 150 Thaler census, 10,000–20,000, 200 Thaler, 20,000–50,000, 250 Thaler, population of 50,000 or over, 300 thaler.

The debate over the commission’s project reflected a number of varying perspectives. It was conducted in line with the traditional liberal language of capacity and the favorite German criterion of “independence,” which had moreover been enshrined in the Prussian Constitution. Thus for Duncker, those who didn’t have the capacity to bear public burdens lacked the capacity to exercise the right to vote: “We make duty the foundation of rights.” Those who couldn’t afford to take on unpaid civic responsibilities and duties ought not to have the vote. Duncker opposed the liberal doctrine of capacity to the “peculiar alliance” of democrats and aristocrats that threatened to defeat liberal suffrage reform plans – they were the ones who rejected the idea of capacity.311 Vincke restated liberal doctrine clearly. The capacity for political participation was based on three things: “Independence, intellectual capacity, and enduring interest”, i.e. property and education.312 Of these three, debate turned chiefly around the definition of “independence”, and in particular on its economic meaning.
On the left Schulze-Delitzsch and Waldeck denied that independence had an economic meaning. For Schulze the independence of the voter was guaranteed by the secret ballot. Waldeck, a radical democrat in 1848, now accepted the liberal principle that there were no rights without duties. But he defined this group far more broadly than men like Duncker and Vincke. For Waldeck, once it was ascertained that a man contributed to the public burdens, that is, paid taxes and did not receive public assistance, then that man was entitled to vote, and there was “no logical or historical” ground for denying him the right of political participation. It was illogical to say that if a man lost his money in the stock market overnight, he had gone to bed a citizen and lost his citizenship overnight. Waldeck also pointed out that previously, anyone who owned a house, or owned a business in town with at least two employees, could vote, but that many of these people would lose their votes under the proposed law because of the new income requirements. Thus the Progressives (a coalition of left-liberals and democrats) proposed the vote for all who did not receive public assistance, paid local taxes, and had one year of residency in the town.

But most liberals saw economic independence as essential to the capacity for useful political participation. It was true that one could not prove the moral independence of an individual from his income, but economic independence was the basis for a good approximation, as Vincke put it. Independence was the chief guarantee for a good vote and a good result, said Lette, and independence would come from three things: first, the abolition of the three-class system, second the institution of a secret ballot, “third however also from this, that we only allow economically independent people to vote, and that not every servant, every apprentice, every young man... be allowed to vote... one’s own independent household is required for the exercise of political rights.” Secret balloting (also established by accepted amendments to the draft suffrage proposal), the end of the three-class system, and the proposed census would thus create a “true universal suffrage.” Here Lette was appealing to a “true universal suffrage” of all those who were independent, i.e. capable. It must be equal, rather than weighted, because independence could not be weighted. One either was or was not independent. Lette thus appealed from a universal suffrage based on the mere existence of adult males to one based on some higher, more rational principle, a typical liberal move, and one that rhetorically annexed the powerful phrase “universal suffrage” to liberalism, while changing its content. Universal suffrage became the universal suffrage of all those qualified to exercise it. German liberals’ attempt to redefine the words “universal suffrage” in 1861 bears a strong resemblance to their attempt to redefine “democracy” in the Vormärz.

It was already apparent in these opening speeches of the 1861 debate that Prussian liberalism was carrying on a number of earlier liberal arguments. In fact, more than about the issue of independence, the debate was con-
ducted over the merits and flaws of the three-class system. Duncker stressed the political equality of all those with the capacity for political participation, and rejected the three-class system because it tore irrational social rifts in what ought to be a united middle class. The three-class system treated society as if it was a corporation with stockholders of varying magnitude, but it then put people who paid quite different taxes into the same class – it was completely irrational. A simple census was rational, based on the principle that one must fulfill certain duties to be capable of exercising certain rights. Duncker stressed the Commission’s exception to the census – any citizen who actually undertook an unpaid civil office would be entitled to vote regardless of income, because he had proved his capacity to bear public burdens independently. Lette emphasized the same theme as Duncker. “We want the political equality of all really independent men” (emphasis original). German liberalism of an individualist sort was never comfortable with the idea of deference, unlike English liberalism. As usual, in debate liberals often mixed social and individually oriented language. Duncker and Lette’s stress on political equality once the suffrage was obtained aligned them with the individualist tradition, while their stress on unity among the middle classes aligned them with socially oriented liberalism.

Waldeck pointed out that the proposed reforms in fact meant the exclusion of numbers of less well-off voters who had previously voted because of house- or business-ownership, especially in smaller towns. In this the Prussian 1861 proposal was similar to the English Reform Act of 1832, which resulted in an effective decline in lower-class electoral influence through the establishment of a uniform property-census in all boroughs. Waldeck therefore argued that even the present system was better than the proposed one. Vincke had no patience with the argument that a census would take votes away from those who already had them. If the lower class didn’t drink and saved their money, they could easily improve their situation and their income, and get the vote, while under the three-class system, no one ever knew how much money he needed to have to increase his political weight, since it varied from year to year and town to town, and thus no one had a political incentive to better themselves. Most Prussian liberals were more concerned with excluding the lower class than in finding some way to integrate them, unlike their English counterparts, for whom as we have seen at least a token integration of the lower classes into the liberal political system was desirable.

Several speakers, including Vincke and Riedel, continued to emphasize the theme that the three-class suffrage fostered social conflict in the towns. But the attacks on the three-class suffrage system did not necessarily translate into support for the Commission’s proposal, even from those who stood well to the right of Waldeck. Rudolf v. Gneist, an important liberal political theorist as well as a member of parliament, opened his speech by continuing Duncker’s attack on the three-class system. For him too it destroyed
the social and political unity of the towns, and undermined their system of administration by unpaid officials. For Gneist, however, the basis of suffrage had to be the ownership of real property, that is of a house, and all householders ought to vote. Householders were the bedrock of the social and political order, and were worth far more to society than renters, whatever the renters’ income, relative weight in the population, or education. For Gneist property was not a guaranty of education, it was the guaranty that one was capable and willing of serving the town and the state: “even the smaller and smallest proprietors mean more for the town, than even the big and medium renters. For that reason having the same census for all of them is absolutely inadmissable.” The commission was turning upside down the relationship between rights and duties, because it was the house-owners who did a disproportionate amount of community service. Gneist took particular aim at the idea that renters would be the more educated element in the electorate, arguing that the kind of education professors and bureaucrats had was inferior to householders’ experience in civic affairs. He protested that in Berlin, under the Commission’s draft, the house-owners would be outvoted 2–1 by renters.319

But more broadly Gneist rejected basing the state on the representation of particular social interests. The state ought to be based on the general interest. That meant it must be separated from social struggles and material interests and lead people to become involved with “higher political, moral and educational goals”. This was to be achieved through “self-government” (Gneist used the English word), through involving people in civic activity. This was an attitude that had similarities to Tocqueville’s in its emphasis on local community action. Through this understanding of politics Gneist arrived at his emphasis on the householders as the crucial class, because it was they who chiefly participated in local government. But even were all house-owners to be given the vote, Gneist was not happy with taking the vote away from people who had had it under the three-class system. Thus for all his dislike of the three-class suffrage, he did not consider the new proposals an improvement.320

This was the Achilles’ heel of all proposals to reform the Prussian three-class system, from the 1860s onwards. A majority of liberals disliked it, but always found it more acceptable than any given alternative suffrage. Part of the reason for this, as both Gneist and Riedel stressed, was that reforming it meant the imposition of a census, and taking away votes from people who already had them. Forckenbeck joined Waldeck in pointing this out. But even more important was the fact that liberals simply couldn’t agree on the details of an alternative: “But, Gentleman, even if I too condemn the three-class system, I am nevertheless only willing to get rid of it, now that it has been introduced, if I can replace it with a really good electoral system that is entirely satisfactory to me, and such a system, I must state, I cannot see presented before me now.”321 The government spokesman v. Kehler was glad
to admit that the government was not especially fond of the three-class system, but the proof that it was the best available lay in the fact that no other system was generally acceptable. Schwerin ended by saying that it was hard to find an electoral system that was both rational and practical. Since there was nothing better proposed, and since the three-class system did allow all levels of society to be represented where it was in force, nothing should be changed.322

Why were Prussian liberals unable to agree on an alternative to the three-class system? In the 1860s and 1870s they could feel fairly confident that any system they put in would likely give them a majority. Even the universal male suffrage of the North German Confederation and Reichstag elections of 1867–71 gave favorable electoral results for the liberals. It was not in fact the results that seemed to be the crucial problem, otherwise liberals would have been happy with the three-class system, which worked very much in their favor in both the local and Prussian national elections. The real problem was the Prussian and German liberal attitude towards the political participation of the lower classes. German liberals were unable to find a way to include them in any more positive way than the three-class system, and unwilling or unable to exclude them entirely. Whereas broad segments of English liberalism, from Gladstone to old Whigs like Russell to a large segment of the Conservative Party expressed a desire to integrate the lower classes, this was not a theme stressed by German liberals. It may be objected that the suffrage reform plans proposed in England in 1854–65 offered the lower classes little more real political influence than they possessed under Prussia’s three-class system, but the difference in political rhetoric and political anticipation was nevertheless great and of great importance. It is context that is crucial. The English liberals looked forward to absorbing the lower class, or at least its leading elements, within liberal politics. The Germans looked upon them as a foreign element, acceptable as individuals once they had raised themselves into the middle class, of course, but in themselves only a threat.

A good example of the unwillingness of German liberals to accept members of the lower classes as political partners can be found in the well-known refusal of the left-liberal Schulze-Delitzsch to make it possible for workers to join the German National Association. Schulze was a figure who often hovered on the boundary lines between liberalism and democracy, as did many of his fellow Progressive party-members. In his attitude towards workers joining the Nationalverein, however, a pressure-group dedicated to the unification of Germany, he was decidedly liberal. The question was whether the membership dues, which were considerable, ought to be lowered to make it possible for workers to join the organization. Schulze was steadfast in refusing to support any lowering of the dues, in 1860 even voting against a proposal to allow them to be paid quarterly instead of yearly. His only solution for the workers was that several of them should
join together to purchase membership for one. After heavy criticism, he finally agreed in 1863 to support monthly dues-payment, but that was as far as he would go. This refusal to lower membership dues despite considerable expressed lower-class interest in joining was representative of German liberal attitudes to lower-class political participation.

This refusal was echoed in the suffrage debates of 1861. There liberals as far left as Waldeck and as far right as Vincke joined in condemning Conservative flirtation with the lower classes. There was no effort to find a more acceptable means of integrating the lower classes into politics. Lette denied Waldeck’s charge that he and his colleagues had nothing but contempt for manual laborers, and spoke of his many working-class friends, but that was all. Lette’s remark was less fatuous than it might appear, for he was a founder of the Zentralverein für das Wohl der arbeitenden Klassen (Central Association for the Welfare of the Working Classes), and in 1868 would be its chairman. But that a man like him would refuse to make any rhetorical concession to the political participation of the working classes shows the estrangement of German liberals from the lower classes, especially when combined with Schultze-Delitzsch’s attitude in the Nationalverein question. Even Waldeck did not emphasize the need to integrate the lower classes as such. From the body of mainstream liberals to his right there was nothing of that broadly expressed concern for fostering the political participation of the capable segments of lower classes so often expressed in the British Parliament. Some left-liberals did worry about taking votes away from workers through a census, but more common were voices like that of Vincke, urging that a census was a good incentive for the lower class to earn their votes, through their virtue, savings, and efforts – much better than simply giving the suffrage as a gift.

Schwerin was correct when he noted in the parliamentary debate that the committee’s draft didn’t seem to have a majority for it, nor the three-class electoral system to have very determined enemies. The voting proved him right: the committee’s draft, even when amended to give the vote to all householders as well, failed to pass the lower house, without a roll-call vote. Duncker was correct that between proponents of universal suffrage on the left and the three-class system on the right no reform could pass. This situation was not unique to German liberalism. English liberals, despite their broad agreement on the need to find a way to include the lower classes in politics, were also unable to pass a suffrage reform despite repeated attempts between 1854 and 1865. The difference was that English liberals were willing to make repeated attempts to reform the suffrage, in order to include some portion of the lower classes, even though they were as divided among themselves on the precise way to do so as German reformers were. The same conviction that suffrage reform and social inclusiveness, at least in appearance, was essential was lacking in German liberalism in 1850–65. Not entirely – Waldeck shared it to some extent. But the broad mass of
German liberals did not, as the Prussian parliamentary debates of 1861 made clear. It was rather the German conservatives who sought in the 1860s to use the nascent German urban working class to their advantage (British Tories, with some success, did the same thing). Long before the notorious Bismarck/Lasalle conversations, German conservatives were making overtures to the workers, and liberals were warning each other of the dangers this posed. Thus in 1862 Conservative congresses were listening to speeches calling for broadening the electoral influence of the proletariat, and the liberal *Preussischer Jahrbücher* was warning of the dangers of plebiscitary despotism à la Napoleon III: "It seems clear that there are statesmen who believe they will be able to break the resistance of the opposing middle class with the help of the organization of the Fourth Estate. Napoleon rules France, because he controls the soldiers and the workers." 326

German liberals, however, were at least in a position to discuss suffrage reform in parliaments in 1850–65. The same could not be said of French liberals under the rule of Napoleon III, a rule founded on plebiscites relying on universal suffrage. French liberalism, the first European liberalism to scale the heights of political power in 1830, was also the first to be toppled from its perch. Its development in defeat, and its briefly revived political significance in the late 1860s and early 1870s, provide instructive lessons on the demise of European liberalism as a whole.

**French liberalism in retreat, 1851–65**

The French suffrage law of 31 May 1850 had eliminated roughly 30 per cent of the voters, that is, over three million men. The democratic left called for its supporters to abstain from all elections held under these conditions. In a number of parliamentary by-elections that were held under the law, abstentions were as much as 40 per cent of the remaining electorate. Some of these of course were people who would not have voted in any case, but by comparison with the participation rates of 1849, it was clear that a large minority of the electorate heeded the left’s call for a boycott. It was the presence of the future Napoleon III as President of the Second Republic which made the abstention of the left unbearable for French liberals. The liberal nightmare, an alliance between executive despotism and the lower classes, seemed to be a reality in France. Liberal government, weakened by the fall of the July Monarchy, could not withstand simultaneous pressure from President Louis Napoleon above and the lower classes below. It was in order to refloat a foundering liberal regime that French liberals contemplated once again reforming the suffrage, this time to broaden it, in 1851. Rather than a sign of liberal strength in France, it was a sign of liberal weakness, an attempt to purchase lower-class support for the Republic in order to defend the regime against Louis Napoleon.
The suffrage-reform efforts of 1851 were thus strongly effected by relatively fleeting political circumstances (although they are an example of the classic liberal dilemma of the two-front war against despotism). Just as the passing of the restricted suffrage of 1850 had been triggered by the elections of Eugène Sue and Victor Hugo, then considered revolutionary socialists, so too the reform effort of 1851 was triggered by the fear of a coup d’état by Napoleon III, one which would have at least the passive support of the lower classes, crucially in Paris, where 60 per cent of the voters had been eliminated by the 1850 suffrage reform. More directly the suffrage reform was anticipated by the initiative of the President himself to reform the suffrage and thus pose as the champion of universal suffrage, although it was with his consent that the original law had been passed.

Napoleon had created a ministry dominated by his own men in late 1851. Particularly disturbing to liberals was the fact that the new government clearly did not enjoy the support of a parliamentary majority, which they controlled. It was the President’s government, not theirs. In early November 1851 the new Interior Minister, Thorigny, came before the Assembly to propose a new suffrage law. It was essentially a return to universal suffrage, eliminating the three-year residence requirement and replacing it with a 6-month residency requirement without substantial proof of residence, the original suffrage of the Second Republic. To cover the President’s change of position, Thorigny announced that the law of 1850 had served its purpose in troubled times, but that now that order had been restored it was possible to return to real universal suffrage. He asked the Assembly to declare urgence for his measure, that is, bypass the usual procedure of report by a committee and three readings, and immediately proceed to debate on the measure itself and a final vote. The law of 31 May 1850 had been passed in urgence. By a voice vote the Assembly rejected urgence for the government’s proposal.327

Nevertheless the Assembly moved rapidly to consider the issue of suffrage reform. The committee report on the government’s proposal was made on 10 November by Daru, a liberal who was not necessarily unfriendly to Napoleon – he would later rally to the regime and serve as one of its ministers. Daru’s report was a classic restatement of the liberal rhetoric of capacity. For Daru, suffrage after only six months’ residence meant recognizing the principle that national sovereignty resided “in the entire mass of the population, including everyone, absolutely, without distinguishing those unworthy and those incapable, rather than the principle which makes sovereignty reside among all those in whom the law recognizes, within the limits set by the Constitution, the capacity to vote and to be elected.” There was no doubt which principle Daru preferred: “Can we accept that imprudent and inaccurate theory that universal suffrage is subject to no rules; . . . that the right to vote is inherent in man, indestructible; and that one owes him amends for any precaution, any legal guaranty with which we
have surrounded the right to vote?" Experience had taught France to know better, and yet the law of 1850 still gave France the broadest suffrage law in Europe (which, given the constraints of the Prussian three-class system, was probably true). No claim of discrimination against the poor or the proletariat could be raised because everyone, no matter their wealth, was treated equally by the law. No one was privileged, no arbitrary exercise of authority was permitted. All the residency requirement did was "give the guaranty of independence, of morality, of responsibility, that we have reason to look for as a condition for the exercise of popular sovereignty." Daru recommended the rejection of the government’s proposal on the first reading, thus leaving the law of 1850 unchanged. 328

But Daru’s seemingly uncompromising stance hid a willingness to reform the suffrage. Vatimesnil, one of the leading liberal spokesmen in 1850, after lauding residency requirements in principle, indicated that although he would vote against the government proposal, he was prepared to support modifications in the law, making it easier to prove residency and lowering the requirement from three years to one for those born in their voting district. The special favor for those born in their district was in part derived from one of the unexpected consequences of the 1850 law – the elimination of many peasant voters counted on by rural liberal and Legitimist candidates, often either peasants who had left home for temporary work or else could not or would not go through the written formalities necessary to prove residence under the 1850 law. But beyond Vatimesnil’s statement, the readiness of the Assembly to broaden the suffrage was shown by the narrow margin by which it rejected the government’s proposal in its first reading, only 355–348. Clearly many liberals wished to avoid the path of intransigence about suffrage taken by the July Monarchy. 329

After the disappointment and disaffection caused by the rejection of the government plan, the Assembly hastened to take up its own. As so often, the chosen format was a reform of the municipal suffrage law, previously subject to the same conditions as the national suffrage. As proof of willingness to reform and to speed up the legislative process, the sections concerning suffrage were separated out of the law on local government and debated as an independent bill. In the course of the debate it was explicitly recognized by many of the liberal speakers that the new municipal suffrage, once passed, would be adopted with urgence as a new national suffrage bill.

Vatimesnil now served as the committee spokesman for suffrage reform, proposing to go somewhat beyond his earlier suggestions and lower the residency requirement to six months for those locally born, as well as make residency easier to prove. A readily accepted amendment applied the six-month rule to those who had been put on the draft roll in a given town as well as those born there. The real struggle was over the length of the residency requirement for those who fulfilled neither of those conditions, for whom the committee intended to retain the three-year requirement. Monet
proposed reducing the residency requirement for these people to one year, arguing that traditionally one year was the residency requirement before one started to pay local taxes or be eligible for local services, and that this was the real measure of belonging to a community. Monet spoke of community membership in largely financial and individual terms, pointing to whether or not the individual made payments or received services as the indicator of whether he was part of the community. Vatimesnil, using socially oriented language, rejected the idea that belonging to a community was only a matter of monetary burdens and benefits. It was a question of moral affiliation, of knowing and being known, and three years was necessary. After a brief debate the amendment was rejected and the committee proposal passed its first reading unchanged.

The vote on Monet’s amendment was significant, however. It failed by only 301–258, with a number of radical left members abstaining on the grounds that any requirement of more than six months was unconstitutional. Liberals divided on the measure. Barrot voted for the one-year limit, as did Gustave de Beaumont, Dufaure and Tocqueville. Against were Baroche, Broglie, Daru, Molé, Montalembert, Thiers, and Vatimesnil. Thus while the bulk of French liberals continued to vote against cutting the residency requirement to one year, a significant number of the former left-liberals of the July Monarchy, including their old leader Barrot, favored it. Of course, their motivations were open to question. Was it fear of Napoleon that moved them, or confidence that the relatively complicated procedures for non-natives to prove residence would prevent many voters from being added to the rolls, or a belief that the Parisian proletariat would still be excluded by a one-year requirement, or a real desire to broaden the suffrage? It is notable that relatively few liberal leaders spoke during the 1851 debates. Thiers in particular remained silent, as did Montalembert. Their silence might well be considered an indication of the political necessity of reform in 1851.

After the close vote on the one-year amendment, the Commission modified its draft on the second reading. Vatimesnil was replaced as spokesperson, and Larcy, in his place, announced that in the spirit of conciliation the committee would lower its residency requirement for non-natives to two years, noting that the difficulties of the registration process would mean that this often meant three years in practice anyway. Léon Faucher, Committee spokesperson for the original 1850 law, rose to protest this change, seconded by Kerdrel, who argued that in the eyes of the nation lowering the residency requirement for the vote meant lowering the moral character required of voters, and this was the wrong impression to give. Despite the intransigence of some liberals, however, the two-year amendment passed easily, 344–218, with the left again abstaining on principle. Thiers, Broglie, Daru, Duvergier de Hauranne, and Montalembert continued to vote against. As usual, liberal willingness to compromise on the suffrage should not be overestimated.
When democrats and legitimists combined to suggest changes to simplify the registration procedure, liberals united to defeat the measure 363–206. The second reading of the revised municipal suffrage law passed by an overwhelming majority of 433–229, considerably bigger than the majority or the total number of votes recorded on its crucial points. In the final analysis, none except those in the far right or left of the Assembly wished to be seen voting against any broadening of the suffrage. Thiers, Broglie, Molé and Montalembert were absent for this vote, doubtless deliberately. There was considerable sympathy for still further reform. This was demonstrated in the debate on the third and final reading, which took place on November 30. Despite Vatimesnil’s argument that those who vote must “have the moral aptitude necessary for making good, honest and wise choices,” a renewed attempt to reduce the residency requirement to one year was defeated by only one vote, 321–320. Still against one year were Thiers, Vatimesnil, Montalembert, Duvergier de Hauranne, and Baroche. Tocqueville and Laboulaye were absent, Beaumont was in favor. There was, as might be expected, considerable uproar and confusion over the vote, which was revised from an original count of 328–327. Further attempts to amend the requirement to one year were to be expected when the national suffrage actually came up for a vote, and seemed to have a reasonable chance of success.

No further attempts were made, for on 10 December, before action could be taken to reform the national suffrage, Louis Napoleon made his coup d’état and proclaimed universal suffrage by decree. Although it is never cited by histories of the period, one of his motives may well have been fear that a revised suffrage law, as seemed to be imminent, would deprive him of one of his main claims to legitimacy against the National Assembly. The effects of a suffrage law with even a one-year residency requirement for non-natives will never be known. Would the registration-requirements have proved to exclude almost as many voters as a three-year requirement, as some democrats claimed? Possibly they would have, since in England, after the Third Reform Act of 1884, difficulties of registration kept some 30 per cent of otherwise eligible voters off the rolls. Or perhaps French political parties would have learned how to make sure their supporters were registered, aided by the lesser complexity of French registration procedures by comparison with England. How many would still have been excluded is unclear. The numbers likely would have remained significant.

The liberal opposition to Napoleon III could make little resistance against his coup, and such resistance as there was, the rebellions of the “demosocs” in the provinces, was enough to make liberals withdraw from open contention, unwilling to encourage either despotism from above or what they saw as revolutionary anarchism from below. The liberal center had been squeezed out of French politics, after being a key player in the political game, whether in government or in opposition, from 1815 to 1851, 36 years in all.
What happened to French liberals in 1852 was in some ways similar to what happened to German liberals in 1867 or 1871. Universal suffrage had been imposed on them from above, and once imposed, there seemed no possibility any more of getting rid of it. This is not to say that French liberals were passive under the Second Empire, for they were not. The “Union libérale,” the united opposition of the 1860s, included a considerable number of liberals, above all Thiers. Thiers’ re-entry into political life after the “liberalization” of the Empire was an event of national note. His parliamentary speech on “the five necessary freedoms” of 11 January 1864 made a wide impression. But it is important to note what it contained, and what it did not. Thiers refused to consider France “incapable” of freedom. He insisted that Europe was now in the “liberal period” of its history, succeeding the feudal and royal periods. But he did not speak of the middle class. He did not speak of the capacity of the voters. His five necessary freedoms were freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of the press (within limits, he was quick to add), elections free from government control, the freedom of parliament to “impose a useful check on the actions of the government,” and the freedom of parliament to make the government act in accord with public opinion, that is in accord with a parliamentary majority. These freedoms represented the formal civil rights and the formal constraints on government that liberals had always contended for. What was missing was the content they had once had, the definition of the public and its opinion as the opinion of a certain designated portion of society with the proper capacity. There was nothing for a democrat to dissent from in this speech, and French democrats gave it loud applause and a wide audience. There was also nothing substantially liberal about Thiers’ speech. In 1852–65, there was a very restricted audience for liberal discourse in French politics, one that seemed to have little opportunity for growth either to its right, where the Napoleonic regime offered the most obvious promise of political stability, nor to the left, where the liberals were outbid by democrats.\textsuperscript{333} As Girard said, “liberalism was the great loser of the coup d’etat [by Napoleon III], as much and more than the democrats. After all, universal suffrage was re-established.”\textsuperscript{334} Thiers did not mention separating those with capacity from those without. His speech was a crucial step in the melding of the liberal and democratic traditions in France.

This retreat before democracy was evident in Laboulaye’s significantly titled work \textit{The Liberal Party, its Program and its Future}.\textsuperscript{335} Laboulaye, often considered Tocqueville’s leading disciple in nineteenth-century French political life and thought, opened his chapter on universal suffrage by stating that to attack universal suffrage, to try to reduce it or to eliminate it by the false tactic of indirect elections, these are views little worthy of a statesman, and completely foreign to the liberal party. The liberal party
sincerely accepts universal suffrage as the guaranty of freedom, as the means of government, as the instrument of civic education. Far from searching to weaken it, the liberal party would like to strengthen universal suffrage, by educating it.336

The guaranties that were once sought in a census, in property, in a small number of already educated voters were now to be sought in the minds of the masses, which must be improved and enlightened. The only available political guaranty was to educate the masses – and Laboulaye, as a follower of Tocqueville, pointed to the example of Massachusetts. Liberals had once made education precede political capacity. Now it was to follow it. The inversion presaged the transition of European liberalism from a political power, to what George Armstrong Kelly has aptly described as a political influence.337

Not all French liberals were quite as ready to surrender to democracy as Laboulaye was, but they found it difficult to come up with plausible alternatives. Rémusat wrote articles both criticizing universal suffrage and signalling that liberals would, if necessary, learn to live with it, at the same time as he called for the creation of a new kind of representation, one that would be a moral rather than a statistical representation of society. By this he meant some form of the representation of social interests, weighted according to their interest in the common good. But he could not suggest any concrete way to do this. Auguste Neftzer wrote an article lamenting that the July Monarchy had not broadened the suffrage in time to avoid revolution and universal suffrage. But now that universal suffrage had been inaugurated, it would be “illusory and dangerous” to try to limit it, because that would require revolutionary means. Thus liberalism would have to seek its guarantees for good government and freedom in education and in constitutional and institutional safeguards.338 Laboulaye was an example of the slow merger of democrats and liberals going on within the ranks of the opposition to the Second Empire, Rémusat and Neftzer examples of liberal confusion and despair.339 But the Second Empire was not quite the end of French liberalism as an independent political power, or even as the executive power in France. The defeat of France by Germany in 1871 brought about a brief revival of the language of capacity.

European liberalism presents an increasingly variegated appearance between 1848 and 1865. In the period covered in the next chapter, 1866–85, European liberalism, although still producing a few new and attractive petals, increasingly begins to look old and withered.
In 1866 liberalism appeared to be the motivating force in the political life of England and Germany. In England, Gladstone was attempting to reform the suffrage. In Germany, Prussian liberals were still bitterly fighting the Constitutional Conflict with Bismarck, but the situation was about to be transformed by the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and the formation of the North German Confederation. National unification, one of the most heartfelt goals of German liberalism, was in sight. Even in France, liberals led by Thiers participated in the new-found parliamentary life of the Second Empire and played an important role in French politics.

Whether or not liberals were in control of executive government in 1866, they were important in setting the political agenda and determining the bounds of what was politically possible. By 1885 this was no longer the case in France or Germany. After 1885 liberal parties would never again hold a majority of seats in either the Prussian or the German parliaments. After 1885 French liberalism had ceased to count, and barely retained a vestigial parliamentary existence. British liberalism retained its pivotal role a little longer, and slid more slowly down the slope of power. Nevertheless, after the passage of the Third Reform Act of 1884–85 in England, Gladstone split the Liberal Party over the Irish Home Rule question in 1886. The British Liberal Party ceased to be the natural party of government and became a collection of increasingly marginal splinter groups. It could still profit from an occasion and win an election, as in 1906, but its foundations had been wrecked beyond repair, and British Liberalism was heading for the political irrelevance that would be its lot after the First World War. It is not a coincidence that after 1885 the majority of adult males voted in the national elections of all these countries, and that in France and Germany (although not in Prussia and England) equal and universal male suffrage had become law. The period from 1866 to 1885 saw the position of liberalism undergo great change. It is therefore particularly interesting to see the development of the language of capacity under these challenging circumstances.
The marginalization of French liberalism, 1866–85

It was in France that the language of capacity first lost its coherence. The development of French liberalism over this period can be divided into three phases, running roughly 1866–70, 1871–75, and 1876–85. During the first phase, liberals recovered from the crushing defeat Napoleon III had inflicted on them, and tried to find a way to once more become leaders in French political life. In 1871–75, the shock of France's defeat by Germany, while certainly unwelcome, nevertheless gave French liberals an opening. It should be no surprise that a key part of their efforts was an attempt to limit the suffrage. This effort reached its apogee in the Batbie report to the French National Assembly in 1874, which will be discussed in detail, but in the end achieved no more than the creation of the French Senate in the Constitution of 1875. With the final failure of efforts to limit the suffrage, the language of capacity ceased to be a useful language for French politics, and it rapidly passed out of the mainstream of political life, despite a certain nostalgia felt by a number of articulate Frenchmen. The incoherence of late French liberalism, its linguistic collapse and retreat from politics are chronicled in what follows.

The problem for liberalism under the Second Empire was that it was impossible to imagine a political crisis strong enough to overthrow the Empire and limited enough to restore the July Monarchy, as Rémusat put it. He thought it would be impossible to found a new government without universal suffrage. Liberals' goal could not be to overthrow the Empire, however much they disliked it; it could only be to reform it (liberals were never revolutionaries). This was the agenda Thiers had set in his “five freedoms” speech of 1864, and this was the tactic liberals pursued under the late Empire.340

What was new was that French liberals found it increasingly difficult to be successful electoral politicians. In 1869 democrats and republicans deserted the “Liberal Union” which had served as their joint campaign vehicle with the liberals, and liberals were left to fight on their own, with disastrous results. Without republican support liberal Orleanists who did not campaign as friends of the Second Empire were defeated, including Prévost-Paradol, Albert de Broglie, and Casimir-Périer. Thiers, despite his adhesion to the regime, was defeated twice and barely hung on in the third district in which he was a candidate. Even some liberal republicans had to struggle to retain their seats when charged with being closet Orleanists. Rémusat again provides the reasons for liberal failures: “people could believe us to be moderate in our means, revolutionary in our desires. Thus [we were] revolutionaries to the conservatives, moderates to the revolutionaries, and we couldn’t get the votes of either the cautious or the crazy.”341 The traditional central position of liberalism, moderate in means, revolutionary in ends, had become a weakness rather than a strength, at least for liberals. In the
Third Republic, the Opportunists and later the Radicals would still be able to make use of the rhetoric of moderate means and revolutionary ends through the First World War, but from a democratic perspective.\textsuperscript{342}

What hurt liberal electoral chances was more than a difficult tactical situation. The Second Empire was a turning-point in French political ideas. By the late 1860s a democratic consensus had been arrived at with regard to political participation and citizenship. While this consensus largely adopted liberal views of civil rights, “it is true that this extension of liberal norms occurred to some extent at the expense of the political and intellectual core of liberalism”. That is, in the terms developed here, the growing acceptance of what the twenty-first century calls liberal democracy came at the expense of the discourse of capacity and the separation of political participation from civil rights at the heart of nineteenth-century liberalism.\textsuperscript{343}

While this was the long-term trend, it is not clear that liberalism’s day was done in 1869. Liberals who opposed the Empire were defeated, but those who were willing to accommodate it made up the majority of the legislature elected in 1869. In effect, the Empire seemed on the way to realizing the liberal program. Parliament was increasingly dominant, and although Parliament was elected by universal suffrage, this was a universal suffrage heavily influenced by a government that liberals now felt they could control. The Liberal Empire would be able to fight off liberalism’s enemies on both the left and the right, and a liberal parliament could hope to become increasingly free of the influence of the ailing Emperor. As Rémusat said, “we have all [the freedoms] the Charte [the Constitution of the July Monarchy] contained and look what we have in addition: There are no bureaucrats in the elective house of parliament. The system is much more advanced than any of our reform proposals. . . . Everyone would certainly be shocked, if one said that France is freer than it has ever been.” Guizot and Prévost-Paradol now publicly supported the Empire, and liberals supported the Ollivier ministry.\textsuperscript{344}

French liberal thought also tested new waters in the late 1860s. Duvergier de Hauranne the younger tried to find a way to reconcile liberalism with mass politics. In his article on “Democracy and the Right to Vote”, which appeared in the \textit{Revue des deux mondes} in 1868, Duvergier at first merely restated old liberal rhetoric about the right to vote needing to be limited by capacity. The deaf and blind had a right to see and hear, but you couldn’t ask the advice of the blind about colors, and if everyone really ought to vote, what about women?\textsuperscript{345} The familiar details of Duvergier’s arguments need not be repeated at length. But he went beyond the language of the July Monarchy too. He argued from a social-representation point of view that all classes in society needed political representation, no longer just the middle class. With many references to John Stuart Mill and the British Reform Act of 1867, he tried to convince both democrats and liberals of the need for a new solution to the old problems.\textsuperscript{346} Acknowledging the permanence of uni-
versal suffrage in France, despite all his criticisms of it, Duvergier looked for his solution in the creation of strong political parties:

There is only one way to insure peace in a democratic society, that is to allow and encourage as much as possible the formation of large political parties. . . . The more a democracy is ignorant, capricious, inexperienced, incapable of directing itself and directly governing affairs, the more it is necessary for the organization of parties to be strong and independent. . . . The organization of parties is not only the necessary corrective of the flaws of democracy, it is also the sole effective remedy for them, the only one sufficient to cure. All others are powerless if it is neglected, and become useless as soon as it is employed.347

Without strong parties, France would alternate between anarchy and despotism, the usual liberal nightmare. But with strong political parties, politics could be controlled by those with capacity even under universal suffrage. Duvergier was thus groping towards a means of preserving the language of capacity even under modern conditions of universal suffrage.

But Duvergier's ideas, as so often the case in France, were not given time to work. In the short run they had little influence on his fellow liberals, and the Liberal Empire was fragile, both as an Empire and as a liberal regime.348 When the Emperor decided to put an end to further concessions through a plebiscite, an authoritarian appeal to universal suffrage that brought to mind the bad days of 1852, liberals were divided about how to react. The republican and democratic opposition on the one hand, and the Legitimists on the other, called for a boycott or a “no” vote, because a “yes” vote meant, in effect, accepting the legitimacy of the regime. Rémusat, Thiers and Dufaure joined the opposition, but Guizot, Barrot, Prévost-Paradol and Laboulaye voted yes. The plebiscite was a massive success.349

Whether the Empire would have continued open to liberal influence must remain an open question, because the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 put an end to France's last monarchy. When the Second Empire fell, it was replaced by a Provisional Government, republican and democratic, headed by Léon Gambetta. The Provisional Government attempted to carry on the war, but was eventually forced to ask for terms. Thiers became the new head of government, and it was Thiers who suppressed the last French revolution, the uprising of the Paris Commune in 1871, a fitting task for the last liberal government of France.

French defeat and the Paris Commune provoked renewed debate in France about the merits or rather the flaws of universal suffrage. Regimes sanctioned by universal suffrage had resulted in unparalleled disaster for France. The Empire and the Commune had demonstrated the reality of liberal fears of despotism from above and below. In the long hesitation over what kind of regime France ought to have to replace the Empire, it once more became
politically possible to voice ideas about limiting the suffrage – the language of liberalism was spoken once more.\footnote{130}

The elections of 1871, in which the French electorate voted massively for whomever they thought would end the war soonest, produced the most conservative assembly France had seen since 1850. Liberals held a powerful position in the political center of that Assembly, but they were themselves divided between monarchists who wanted to see the July Monarchy restored (along with a few liberal Legitimists) and republicans who wanted to make sure the republic was a liberal one. It was a highly divided liberalism that emerged from the Second Empire, divided over the form of the regime, and above all divided about what its own aspirations and its own language ought to be. It was a liberalism without self-confidence. A good example is the newspaper articles published on “Universal Suffrage” by Charles Dupont-White, later reprinted in pamphlet form.\footnote{351} Dupont-White, after expressing the usual liberal fears about despotism from below and above, cast doubt upon the whole idea of an intellectual capacity to participate in politics. In fact, no one had the necessary capacity for political participation: “The masses do not have these qualifications to vote; but almost no one has them. However we need voters: but basic ideas, or rather instincts, which no one lacks, are sufficient for the exercise of this right.” Thus either no one knew enough to vote, or everyone did. Dupont-White chose the latter: “one can say the capacity for universal suffrage is not lacking among us, that it exists to the degree desired, in a form which, while implicit and obscure, is nevertheless certainly sufficient.”\footnote{352}

However, Dupont-White was not abandoning the language of capacity; he was merely shifting its ground: “But, the considerations which we have just shown prove only that the right to vote does not exceed the intellectual capacity of the masses. It remains to be seen if it does not exceed their moral capacity.” Despite the progress of education, the poor would use their numerical sovereignty to steal the rich man’s money. Therefore limitations on the suffrage were needed on the basis of the prospective voter’s moral capacity. How could one determine a voter’s morality? Dupont-White was content to define morality according to the prescriptions of the suffrage law of 1850. Voting should be limited by a voting age of 25 as in Germany, rather than 21 as in England and as French democrats wished, and above all by a sufficiently long residency requirement. These would be internal moral counterweights, within a system based on universal suffrage, to the poor’s interest in confiscating the goods of the rich. Dupont-White also called for a Senate or House of Lords as an external balance to a lower house elected by universal suffrage.\footnote{353} French liberals who despaired of limiting universal suffrage in a lower house turned increasingly to the idea of a Senate in the early 1870s. Renan wanted one composed partly of notables and partly through corporate representation of interests.\footnote{354} A limited electorate for one house, capable of preserving liberalism from the assaults of the other,
seemed the best solution to a fearful liberalism. It was as a defensive maneuver that many liberals became increasingly attracted to the idea of a Senate. In 1873 E. Duvergier de Hauranne proposed a Senate elected by a combination of office-holders and intellectual and commercial notables. Vacherot and Laboulaye called for a Second Chamber designed to represent interests against a lower house that would represent numbers. Fouillée wanted a Senate based on “permanent and collective interests”, including representatives of teachers, the military, judges, industry, agriculture, workers, and the arts and letters. Each group would draw up a list, from which universal suffrage would elect individuals. But he did not go so far as to give a complete list of the groups he wanted to see represented nor an idea of the number of representatives they would be allotted.

French liberals could not unite behind any one solution, any particular rewording of the language of capacity. In 1873 one of Thiers’ supporters, Herbette, gave a confused speech to a liberal gathering which demonstrates liberal disarray. He first lamented “the lack of cohesion and understanding that exists within the educated middle classes.” Then he tried to define liberalism: “Who are the liberals? They are all those who have acquired, by an intelligence cultivated through study, a certain development which allows them to imagine an ideal less confused and more fixed than the vague and unclear aspirations which circulate among the masses. Among all the middle classes, there is therefore a link which ought to bind them tightly together in a common interest . . .”. But after appealing to the middle classes, to their common interest, intelligence and achievement, Herbette became vague and unclear. He was unable to specify the link between the middle classes, unable to convert their greater intelligence into a criterion of political capacity, and could only conclude that “the problem with the situation consists solely of the fact that the liberals are deeply divided.” His solution to the problem was that universal suffrage must be enlightened rather than attacked, Laboulaye’s conclusion of 1865. This was to reverse the traditional liberal order of things: first education, then votes. Now it was first votes, then education. The change betrayed the declining self-confidence of French liberalism.

Still, liberals held positions of power in French government in 1873. Thiers was President, and Dufaure his prime minister. The left-center Dufaure government was in a position to introduce a new suffrage law. The project was given sudden urgency by Rémuat’s symbolic defeat in a Paris by-election by a democratic opponent who passed as a supporter of the Communards. But the Liberals were being squeezed from the right as well. In May of 1873 Thiers was beaten by the right in the Assembly and resigned. The Orleanist/Legitimist government of the Duc de Broglie continued the electoral reform project but was forced to resign on 16 May 1874, by a combination of distrustful Legitimists and democrats, the unholy coalition of left and right against the center so feared by liberals.
It was during the Broglie government’s period of office, on 21 March 1874, that the Batbie commission reported to the Assembly on the electoral law originally proposed by Dufaure. Its membership included many who had participated in the suffrage debates of the 1850s – Dufaure, Laboulaye, Daru – and in its broad outlines the suffrage it proposed was a return to the legislation of 1850, limiting suffrage essentially on the basis of a residency requirement. But more than that, the Batbie report summed up the state of liberal opinion on the means and bases for establishing political capacity and the right to political participation.

Batbie started out by asking whether suffrage was a right or a *fonction*. He immediately rejected the idea of voting as a right – if it was a right, why couldn’t women exercise it, or why wasn’t it delegated to the legal guardians of children, like the other rights of minors? Therefore suffrage had always been an office and a duty, never a right. And “not only an office, but it must be recognized that it is a difficult office.” Nevertheless, Batbie admitted that in practice the suffrage had become a right for the past 25 years. Liberals did not dare to explicitly reject it. The doctrine of capacity had to be introduced by the back door, because there was no choice: liberals were kept from reintroducing a census by “the fear of offending the strongest and most touchy feeling among us, equality....it is doubtful if public opinion...would be disposed to accept such a fundamental change, and the measure would risk being misunderstood or misinterpreted.” Liberals had once argued that the language of capacity was egalitarian, that there was nothing in a census that constituted a privilege or offended equality rightly understood. Now they admitted that this argument was no longer plausible.

Batbie thus no longer sought to exclude the incapable, but to balance them. “It would be good to temper the power of numbers, up to the present without any counterweight, by adding to it the representation of interests. We [the commission] were in agreement in recognizing that what is rational in the administration of private affairs could usefully be transported into the conduct of public affairs.” In this statement the traditional language of French liberalism with its preference for the language of social representation was neatly slid into place. Voting should be a means of representing interests and of insuring the victory of reason, all in the name of public utility. But it was the language of a liberalism on the defensive, even if in a position of power. Compared to English liberals, condescending to freely include a few token outsiders in the suffrage debates of the 1850s and early 1860s, or German liberals, maintaining a limited/unequal suffrage in the individual German states and above all Prussia, French liberals in 1874 were forced to compromise from a position of weakness. Although they were temporarily strongly represented in executive government and in the National Assembly, they were weak in society and no longer masters of the dominant political language of the day – a reversal of their position in the earlier half of the century.
Weak as they were, French liberals were further weakened by their internal divisions, which existed within the Batbie commission: “we were not agreed on the means to remedy the evil.” Plural voting was considered, some wishing to give additional votes to those married and with children, others to those whose capacity was proved by education and by direct taxation. The reason the commission rejected all these attempts to create a plural vote was that no one knew the effects of this innovation. Would marriage or fatherhood not perhaps increase rather than decrease the radicalism of the impoverished father with hungry children? And if property brought additional votes, it could not provide nearly enough votes to balance the unpropertied unless extra votes were given to those with such small amounts of property as to defeat the intention of seeing that the material interests of society were represented.\textsuperscript{358}

The Batbie commission also rejected the idea of indirect elections combined with universal suffrage, a pet project of French Legitimists. Indirect elections would give the advantage to the best-disciplined parties, rather than to those best in rational discussion. Since the liberals were never the best-disciplined of political groups, they could only lose by such an arrangement. Some members of the commission proposed to simply adopt the Prussian system, dividing the voters into three groups based on their tax-payment, combined with indirect election. Contrary to the Prussians, the French could see no rational purpose in a division into three rather than two groups, because “from the point of view of the representation of interests, there is no distinction to be made between large and medium property nor between medium and small.” The commission did more seriously consider some means of dividing the electorate into two groups. The leading proposal was a form of partly indirect election, in which half the electors would be chosen by universal suffrage, and the other half of the electors would consist of the highest taxpayers plus certain other “capacities, that is the chief office-holders and the leaders, . . . of the organizations of the liberal professions.” This proposal bore some resemblance to the Lette amendment that was defeated at Frankfurt in 1848, although its capacities were not based solely on property as Lette had suggested.\textsuperscript{359} It also bore some resemblance to the eventual form of election to the French Senate. It provoked considerable debate in the commission. The argument for it was the eminently liberal one that “it would give universal suffrage a head capable of directing it. The vote would not be taken away from anyone; but, rather than leaving the conduct of affairs to the multitude, it would be confided to those with capacity proven by their professions or presumed on the basis of their wealth, that is the class sufficiently independent and sufficiently enlightened to direct.”\textsuperscript{360}

But the commission feared strife between the two parts of the electoral body. Liberals had lost confidence in their ability to guide the masses, or rather that their guidance would be accepted. Liberalism had been devised
as a means of finding a new and rational form of political legitimacy through the language of political capacity. French liberals now feared that the language of capacity would be perceived as illegitimate, and thus that this system would be no better received than a census. This was a grave problem. What good was it to define political capacity if those who possessed it no longer possessed the capacity to lead? Didn’t that mean there was no longer any such thing as political capacity? To avoid this disaster the commission had to find criteria of capacity that would still be accepted as such. The commission chose to look for what it called “sufficient guaranties” elsewhere. As good liberals, they tried to position themselves in the center of the debate, saying to those who favored universal suffrage that the best means to preserve universal suffrage was to eliminate its flaws and make it rational, and to those who wanted to re-impose a census that throughout Europe there was an irresistible trend to reduce or eliminate property requirements for the vote, and that a low census would do no good.361

The commission found the guaranties it was looking for in raising the voting age to 25, and in returning to a lengthy residency requirement. While those born in the township where they voted would only have to show a residence of six months, those voting elsewhere would have to demonstrate three years’ residency, the requirement of the law of 1850 which had eliminated roughly 30 per cent of the adult male electorate, and over 60 per cent of the Paris electorate. Compared to 1850, however, the procedures for registering to vote were simplified. Nevertheless, those who did not pay direct property taxes would have to make a formal request to be registered, and in townships of over 2,000 population they would have to provide written proof of their residency.362 In the commission’s view, none of this contradicted the fundamental equality of all Frenchmen. It defined equality in a liberal sense as “real equality, which consists of giving everyone equal guaranties [against oppression] rather than leaving everyone equally exposed to the same oppression at the hands of everyone else.”363 The commission recognized that some worthy individuals would be deprived of the vote by its scheme, but what mattered was the general and not the particular. Faithful to the liberalism of the representation of interests, and having rejected all the variants based on the representation of individual intelligence, the committee was content to exclude some worthy individuals. By voting to limit the suffrage as the committee asked, the nation’s representatives would be the “organs of the real sovereign,” i.e. Reason.364

Actual debate on the proposed law was brief. The bill passed its first reading in the National Assembly on 5 June 1874, by a vote of 378–301. The numbers meant that the liberals of both the left-center (after a speech in favor of the law by Dufaure) and the right-center had united with the Legitimists and a few liberal republicans in favor of the law, against the Republicans and Bonapartists. Some notable liberals, however, voted against it: Duvergier de Hauranne, Léon de Maleville, Rémuusat, and Thiers. Casimir
Périer and Léon Say were absent or abstained. The rejection of the bill by Thiers and his closest followers was significant. The moment of reaction against universal suffrage was coming to an end, and the victory of one or two Bonapartists in by-elections was enough to put an end to the Assembly’s dithering over the suffrage law as well as over the possible restoration of the monarchy. Everyone wanted to avoid a restoration of the Empire. The liberal leadership traded universal suffrage to the republicans in return for a Senate elected by the local office-holders of France, where the large cities would be outvoted by the countryside. In addition, a quarter of the first Senate would be elected for life by the outgoing National Assembly, and chosen from among its members.

Thus the Senate represented a liberal remnant in the Constitution of 1875, based on a principle other than pure numbers and elected by something other than universal suffrage, even though its electors were themselves chosen by universal suffrage. Nevertheless, the abandonment of the election of the lower chamber to the democrats was the death-knell of French liberalism in political life. As Girard notes, French liberals had changed since 1830:

Long the adversaries of democracy, they had elaborated a complex form of government which sheltered them from the sovereignty of the masses as well as that of the ruler. But in the course of the century . . . [it had become] necessary to come to an arrangement with the rising democracy. Parliamentary democracy, a combination of terms which would have very much surprised the liberals of 1827, was born of a compromise between republicans and liberals. It is in this sense that 1875 was an ending . . .

Never again would a serious attempt be made to limit the suffrage in France. The Senate would live on, purged of its life-members by the constitutional revision of 1884 but otherwise as the Constitution of 1875 made it, until the end of the Third Republic in 1940. Half-hearted attempts to abolish the Senate gradually petered out as its majority became firmly republican. French liberalism itself was rapidly petering out as an independent force. Even in the early 1870s its strength was largely illusory, created by the accident of war and the enduring reputation of a number of aged politicians, notably Thiers. In Republican propaganda in rural districts in 1872–77, hardly any mention was made of Orleanism – the Orleanists had lost the countryside to illiberal Legitimists. After Rémusat’s defeat in Paris had demonstrated their urban weakness, what was left? In the new mass style of French politics in the 1870s, liberals had little success. After 1879 the liberals ceased to be a major force in the French lower house and they disappeared completely after the elections of 1885. In the Senate they remained strong until the elections of 1882, but by 1885 the liberals numbered only about 35 Senators.
The dissolution of French liberalism, the disintegration and collapse of the language of capacity in France is displayed in essays written by liberal Senator Edmond Schérer in 1883 and by the philosopher Alfred Fouillée in 1884. They represent two different kinds of response made by French liberals to the disappearance of the language of capacity from French politics. Schérer claimed that after 1877 he and other French liberals had accepted universal suffrage, but he refused to accept the identification of universal suffrage with the right of the lower classes to dominate politics. In fact, the more one reads his essay the more it becomes clear that Schérer did not really accept universal suffrage at all: “One cannot admit everyone to political participation without admitting a quantity of the incapable and the unworthy whose actions will hurt the nation.” As far as Schérer was concerned, the lower classes of France were “so backwards, so ignorant, so egotistical, often so corrupt,” that they could not be regarded as capable of government, or even the administration of their own material interests, as proved by the usual examples of the Imperial plebiscites and the Paris Commune (once more the threats from above and below). Under universal suffrage, all political programs had to be addressed to the masses “and what effect can political reason have on populations without culture”? Democracy was condemned to mediocrity and the rule of the half-educated. It had nothing to do with liberalism: “Freedom supposes inequality, for freedom consists of letting natural forces develop with the fewest hindrances possible, in order that they may give all that they contain. The essence of democracy, on the contrary, is equality and, in consequence, the depression of everything which tends to rise above average.” Schérer rejected pessimism, but offered little grounds for hope for the present. For the future he could only appeal to the tendency towards increasing division of labor, which might lead people to recognize differences of capacity, and make inequality respectable again.

Schérer’s despair about politics and his appeal to specialized professional competence as the salvation of the discourse of capacity had implications for the twenty-first-century history of that discourse, which will be discussed in the Concluding Note, but for his time he accepted the disappearance of liberalism. Alfred Fouillée attempted to maintain a quasi-political liberalism in the present. His essay was entitled “The Philosophy of Universal Suffrage,” and it appeared in the Revue des Deux Mondes as a review of, among others, the German liberal Bluntschli’s Politics and the English liberal Spencer’s Political Essays. It maintained a typically liberal elitism, attributing progress to the victory of those truly superior, which resulted in inequality, and seeing in unequal capacity a potential contradiction with the democratic spirit of equality. Fouillée favored this elite: “progressive politics” was based on assuring the free rise of those truly superior. So far Guizot would have been in full agreement, as he would have been with many of the terms in which Fouillée stated the resulting political dilemma: “How to allow everyone to
share in the social power [i.e., vote] without allowing in a quantity of inca-

cpable and unworthy people whose actions will effect the social body. . . . All

the contradictions go back to the fundamental antinomy between the right
to vote, given to all, and capacity, which really only belongs to a certain
number.”

But from here on Fouillée fundamentally broke with liberalism, in terms
decisive in their rejection of the idea of capacity as a means by which to
determine political participation.

We do not possess a criterion for recognizing ‘the bad and the incapable’
as we do for the crippled, the lame, the leprous; that is why it is incor-
crect to consider universal suffrage as misguided philanthropy . . . . even
education is not a sufficient criterion of political capacity; as we will
shortly show, education is found to coincide with leisure or wealth, and
the privilege attributed to education becomes a privilege attributed to
money. . . .

Limited suffrage, based on our acquired experience, has shown the
same flaws as that of the greatest number.

One of liberalism’s slogans had always been that heads ought to be
weighed, not counted. Fouillée reversed this and so demonstrated the col-
lapse of liberalism: “Unable to weigh heads, we’d better count them.”
There were no criteria of capacity to be found. Fouillée could only appeal for univer-
sal education. However, in his eyes a little education, e.g., literacy and
arithmetic, were no good at all. Factory-workers were better educated than
peasants, but they were more likely to be criminals and more likely to be
socialists. Fouillée dreamed of a national civics test for voters with questions
like “Who makes our laws?” “Name the four largest cities in France?”, but
not very seriously. By the end of his article he effectively despaired of mass
education too. His final plea was not to educate the masses, but to train the
upper classes in political science and economics. “If universal suffrage sup-
poses, below, men capable of choosing, it supposes above all, on top, men
worthy of being chosen.” Thus he renounced political power among the
masses who determined elections, and contented himself with an educa-
tional influence on a small part of society. French liberalism had “become
an influence, not a power.” The language of capacity had become impossible
for Fouillée, and irrelevant to French political life in an age of mass
politics. As a political power, French liberalism was finished.

Some historians look at French liberalism after the end of attempts to limit
the suffrage another way. Hudemann admits the defeat of the old Orleanist
liberalism but argues that the Opportunists, the republican party of
Gambetta and of Ferry, were the new incarnation of French liberalism. Furet
saw Jules Ferry as the democratized version of Guizot. The question is to
what extent the Opportunists really were democrats, and thus to what extent
the Third Republic, at least down to the 1890s when the Opportunists began
to give way to the Radicals, was really a democratic regime. Indeed, Agulhon
goes so far as to distinguish what he describes as an “orleanist” current in
French political life that runs from the Méline government of 1893 down to
the Catholic “ralliés” of the turn of the century and even to Giscard
d’Estaing, president of France in the 1970s! This current would be defined
by its allegiance to civil rights on the one hand and its social conservatism
and distrust of the lower classes on the other. It would also be defined by
attempts to use the educational system to reconstruct a new hierarchy of
capacities, a new elite capable of providing political and social leadership.
Jaume suggests that hierarchy plus democracy was the French Republican
synthesis. Certainly elitist visions of secondary education flourished in the
Third Republic. At the least this would suggest that alongside its commit-
tment to civil rights, liberalism had succeeded in transmitting its spirit of
hierarchy to some aspects of politically egalitarian democracy (see the
Concluding Note).

But this argument cannot dispute the permanent establishment of
universal suffrage in France, and the end of the liberal effort to separate
politics and civil rights. Liberalism in the nineteenth century was not the
same as simple social conservatism and the defense of private property – to
adopt this view, as Agulhon does, and to some extent Rosanvallon, is to
simply accept the nineteenth-century socialist critique of liberalism while
ignoring its own viewpoint. Despite historians’ reluctance to acknowledge
discontinuity, what happened in France and Europe after 1885 was some-
thing else, not the continuation of liberalism. It is indeed, as Hazareesingh
admits, a “considerable overstatement” to claim the Third Republic as a
liberal victory. The reality behind the comments of Hudemann and
Rosanvallon is that a modernized conservatism developed in the late nine-
teenth century, in France and elsewhere, not that liberalism survived or
even retained its hegemony. Both liberals and their opponents recognized
that French politics after 1875 had left liberalism behind, and the word
rapidly ceased to represent a particular political viewpoint and instead
became either a synonym for proponents of civil liberties or, more com-
monly, of an economic position, as will be discussed in Chapters 4–5. Parties
to the right and left of liberalism inherited fragments of its attitudes and
supporters.

Liberalism was finished as a political discourse in France. The question is
whether the discourse of capacity did not find new fields in which to flour-
ish, as Schérer suggested it would in an increasingly specialized society. This
question will be examined in the Concluding Note. But if liberalism was fin-
ished as a political discourse in France by 1875, it seemingly won yet another
success in England ten years later. Why was English liberalism able to main-
tain its hegemony when French liberalism was only a memory in electoral
politics?
English liberalism and suffrage reform, 1866–85

In 1867 the Second Reform Act raised the number of voters in England from 15–20 per cent of the adult male population to 35–40 per cent. It thus continued to exclude the majority of males from the vote. The Third Reform Act, Gladstone’s first successful effort at suffrage reform after many failures, was passed in 1884. It raised the voting population to about 60 per cent of adult males. Thus between 1866 and 1884 the proportion of the male population registered to vote tripled or more. The dominant note of political life moved well down the social scale. In the course of less than 20 years England moved from a nineteenth-century liberal electoral system dominated in most places by a relatively small group of local notables, to a democratic one in which most districts numbered tens of thousands of voters.

The evolution of the British electoral system was accompanied by an evolution of the rhetoric of capacity. Liberalism remained the dominant political language in England right until the very end of the period covered in this chapter. Only in the debates over the Third Reform Act of 1884 did it begin to lose its grip, and even then it was capable of maintaining a presence in English political life, albeit a diminishing one. How did English liberalism succeed where French liberalism failed? The 1866–67 suffrage debates show the ability of English liberals to renew the language of capacity in ways adapted to their contemporary situation. Unlike French liberals, English liberals were still the dominant political force in the late 1860s, and their language showed both a flexibility and a coherence of which French liberals were no longer capable.

The process of adaptation was by no means easy for English liberals. In 1866 the failure of suffrage reform brought down the Liberal government led by Gladstone, and in 1867 the Second Reform Act was the great triumph of the Conservative government led by Disraeli. Nevertheless, the results, if not Disraeli’s authorship, were largely satisfactory to liberals. The debates of 1866 are the most revealing for a study concerned more with liberalism than with the passage of the Second Reform Act. In 1866 liberals were largely debating with themselves, attempting to hold together their majority in the face of united Conservative opposition. The 1867 debate was skewed by the fact that liberals were debating a Conservative proposal and under tactical imperatives that constrained them differently. The discussion that follows, while not ignoring the liberal contribution to the 1867 debate, concentrates its attention on Gladstone’s 1866 Bill and the liberal reaction to it. It was certainly the 1866 debates that most interested the country. They gave rise to Robert Lowe’s famous speeches against reform, and saw the formation of the “Cave of Adullam,” a coalition of right-liberals that eventually sank the Bill.

The majority of liberals supported suffrage reform in 1866 but were unable to agree on the details. What they did agree on was a return to the language
of social representation that had appeared to be in retreat in 1852–60. Gladstone’s 1866 Bill contained several different reforms of voting qualifications, among them elements taken from Russell’s reform bills of 1852 and 1854. Only the provisions most numerically important are noted in what follows. In the counties, that is the relatively rural districts, an additional franchise was to be created, giving the vote to anyone who occupied a house or house with land of a value of £14. This would have added, according to Gladstone, 172,000 county voters. Gladstone did not expect there to be any considerable opposition to this. It was “a middle-class enfranchisement.” A new franchise would also be created for all those who had had deposits of at least £50 in a savings bank for at least two years. Gladstone estimated that there were 87,000 such people in England and Wales, many of whom already had the vote, and many of whom would not go to the trouble of making an annual claim to be registered, so that he thought that no more than 10–15,000 new voters at most would really be added by this criterion, mostly in the counties rather than the towns. This too was thought to be mostly a middle-class franchise.383

Thus Gladstone proposed a middle-class suffrage extension in the counties, where it might be expected to offset, to a certain degree, the influence of the landed gentry. In the boroughs, on the other hand, the suffrage extensions of 1866 were directed mainly towards the lower classes. There were two major changes. One was to include lodgers, that is renters, who paid at least £10/year. This too was considered mostly, although not entirely, a measure to benefit the middle class. Only in London would a few working-class men have been able to afford that rent. Gladstone estimated at 60,000 the number of people who would benefit from this measure. The larger measure of borough reform he proposed was the replacement of the £10 householder franchise by a £7 rental franchise. This would add roughly 144,000 voters to the borough constituencies, nearly all of whom, in Gladstone’s view, would be members of the working class. Since the present number of borough voters was about 488,000 persons, the proposed addition of 144,000 working-class voters meant a considerable although not overwhelming change in both the size and social composition of the constituencies: “It alters greatly in towns the balance as between the working class, . . . and the classes above them; and yet it does not give the absolute majority in the town constituencies to the working classes.”384

The net result of all these changes would be an increase in the electorate of 400,000, to roughly 25 per cent of the adult male inhabitants.385 Gladstone’s proposal was by French standards extremely narrow. No French liberal in the 1860s or 1870s could have dreamed of excluding three-quarters of the adult male population from the vote. The overwhelming strength of English liberalism is clear from what it was politically possible to propose in 1866.

In England the language of capacity retained a resonance it had already lost in France. The language of rights still had not made any considerable
impression on English parliamentary rhetoric. As Layard, famed for his discovery of the ruins of Nineveh, and now Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the Gladstone Government, noted “where is now the Charter with its six points of which we used to hear so much? We hear no more of it now.” The reason for this change was the reforming tradition of English liberalism. Layard was pointing to one of the important differences between English liberalism and its Continental cousins: a far greater social inclusiveness in language and attitude, however limited it was in practice. British liberals realized that openness to reform was the key to stability, and since the late 1850s they had recognized that the reform that mattered was a reform that would reach out to the lower classes as well.

Integrating the lower classes into society and hence into politics, as Gladstone pointed out, had been the purpose of liberal government in England for the past 30 years: “Parliament has been striving to make the working classes progressively fitter and fitter for the franchise, can anything be more unwise... than to refuse to recognize its legitimate upshot – namely, the increased fitness of the working classes for the exercise of political power?” The working class had improved themselves, they would provide a useful new viewpoint (utilitarian justifications for working-class political participation were not absent from liberal rhetoric), their elite at least was fit and capable of voting. Baxter pointed to the “unprecedented strides in intelligence, and in everything, in fact, which fitted them for the due exercise of the elective franchise” made by the working classes. As Gladstone responded to those like Robert Lowe who suggested that the suffrage should be left well enough alone since the country was well-governed: “No one can seriously deny that, if a considerable extension of the suffrage can be made safely, it is a positive good in itself, as tending to increase confidence and sympathy between the different classes of the community.”

The problem for British liberals was not whether more of the working class should be given the vote, it was a question of how many, and with what effect. One handicap from which all participants in the debate suffered was ignorance. No one knew how many working-class people already had the vote, and no one knew how many would really be enfranchised by any particular measure. Gladstone suggested that at least 20 per cent of the borough electorate was already working-class in 1866. He contrasted this with an estimate that before 1832, 32 per cent of the borough electorate had been working-class, and thus justified increasing their share of political representation. This was in many ways an irrelevant comparison, since the pre-1832 lower-class voters had been concentrated in a handful of boroughs and their electoral influence was thus much less powerful than the 32 per cent figure would suggest (although working-class voters in 1866 were also relatively concentrated geographically). Gladstone himself admitted he found his own figures for contemporary working-class voters surprisingly high, and they were contradicted by many MPs. Bright claimed that rather than the 20 per
cent claimed by Gladstone, no more than 8–12 per cent of the borough electorate was actually working-class in 1866, and that the proposed Reform would bring that number up to no more than 25 per cent. Arthur Peel cited the example of the borough of Warwick. In 1831, before the First Reform Act, Warwick had a population of 9,000, and 1,300 voters under its relatively broad local suffrage. In 1866, the population was 10,000, but the number of voters had actually declined to 760 as the old grandfathered lower-class voters died or moved. Hodgkinson cited the even more striking example of the borough of Newark, where in 1832 there were 1,700 voters, and in 1866 only 711.389

No liberal wanted to see the lower classes dominate Parliament. Gladstone, attempting to reassure the Commons, argued that the working class would not vote as a bloc. Not hoping to convince with this argument alone, he estimated that, after the Bill was passed, the working classes would be a majority of the voters for 101 MPs (out of 654), whereas before 1832 they had been a majority for 130 MPs. For many liberals, this was too much. For Earl Grosvenor, a liberal MP of long standing, the effect of the Bill would be to give “a preponderance of political power to the working classes.” Bulwer-Lytton, a former liberal who had switched to the Conservative Party in the House of Commons but still used liberal language, thought that a little working-class political participation was a good stimulant, but that too much, as envisaged under the Bill, would bring disaster. J. S. Mill tried to comfort people like Grosvenor and Bulwer-Lytton by suggesting that even if 200 MPs had working-class majorities among their constituents, “there would not be fifty of that number who would represent the distinctive feelings and opinions of working men, or would be, in any class sense, their representatives,” due to other influences on their votes. Therefore it was not working-class predominance that was at issue, but assuring the lower classes “sufficient representation to ensure that their opinions are fairly placed before the House.”390

It might seem from this that the 1866 Reform Bill ought to have passed by acclamation, at least from within liberal ranks. But a sufficient majority of liberals could not be brought to agree that Gladstone’s Reform Bill achieved its purpose. One reason was the famous speeches of Robert Lowe. Lowe was the leading spirit of the so-called “cave of Adullam,” formed by MPs on the right wing of the liberal party to oppose the Bill. It was not a large group, perhaps 25–30 MPs in all, but it was enough to sink the Bill. Lowe himself was an orthodox Benthamite and doctrinaire Free-Trader who had always been part of the liberal party. But his choice of rhetoric in 1866 revealed that with regard to the political issues central to liberalism rather than the economic ones peripheral to it, he was no liberal at all. The fact that Lowe’s illiberal rhetoric could appeal to a significant minority of liberals was an ominous warning for a future in which the liberal political fusion would dissolve into conservatives and Labor Party social democrats.
In debate Lowe departed from the general desire of English liberals to include a competent fraction of the working classes in the suffrage. He trumpeted his contempt for the lower classes. He did so because he did not think the lower classes capable. In this of course he was making a perfectly liberal point, in language reminiscent of Guizot or Thiers. Indeed, in many respects Lowe's rhetoric bore more resemblance to someone on the right-wing of French liberalism than to the usual language of English liberalism.

What separated Lowe from liberalism was not his rejection of the Bill or his dislike of his socio-economic inferiors. It was his attitude towards political participation. He rejected the idea that political participation was a good thing in itself. If there was nothing wrong with the way the existing House of Commons governed the country, than nothing ought to be done to change it, i.e. to broaden the suffrage. He thus rejected the idea that liberty was good not just in its fruits, but in itself; that was the basis for the liberal rejection of despotism, even Enlightened despotism. Lowe was in many things a reformer, but in the final analysis not a liberal.

The argument that Lowe had departed from liberalism was made at the time in Layard's reply to Lowe, a speech unfortunately not so well known as Lowe's. Layard said that for Lowe:

The end of all government is the well-being and good administration of the State, if that end is accomplished we have nothing to do with the means by which it is attained. This is an argument which may suit other countries, but which will never be admitted in this land of ours. Whether the English people are theoretically right or wrong, they have made up their minds to one thing before all others – that whether they be well or ill-governed they will govern themselves; and that they prefer self-government, even should that government prove in many cases faulty and defective, to being governed by those who do not represent them. The argument of the right honorable Gentleman may suit very well those countries in which despotism doles out liberty with a sparing and grudging hand; but he will quote Aristotle and Montesquieu in vain to the people of England . . .

One of the chief supports of the liberal argument for inclusion of the working classes relied not merely on the capacity of the lower classes – Layard argued for that elsewhere in his speech – but on the desirability of political participation in itself. Lowe's complete disinterest in doing anything to integrate the lower classes into political participation separated him from the vast body of English liberal discourse in 1866.

But if most liberals differed from Lowe in their desire to include the lower classes, they agreed with him in their fear of lower-class hegemony. Vincent has noted the importance of preserving middle-class electoral domination for the reformers of 1866–67. Certainly this was the thought behind much
of the talk of avoiding the predominance of the working class, even if it was put in terms of avoiding the domination of any class. The claims to predominance of the middle class were not often mentioned in 1866, yet Gladstone’s Bill enfranchised as many members of the middle class as it did those below. Mill mentioned in passing that the Bill would only weaken the domination of the middle class, rather than give hegemony to the working classes. But in general the role of the middle classes remained unstated, implicit.392

The desire to preserve middle-class hegemony, and also to reject language based on individual rather than social representation, can be seen in the way liberals dealt with the relationship between capacity and education in 1866. Vincent has argued there was a shift in emphasis in the 1860s away from the right of property to govern and towards the right of education (often recognized through property-ownership) to govern. This is confirmed by the Parliamentary suffrage debates of the 1850s and early 1860s discussed in the last chapter. But in fact Parliamentary support for a franchise based directly on education was very thin, a loud minority, particularly when education was defined in anything approaching academic terms. Nonconformist Radicals did not like suffrages based on university degrees, and often tried to abolish the Parliamentary seats held by Oxford and Cambridge, because the university electorate was still dominated by Tory Anglican clergy. As shall be seen below, a suffrage based on more elementary educational qualifications, for example the ability to read, write, add and subtract, did not find much more favor.

Yet the inclusion of the lower classes in the electorate was often defended on the grounds of their increased education as a group, if not as individuals. Baxter talked of their “unprecedented strides in intelligence” since 1832. Sir George Grey spoke about “all that has been done by Parliament, to promote their education; and when I speak of education, I refer not only to that education which is acquired by children in the schools, but to that self-education, that self-improvement in after life, through those means which have been placed within the reach of the working classes, and of which they have so largely availed themselves.” Thus for F. Leveson Gower “those to whom they proposed to give [the vote] were equal in intelligence, and conduct, and political knowledge, to those who were £10 householders at the time of the Reform Bill.”393

What this rhetoric really meant was, the vote was not based on the argument “that the amount of rent which a man paid constituted his qualification to vote, whereas that was not the real qualification itself, but the test of another qualification. A rental qualification was fixed for the purpose of obtaining a constituency which might be supposed to possess the benefits of education, and the intelligence which accompanied education.” Its purpose was thus the same which might be achieved by a direct educational test.394 It might seem logical then that a direct educational test would find
favor. But such was not the case, at least not with the majority of liberals. Property, a tangible stake in the community in the form of an independent household, was the preferred criterion of political capacity and even of education. Bourgeois status as represented by both a house and the vote might not rest purely on wealth, but could not be totally divorced from wealth, either.

Yet 1866 saw the great test of an educational franchise, perhaps the only time that it was ever seriously proposed as potentially the most important qualification for suffrage by European liberals. The education-based adjuncts, both actual and proposed, of the French July Monarchy would never have amounted to more than 10 per cent of the electorate. Only in England in 1866 did “Clay’s Bill” represent a real attempt by liberals to define capacity predominantly in educational terms. Its failure is significant.

Clay’s Bill was the creation of two liberals of very different stripe, Clay and Gregory. How different they were is indicated by the fact that Clay, a Radical, eventually voted in favor of the 1866 Reform Bill while Gregory, a Whig, voted against it. But both joined in proposing a new kind of suffrage qualification. It was introduced before the government’s own Bill, and was conceived as a preemptive strike against the rumors that Gladstone was planning to lower the borough suffrage qualification. It was taken seriously enough for considerable debate, and attracted the fire of the Liberal leadership, led by Gladstone himself.

Clay’s Bill provided that anyone who did not have a vote under the 1832 Act could take an examination which if passed would entitle him to a vote as long as he could show six months’ residence in one place. One would have to be 21 years old to take the test, although Clay stated his willingness to accept an alternate age of 25. The examination would be in writing and spelling, tested by a dictation given by the examiner, and in mathematics: addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, with the proviso that division would include money (this being before the introduction of the decimal system in England), but not weights and measures. He warned that any attempt to raise the educational standard he set, by including, for example, fractions, or history, would result in excluding the working classes entirely. Clay assured the House that it would not be very expensive to perform these examinations, and that in any case the examinees would pay for it themselves – he proposed to charge a one shilling fee to take the exam, and another one shilling and sixpence to receive one’s certificate if one passed. Clay estimated that those enfranchised by this measure would include 24,000 members of the liberal professions, 60,000 commercial clerks, and a large number of retail shop assistants, all of whom he considered to be above the working class. “But there is yet another class, who already possess the knowledge which my Bill requires – I mean the most educated of the working men.” Clay admitted that “the bulk of the working class” could not pass this test. But he thought that if they were willing to sacrifice
all their leisure for several months, they could, which meant that this test would be not merely a test of education, but “something much better – a test – in this case a perfect test – of honest earnestness.” “When he [the working-class voter] shall have done this I shall trust him freely, not for his little smattering of learning, but for his earnestness; for I am fully convinced that the best guarantee we can have that a man will be a sensible and trustworthy voter is his own anxious desire to have a vote.”

Clay noted that any property line that might be drawn for the franchise would be subject in time to demands that it ought to be lowered, but that no one would have a reasonable complaint about being excluded from the vote after his Bill. He considered two possible objections to his Bill, that it applied only to the boroughs, and not to the counties, and that he did not require everyone to take his test, including those who now had the vote. His response was that what he proposed was the limit of the politically possible, and that what he wished to do was not abolish the property qualification, but create one based on intelligence to set beside it: “Under our present system we do not require property to be intelligent. I shall not ask intelligence to be rich.” Clay recognized that his proposal might eventually mean universal suffrage, when education had progressed enough to allow everyone to pass the exam, but as a good liberal he welcomed this distant prospect, and argued it would take longer than what would happen if they just went on lowering the property qualifications every few years.

Clay's speech was followed by one by Gregory, in which he paid tribute to his colleague's unquestioned standing as a member of “what I may call the advanced ranks of the Liberal party,” that is, not a moderate Whig like himself. Gregory used the typical Whig emphasis on property and education in supporting the Bill. Gregory supported Clay's Bill because it would give England an electoral system in which all voters had been shown to have “that interest in the institutions of the country which is derived from property, or that they should bear with them that interest which prima facie men of education and men of intelligence in the mass may be presumed to take in all questions . . .”. Gregory too did not shrink from the consequence that this would eventually bring about universal suffrage: “even if it should come to universal suffrage, all I can say is, ‘so be it.’ All I can say is, if you do come to universal suffrage by this Bill you will have taken the danger out of it, because universal suffrage will then be divided amongst an educated and reflecting body who have been long in training in a course of political education.” Or as he more vividly put it: “I had much rather be drowned in a butt of malmsey than in a barrel of swipes.”

Clay's Bill was dangerous to the Gladstone government because it threatened to unite its opponents, both liberal and conservative, behind a reasonable alternative that would enable MPs to go before their constituents claiming to have voted for a Reform that was potentially even more broad than Gladstone's own. The danger was signaled by the reaction of Lord
Elcho, one of the future leaders of the “Adullamites”, the faction of right-liberals whose votes eventually brought Gladstone’s Reform Bill and his government down. Lord Elcho didn’t like Clay’s Bill. He thought it was novel and pedantic, two qualities not, in his view, proper to be embodied in legislation. He thought it ignored property and replaced the representation of classes by the representation of mere individuals. But he warned that he would vote for it in preference to a Bill that would lower the suffrage to £6 in the boroughs, as the Gladstone Government was rumored to be preparing. The Ministers refused all calls on them to respond (doubtless at least in part to conceal their own ideas until they were ready to reveal them), and held their fire until Clay’s Bill came up for its second reading on 30 May 1866. Then they buried it.

Gladstone opened the attack. He was not opposed to an educational test in principle, provided it was applied to everyone and not just to some, but he denied that any direct educational test would ever be practical. Even if it was practical, to accept an educational test would be to proceed “upon the principle of universal suffrage,” for within a generation or two everyone in England would be able to pass it, as they could now in America or Prussia. “The principle of the Bill . . . is as much too wide as the practical operation of the Bill is too narrow.” Attacking Clay’s Bill as too democratic, Gladstone also attacked it as too restrictive. Almost no one from the working classes would be admitted to the vote under Clay’s Bill, because division of money, required in Clay’s test, was such a specialized skill that half the present MPs could not do it, let alone workers. Furthermore, the various bureaucratic procedures and loss of time in applying for the test and taking it, and so on, would ensure that no one would actually take it. Even if some working-class men did take the test, and pass it, rather than admitting the best of the working classes to the franchise, Clay’s Bill would admit some of the worst. It would privilege young men just out of school, rather than established artisans and heads of families: “The labouring classes should be considered not in respect to their scholastic knowledge, but with reference to their habits of life, their settled character, and as fathers of families.” And the whole idea of a test to be applied to some voters but not all was fundamentally unfair. Indeed, the 1832 Act showed that a test was unnecessary. No one suggested that the present voters were unfit, and they had not had to pass a test, so why should others be required to?

The themes sounded by Gladstone were repeated in the speeches other liberals gave against Clay’s Bill. It was too radical and not radical enough. Thus Goschen seconded his leader: “No one has contradicted the statement of the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the principle of the Bill is universal suffrage, while it is quite possible that its practical operation may be to admit to the franchise very few of the working classes.” But it was Bright who, individualist in language though he was, gave the most forceful speech against the idea of educational tests. After attacking the novelty
of the idea, he attacked its principle directly. Abstract education was useless: “What is the object of education, except it be directed to a special question or a special purpose?” He imagined Mill and Gladstone trying to fix a piece of machinery in his factory, and the probable result. Abstract education was equally useless in politics. Being a householder, of whatever value house, was a far better test of character, morals, and overall of practical intelligence and education – “the house is the real test for what you wish to ascertain when you propose to make an extension of the franchise.”

Thus the bulk of English liberals continued to define capacity in terms of property and social situation, in terms of social groups and interests, rather than of individuals or education. If they used the term “education” positively as so many, even Bright, did, speaking of the increased “education and intelligence” of the working classes, they did not understand education in academic terms, but in respect to an overall situation in life and relationship to society. Most liberals used “education” as a moral term, rather than as a reference to abstract intellectual abilities, whether represented by literacy or by a university diploma. The householder, by his ability to maintain a household of a certain standing expressed by the value of his house, was presumptively proving his moral ability to participate in politics by showing his ability and desire to maintain a certain standing in the community.

One thing the 1866 debate over suffrage reform made clear was that the individualist language of the parliamentary debates of the preceding decade was in fact the talk of a minority. It was not lower-class individuals that most MPs cared about, it was the interest of an unrepresented social group. There was some talk about individuals in 1866. Bright continued to contend despite all the evidence to the contrary “that there never was in the Constitution of this country such a thing as representation of classes. ... We should have been called the House of Classes, or something equally absurd, if anything so absurd as such a representation had taken place.” Milner Gibson argued that “We enfranchise men, not classes.” Mill condemned what he called “the class theory of representation,” but felt constrained to use its rhetoric to appeal to the House of Commons on behalf of the lower-class individuals he wanted to enfranchise: “We demand that they be represented as a class, if represented they cannot be as human beings.”

But this was not the talk of the majority of the Liberal party, much less of Conservatives (Mill noted that the class theory of representation was universal in the Conservative Party, and some liberals were to be found there by 1866). To briefly make use of the 1867 debates, in 1867 Gladstone took care to state explicitly that the idea of personal representation was strictly Mill’s own. He, Gladstone, believed in the representation of communities, that is of collective social interests. In 1866, for Baines, Radical and Dissenter though he was, “the mere fact of personal fitness was not sufficient to warrant the admission of large numbers of voters to the franchise. But he was prepared to defend the measure . . . on both grounds – namely,
Thus the individual voter must be fit to represent a class which deserves representation. Giving votes on “merely personal qualifications,” as the Attorney General astutely perceived, could only lead to universal suffrage in the end.403

In this linguistic atmosphere it was no surprise that Clay’s Bill did not pass its second reading. But its failure did not distinguish it from Gladstone’s own Reform Bill. When the latter received a majority of only five votes on its second reading, the Government knew the game was up and resigned, leaving the problem of suffrage reform to the Conservatives. The surprise was that Disraeli passed the 1867 Reform Act. That a Conservative Government, with a minority in the House of Commons, could settle a crucial issue that a Liberal Government with a majority could not, did not augur well for the long-term future of liberalism. But in its immediate results the 1867 Reform Act was a triumph for British liberalism.

The 1867 debates will be touched on here only briefly. They were rhetorically similar to the debates of 1866, at least on the liberal side. Disraeli’s proposals themselves were mostly liberal. Like Gladstone, he proposed to widen the borough franchise very considerably, and the County franchise to a lesser extent. Disraeli’s original proposals for the borough franchise bore a strong resemblance to the French suffrage law of 1850. As in France, residence rather than property seemed a less invidious and equally effective criterion of political capacity. Thus Disraeli proposed to give the vote to anyone who had two years’ residence in a house and directly paid the poor-tax on it himself.404 This would immediately qualify 237,000 voters. There was a complicated problem about those who paid poor-taxes indirectly, through their landlord. Without going into the details that bogged down Parliament for days on end, Disraeli estimated that there were another 486,000 of these people who met the two years’ residence requirement, and some unknown number of them would also get the vote through procedures he proposed. In the counties the vote should go to anyone who occupied land valued at £15 for tax purposes, which would qualify another 171,000 householders.

In addition to these franchises, Disraeli proposed a number of new ones to be valid in both county and borough: anyone who paid 20 shillings/year in direct taxes (chiefly Income Tax, 350,000 new voters), anyone who owned £50 of government bonds (50,000 voters) or had £50 in a savings bank (85,000 voters) or had a university degree (79,000 voters). In all 1,300,000 new voters, of whom were 1,000,000 in the boroughs and 300,000 in the counties. By comparison Disraeli nearly tripled Gladstone’s proposed suffrage extension of 400,000. This is what made it a “leap in the dark,” as he notoriously described it.405

Liberal tactics involved eliminating plural voting and the fancy franchises, which were geared towards increasing the middle-class suffrage in ways cal-
culated to help the Tories. They outbid the Tories towards the working class by amending the Act to lower the residence requirement to one year (18–24 months in practice). They also included a lodger franchise. Lodgers (those who rented rooms in someone else’s house) who rented rooms valued at £10/year unfurnished were given the vote. This was chiefly intended for the use of the professional middle class, considered likely to vote Liberal, but the lodger franchise was so complicated that in practice it was relatively little used outside London. In the counties the liberals reduced the proposed property requirement from £15 to £12. Even as broadened by the Liberals, fewer new voters were created by the law than Disraeli had estimated. Still, over 900,000 new voters were added to the rolls, about 700,000 of them in the boroughs.

The language in which the Second Reform Act was discussed continued to be the language of capacity. Indeed Gladstone, attacking Disraeli’s proposals, declared that by abandoning a property qualification for householders, it adopted the principle of “universal fitness,” from which he dissented. He wanted to make sure that in extending the franchise, “you should not proceed so fast as to outrun the competence and disregard the condition of the people.” Liberals continued to deny the idea that there was a right to vote: “We are told that men have a right to the suffrage. I deny the principle,” said Roebuck. Indeed, as Gregory pointed out, there was no one in Parliament who wished to argue the case for a right to vote. Joseph Hume was dead, and astonishingly there was no other democrat in the House of Commons to take his place.406

This was balanced by a continued liberal emphasis on the need to integrate the working classes. The rhetoric of 1866 was again employed, this time in defense of a more radical measure, but one which now attracted enough Conservative votes to pass. Not that some liberals did not regret the failure of the 1866 Bill. Bright himself did:

If you had accepted the Bill of the late Government, what has been done now would have been done by two steps instead of one. Two steps that might have extended over twenty years. When you came to the second step, you would have found the population more intelligent and more instructed than now. I am not certain – with the Conservative sentiments which I have never concealed – that in view of the future good government of the country it might not have been better that we had taken those two steps.407

Some liberals never accepted the Reform of 1867 (e.g. Walter Bagehot), and others who had once supported it later changed their minds (Goschen).408 Still, with the Reform Act of 1867 English liberals accomplished one of the basic objectives of Clay’s Bill – to eliminate any visible target for those who rejected property as a condition of voting and measure of capacity. The easy target of £10 was removed while much of its exclusive effect was retained.
As Muhs notes, the English Reform Acts should be seen not only as a strategy of inclusion but also as a successful strategy of exclusion. They managed to exclude much of the lower classes while retaining a remarkable degree of support for liberalism among them. English liberals were undoubtedly favored by circumstances, unlike French liberals in 1850. When the French modified the universal suffrage of 1848 by a residency requirement, they were seen as drastically limiting the suffrage. English liberals could adopt household suffrage in 1867 in the boroughs alone, continue to exclude more than half of all adult males from the vote, and still be considered progressives. This difference in perception helped English liberalism survive when French liberalism could not. English liberals continued to dominate the working-class vote well after German liberals too had lost it to the Social Democrats (French liberals had never had it).

It was not only circumstance which accounted for the differences. The rhetoric of English liberalism, its willingness to recognize the claims of the working classes as valid, played a part. There was all the difference in the world between the impression made by Thiers' assault on the “vile multitude” and Bright’s desire to exclude “the residuum . . . of hopeless poverty and dependence.” No English liberal would have refused the request of workers to join a liberal organization at a lower dues-rate, as Schulze-Delitzsch did in Germany. Historians of Germany have made much of the way in which the German socialists, the SDP, created an “alternative culture” for German workers, reaching beyond politics to leisure activities, commerce, education, etc. This kind of “party of social integration” has been contrasted with liberal parties, which were “parties of individual representation”, parties of notables with weak links to their members limited largely to politics. But in England, especially after 1867, both Liberals and Conservatives became integrative parties who organized local clubs that offered burial funds, sick funds, billiards, educational lectures, and so on. These efforts had multiple purposes. Besides the obvious goal of encouraging workers to identify as liberal or conservative, they were deliberately intended to increase their “fitness”, their political capacity, whether they had the vote or not, and in so doing “to prevent the lower classes combining with the rough class, and governing those above”, perhaps through revolution. Through efforts like these, English liberals were able to maintain much of their hold on the lower-class vote.

The Second Reform Act was a triumph for English liberalism, as the electoral success of English liberals in 1868–84 confirms. But success came at a price. The Second Reform Act changed English politics. More and more elections were contested. With so many more contests, and voters, party organization became more important, and the popular appeal of the leader, pre-eminently of Gladstone, became more important as well. In 1872, there were still 27 English boroughs with electorates under 1,000, and 77 under 2,000. In 1881, half the MPs in Parliament had an average electorate of 1,311
voters. But if notable politics continued in places, the total borough electorate had increased from 500,000 to 1,250,000 by 1871, and a new era of mass politics had arrived in England’s leading cities and opinion centers. Goschen described the effects: “there has been a change – a change for good or evil; but let me hope it is for good – in the attitude of all parties since 1867... Since the Reform Bill of 1867 democracy has been making great strides on both sides of the House – a triumph which honorable Members below the Gangway on this side of the House joyfully admit, and which Conservatives cannot deny.”

If the process of democratization and mass politics began in 1867, it took off after 1884–85. “As in so many other respects, the mid-1880s seem to have marked a turning point in British parliamentary politics.”

The Third Reform Act of 1884 continued to exclude 40 per cent or more of English men from the suffrage – about 12 per cent directly, and the rest through the difficulties of registration. The fact that in 1914 England had one of the least democratic national suffrages in Europe is proof of the relative success of English liberalism. The Third Reform Act also added 1.7 million voters to the rolls, an increase of 67 per cent, and eliminated the many small constituencies that had survived the 1867 Act. This struck English liberalism a severe blow. In these two facts, continued restriction and massive expansion, lies the ambivalent character of the Third Reform Act. It was the Indian Summer of English liberalism.

The Reform Act of 1884 was mainly concerned with the county suffrage. Its basic principle was to extend the suffrage in the counties on the same principle of household suffrage which had already been applied in the boroughs. In the counties the Bill gave the vote to anyone who owned or rented land worth £10/year, as well as anyone who qualified for suffrage under the rules applied to boroughs, that is chiefly to all householders with one year’s residence. This change, seemingly a small extension based on making the rules the same for everyone, was in fact significant. For the first time, in the majority of cases votes would now derive not from property, but from occupation, that is from residency: “occupation will inevitably be, under the new system, the ground and the main foundation of our electoral system.” In 1911 84 per cent of English votes came from the occupation of a house, rather than from any form of property or other (service, university, grandfather-clause, lodger) suffrage. The change was also significant in terms of the number of new voters. Where the 1867 Reform had added 1 million voters, Gladstone proposed to add 2 million voters by his plan.

The debates, however, showed the still considerable acceptance of the language of capacity, even by lower-class organs. This made it possible to propose a suffrage extension that stopped short of manhood suffrage. Gladstone’s personal authority also counted for much, on the right as well as the left of the liberal party. The Whigs were still the majority of liberal MPs, even if not of the liberal electorate. But they were unwilling to go against
Gladstone. Nor were the Radicals willing to oppose the Grand Old Man. Under the circumstances the Conservatives in the Commons saw no point in putting up very serious opposition, knowing they controlled the House of Lords, and that the Lords would throw the Bill out. The Bill passed the Commons without serious opposition and Gladstone made a speech threatening the Lords if they rejected it.

They did, on the grounds already put forward by Conservatives in the Commons that no Bill for extending the suffrage could be considered without seeing what kind of seat redistribution bill the liberals proposed to introduce thereafter. What effect suffrage changes would have on the actual balance of power would only be determined by how seats were redistricted and redistributed, as everyone knew. Gladstone worked out a compromise redistricting plan with the Conservatives, and the Lords consented to pass the suffrage extension. The Redistribution Bill was only passed in 1885, and in the middle of Commons’ consideration of it the Gladstone government fell, but the Conservative Salisbury ministry honored the compromise. Conventionally historians, like professional politicians, have looked to redistribution and redistricting as the most significant aspects of the Third Reform Act. But Gladstone denied this. Unlike in 1832, in 1885 “in our view the paramount interest concerned in this great question, which casts every other into the shade, is that of the franchise.” This may well have been the view of the average voter. As one MP put it, people cared about the vote, not about redistricting. He himself had never cared that for 20 years he had had three votes (in three different constituencies, of course), and had never voted for a winner. Even the Radical Leatham suggested that “give a man a vote, and he cares very little about whether he belongs to a small or a large constituency.”

Gladstone set the tone for most liberal rhetoric in the 1884 Reform debates in his opening speech. He said he had introduced a reform bill for three reasons, because the Liberals had pledged to do so, because the people wanted it, and above all “to add strength to the State.” “I take my stand on the broad principle that the enfranchisement of capable citizens, be they few or be they many – and if they be many so much the better – gives an addition of strength to the State.” Gladstone was being consistent with the traditional liberal aim of adding strength to the state by increasing its legitimacy, and doing so by including all the capacities with the ranks of the voters. “Sir, the only question that remains in the general argument is, who are the capable citizens?”

Thus the language of capacity continued to be used in England in 1884 in a way no longer possible in France. But unlike in 1866–67, this was no longer the only language spoken. Some liberals now preferred to avoid tackling political rights-claims head-on, because they feared it might cause them political damage. Trevelyan said, “I am not going to enter into the question as to whether the franchise is a right. . . . this Bill is founded on the prin-
ciple of... the admission of capable citizens”. Fowler, while continuing to
talk about capacity, showed the confusion about how to translate capacity
into a limitation on suffrage, a confusion characteristic of liberalism in
decline: “There were, of course, capable and incapable men in all grades of
society – there was a residuum in all classes; but that was no argument
against the extension of the franchise to those classes – because some people
were drowned it was no reason for keeping everybody out of the water until
they could swim.” This turned upside-down the whole liberal doctrine of
political participation, which was based precisely on preventing people from
entering the political waters until they could swim, that is, until they were
no danger to society and some use to it. The language of capacity was being
subverted to democratic ends.421

Moreover, after lauding the capacity of the artisans and peasants who
would be enfranchised, Gladstone went on to say “I must say I do not think
it is easy to dispute the enormous value of the Parliamentary vote as an edu-
cating power. . . . the man who was a good citizen before he had it will be a
better citizen after he has received it.” Albert Grey agreed: “The good which
he anticipated from extension was the advantage which would be certain
to result from the development of that spirit of enterprize, energy and
self-help which the bestowal of a vote was calculated to produce.”422 Now
Guizot’s “Get rich!” was turned upside-down. The arguments of the 1850s
on the educative value of voting were renewed in 1884, this time success-
fully. No longer was desire for the vote to encourage one to the virtues,
financial and other, necessary to attain it, but rather the opposite. Capacity
was beginning to follow on rights, rather than the reverse. Gladstone justi-

ified his extension of the suffrage not just by pointing at the fact of capac-
ity, but by appealing to faith that it existed: “Because we have faith in the
people; and because we believe it to be the first element, the first article, in
the creed of liberalism, to have that faith; and that, and nothing else, affords
the reason why the Liberal Party has been predominant in this country
through the last half-century.” Capacity had always been something that
was to be proved. Now it was beginning to be an article of faith, at which
point liberalism hardly differed from democracy. It was not far from this to
the claim that any limitation at all upon a man’s right to vote, and even a
woman’s, was unjust. For Anderson the doctrine that the vote was a trust,
not a right, was the view only of Tories. In the North of England where he
came from everyone looked on voting as a right: “They looked upon the
franchise as the inherent right of everyone . . . in this country; . . .”. Broad-
hurst proclaimed the right to vote and demanded the payment of MPs.
Barran denied that anyone could judge the capacity of another: “What right
had any man to judge of any other whether he should have the franchise?
Agricultural laborers and artisans were responsible to the laws of the country,
and they had, therefore, a right to a voice in the making of those laws.” For
Williamson the language of capacity was no longer comprehensible: “It had
been said that the exercise of the franchise ‘was not a right but a trust.’ This was a mere sophism, meant to blind the eyes of the unwar. How could the trust be exercised unless the right be acknowledged and granted?"  

The Radicals who proclaimed the right to vote were by no means the majority of Liberal MPs, let alone of the House of Commons. But they were present in Parliament, and their rhetoric now challenged liberalism from a direction where all had once been silence. Liberals were increasingly faced by the choice of accepting that new rhetoric, becoming democrats and eventually members of the Labour Party, or if they chose to reject it, to become Conservatives. The liberal center was eroding.

Its erosion was accompanied by the end of the dominance of socially oriented liberal language. John Morley, the leading disciple of John Stuart Mill, rejected the image of society as a joint-stock company. Fowler opposed that “old argument about interests and classes.” In this climate it was increasingly the Conservative Party that seemed to represent an idea of politics based on the representation of classes and interests, while the Liberals used individualist language and were increasingly pulled towards democracy. The liberal synthesis was beginning to collapse. Gladstone may have defended the representation of communities against Mill and translated his words into action when it came to redistribution, but for Goschen, at least, it was the Conservatives who were responsible for protecting the principle of community representation in the redistribution Bill.

Property as a criterion of capacity also ceded to education. For liberals to rely on education as a criterion of capacity was nothing new. What was new were the numbers of liberals doing it and the way in which education was now so often seen as something that would follow rather than proceed suffrage. Baxter argued that “You cannot educate the masses of the people without giving them votes . . .”. This made sense: if voting created political capacity, it could only do so by educating, since it obviously did not confer property or social position.

Along with the view that education and therefore (although few cared to express it so bluntly) capacity would follow the vote, came a new understanding of public opinion. Fowler declared that the defect of the present suffrage was that “a majority of the Members of the House were not in touch with – and did not represent the feelings of – the majority of the people of the country.” The “people” now meant the numerical majority, not the middle classes.

In some ways the Third Reform Act was a success for British liberalism. Blewett, looking at the Act’s effects, regards it as the last successful rearguard action by the Whigs (read liberals) against democracy. In 1911, only 60 per cent of adult males were registered voters. The key term is “registered”. The registration process was complicated by both residency requirements (which prevented at least 1,000,000 voters from registering annually) and by the complicated procedures necessary for many voters to register. One MP
referred to the British electoral system as “democracy tempered by registration.” Whether by direct or indirect means, for liberals to succeed in limiting the national suffrage to this degree until 1918 was a remarkable achievement, equaled by few other European liberalisms.

In this respect the Third Reform Act was a sign of liberal strength. It has encouraged historians to be surprised at the rapid decline of liberalism after 1885, and to look for short-term causes for it. For example, as one historian puts it, “in 1885 hardly anyone doubted that Hartington would be the next leader [of the Liberal Party], that he would successfully revive Palmerstonian politics, and that Chamberlain would cooperate with him. . . . It cannot be over stressed, then, how sudden and dramatic was the split of 1886” over Irish Home Rule, which broke the Liberal Party in two (Liberals and Liberal Unionists), and eventually drove Hartington and Chamberlain into the Conservative Party.

But historians should not be quite so surprised by liberal decline. The decline in liberal fortunes was not solely due to Gladstone’s idiosyncrasies and Irish Home Rule. The Home Rule crisis and the Liberal Party split that it brought about were an accident of history caused by Gladstone’s personal predilections, but they were also a reflection of deep-rooted fissures in liberalism that could no longer be contained within the framework of liberal language. They were a rejection by what had once been the mainstream of liberalism of Gladstone’s embrace of democracy.

The parliamentary debates of 1884 and the terms of the Third Reform Act augured a deterioration in liberal prospects even if Gladstone had retired and Hartington had led the party. The language in which the Third Reform Act was debated was not the cause of this decline, but it was a signal that the decline was in progress.

As has been noted, after 1867 the doctrine of political rights began to displace what has been described here as the language of capacity. The decline of liberal language was directly related, as the 1884 debates show, to the decline of its most popular dialect, that of the representation of social groups. In his penetrating study, *Whigs and Liberals: Continuity and Change in English Political Thought*, Burrow argues that the split between the language of social representation and the language of individualism was finally resolved in favor of individualism the 1870s and 1880s: “To the extent that the long contest between moderate Whigs and radicals had corresponded to antagonistic views of political representation – the representation of interest being opposed by the representation of individuals – it was effectively ended.” Although the language of individualism could certainly be a liberal language, it had a tendency to turn into a language of individual rights rather than individual capacity. This was a tendency that the language of capacity, i.e. liberalism, could no longer overcome in the late nineteenth century. Liberalism was replaced by democracy.

The decline of the language of capacity demonstrated in the 1884 debates was also a signal that the centrifugal forces always at work within the party...
of contradictions were getting stronger. And indeed British liberalism fragmented after the Third Reform Act. The “New Liberalism” that arose after 1885 adopted democratic rhetoric and was liberal in name only. As early as 1889 one of the “New Liberal” MPs was writing that “for the first time in the history of English politics,” liberalism was “almost exclusively identified with the particular interests of the working classes,” which was as much as to say that it was no longer liberal. In reply to the suggestion that Hartington might have held the party together on the old basis, it can hardly be claimed that Hartington was more likely to appeal to the masses than Gladstone. Chamberlain might have, but it is hard to see how Chamberlain could have ultimately remained a liberal either, given his attitudes to tariffs and defense, as compared to those of the Radicals and Non-Conformists, and the absence of the language of capacity (of which Chamberlain was no great partisan) to hold them together. Sections of the Liberal Party were already heading in the direction of the Conservatives even before Gladstone shattered Liberal Party unity over Home Rule. While the 1884 debates give evidence of the continuity of liberal political language, with their repeated use of the rhetoric of capacity, they also show how that rhetoric was not what it had once been. The world liberal language had dominated was no more. As Seymour concluded after his monumental study of electoral reform in England from 1832 to 1885, “the epoch of reorganization which made of England an electoral democracy may fairly be said to have been completed by the reforms of 1883 [anti-corruption], 1884, and 1885.

Rapidly enough the choice seemed to become simply Socialism or Conservatism, with Liberalism irrelevant. The “respectable classes,” that had once been the backbone of liberalism went Conservative after 1886. After the elections of 1886, for the first time since 1830, Liberal MPs were a minority in both English boroughs and counties. The landed gentry fled the party, and with them much influence on local government – by 1892 only 15 per cent of county magistrates were liberals. More seriously, perhaps, liberals no longer had secure majorities in many parliamentary districts they had once dominated. Like German liberals after 1879, they rarely won unopposed. In 1886, 1895 and 1900, the Conservative/Liberal Unionist (i.e. ex-liberals opposed to Home Rule for Ireland, usually Whigs) coalition won 119, 133 and 163 seats without a contest, whereas liberals won 40, 10 and 22 seats without contest. The Liberal Party did manage to hang on as a power until 1914, attaining a weak majority in the 1892 election and a much larger one in the unusual circumstances of the 1906 election. However, its ability to legislate was increasingly limited – lacking broad support, the Liberal party was unable to push through controversial legislation against a Conservative/Unionist House of Lords, at least without provoking a constitutional crisis.

All liberalisms declined at the end of the nineteenth century. But despite the problems listed above, English liberalism managed to maintain itself
better than most others. For all its weaknesses, in 1884 the language of capacity was still a necessary cloak for the majority of speeches in the Commons debates, when it had disappeared entirely from active use in French politics. English liberals were still able to attain power in 1892–95 and 1906–14, and this was far more than could be said of French or German liberals. The English succeeded to this extent largely because they, unlike the French or the Germans, took as much advantage as possible of the progressive and inclusive aspects of the language of capacity.

German liberalism and the suffrage question, 1866–85

Contrasted with French failure and English success, the history of German liberalism from 1866 to 1885 and beyond is, as usual with German history, difficult to characterize without ambiguity. The period between 1866 and 1879 saw German liberalism reach its peak of success with regard to both national unification and legislative influence. After 1879 German liberalism maintained itself as an independent power until 1918, unlike French liberalism. Yet neither before nor after 1879 did German liberalism attain the political hegemony of English liberalism. In some respects German liberalism seems to present a middle case between French and English extremes, while in other respects its history is unique, and sometimes uniquely successful: the national unification of Germany has no parallel in nineteenth-century French or English history. German liberals had certainly not achieved this alone, yet Bismarck had willy-nilly served to advance the liberal agenda, just as Disraeli had served English liberalism by passing the Second Reform Act of 1867.

The victories of German liberalism themselves created some of the causes of its decline. The defeat of Austria by Prussia in 1866 led to the formation of the North German Confederation, and with it the application of universal male suffrage to German federal politics. Universal suffrage in the Confederation and then after 1871 in the German Empire put German liberalism under continuous pressure, which it withstood only at some cost. Liberalism was bolstered by the retention of limited suffrage in the individual German states, notably in Prussia, where the three-class suffrage was maintained intact down to 1918, and in urban governments. But whereas in England the Third Reform Act of 1884 left liberals at least a reasonable chance of electoral success, neither the national nor the Prussian suffrage gave German liberals an electoral majority for long. After 1879, they were a permanent minority in both the Reichstag and the Prussian lower house.

Three debates will be used here to present the reactions of German liberals to their new circumstances, the suffrage debate in the Constituent Assembly of the North German Confederation in 1867, the debate over local suffrage in the普鲁士 lower house in 1869, and the debate over an attempt to introduce universal suffrage into Prussia in 1873. In 1867 German
Liberals were stunned by Bismarck’s proposal of universal suffrage for the North German Confederation’s parliament. They also recognized that no alternative was politically possible.\textsuperscript{438} German liberals were not strong enough to act as the open enemies of both the masses and the government, even if they had wanted to. The suffrage debates of 1867 were thus conducted in an atmosphere of inevitability. Liberals struggled successfully to maintain the electoral eligibility of civil servants (who made up the majority of liberal representatives), and some fought unsuccessfully to obtain pay for deputies, but there was never any real fight over who should vote. Universal suffrage, once proposed by Bismarck, could not be opposed. It was too clearly the means of giving popular sanction to the results of the Austro-Prussian war, just as in 1871 it sanctioned the unification of Germany, regarded by liberals as their proudest achievement.

But many liberals made it clear they still did not like universal manhood suffrage. Even some liberals who had previously fought for it, like the Progressive leader Waldeck, now drew back from it. Waldeck said he had always favored universal suffrage in principle, but that the presupposition of “universal suffrage, and above all of direct universal suffrage, was that in the towns, in the courts, in the press, in the whole state everything is as it should be. Is it, Gentlemen? . . . Not yet, I think!\textsuperscript{439} Waldeck feared government manipulation of the masses. This was indeed the chief fear of German liberals at the introduction of universal suffrage, taking precedence over (although not eliminating) their fear of socialism and social revolution. They saw universal suffrage as a weapon being used against the middle classes. Grumbrecht argued “that in fact universal, equal and direct suffrage is intended to be used against our middle class in order to break its power.” North German Liberals in 1867 thus saw themselves as the defenders of a middle class under assault by the government.\textsuperscript{440}

In defending the middle classes, German liberals frequently ended up arguing in favor of the importance of education as a criterion of political capacity. They defined “education” in somewhat more scholastic terms than their English counterparts, perhaps because there were so many more professors among German liberals. The historian Sybel estimated that of the 18 million people in pre-1866 Prussia (before the annexations that followed the Austro-Prussian War), only 50,000 had graduated from or were enrolled in Gymnasia (high schools). Perhaps one million altogether had received some education beyond elementary school. These were the ones with political capacity, Sybel stressed. Weber acknowledged that in comparison to other European nations, Germans were well-educated. He hoped that this would mitigate the dangers of universal suffrage. But he insisted all the more therefore that bureaucrats must be allowed to serve as deputies – excluding them would mean excluding all science from politics. He imagined a father telling his son he’d better not go to college, because then he’d become a civil servant and be excluded from serving in parliament.\textsuperscript{441}
Many liberals reacted to the creation of universal suffrage with a kind of internal rejection. They saw their authority not as coming from the people, but from their own social position and personal qualities. The new suffrage just increased the responsibility of their “internal political mission,” as one National Liberal put it. Significantly, he used here the language of a Christian missionary. The “internal mission” was, in religious terms, the re-christianization of the urban poor. For German liberals, the multitude outside the middle classes remained the “heathen”. There was little of the inclusiveness towards the lower classes of English liberal rhetoric to be found in Germany.

Some German liberals hoped that universal suffrage would soon be displaced. But as early as 1868 the Prussian liberal Unruh recognized universal suffrage as permanent. Thus alongside the liberal victories of national unification came liberal defeats on the suffrage issue. But this was by no means the end of German liberalism. German liberalism, unlike French liberalism when faced by universal suffrage, still maintained its political prestige, in part because of its co-responsibility for achieving national unity. In the national elections of 1871, held on the basis of universal suffrage, the liberal parties received 40 per cent of the vote and 45 per cent of the seats, making them by far the largest group in the Reichstag. German liberalism could also maintain itself because at the state level (and in urban government), most notably in Prussia, liberals were able to retain a restricted suffrage, and with it an absolute liberal parliamentary majority in the Prussian lower house that lasted until 1879. Even down to 1918, the Prussian liberals, or at least one of their factions (usually the National Liberals) were often part of a legislative majority in Prussia.

But if liberals were able to preserve a limited suffrage in Prussia, it was at a cost, the cost of stasis. Prussian liberalism in the 1860s had failed to show that inclusiveness towards the lower classes characteristic of English liberalism. Prussian liberalism continued to be far from inclusive after unification too, as shown in the debates in the Prussian lower house in 1869 over the proposed suffrage for local government in Schleswig-Holstein.

Schleswig-Holstein had been definitively annexed by Prussia in 1866, and the new province needed a new local suffrage law. The Bismarck government’s proposal followed the tradition of requiring voters to be “independent.” To qualify as independent under the government’s suffrage proposal one must not have received poor relief when over the age of 18 without having paid it back, not be in receipt of “bed and board” from another, i.e. no servants or apprentices, and pay all taxes due. In addition, the government draft also demanded either the ownership of a house, of a minimum value to be set by the community, or ownership of a business of a size to be determined by the community, or possession of a minimum income of between 200 and 500 Prussian Thalers/year, as determined by the locality.
The Progressive leader Waldeck wished to eliminate the paragraph in the law that contained the property requirements. He pointed out that in the rest of Prussia the maximum allowable census for the vote in local elections was an income of 300 Thaler/year, and yet in relatively poor Schleswig-Holstein it was proposed to allow a census of up to 500. What Waldeck wanted was described and supported by his fellow-Progressive Hoverbeck as “universal suffrage.” The more moderate Progressive Hagen also supported universal suffrage in principle, and objected to the leeway left the local government to determine what value house or business should bring the vote. He wished to substitute house-ownership regardless of value or ownership of a business with at least two employees over the age of 16.

The Progressive “universal suffrage” proposals left a number of limitations in place, that is poor-relief and tax-payment (post-1867 German liberals had a habit of describing as “universal suffrage” systems that weren’t universal). The poor-relief restriction in the national suffrage eliminated roughly 6 per cent of the male electorate. The restriction on people who received room and board from their employers or did not pay their taxes would not have eliminated many. The residency requirements indirectly imposed by the law would have eliminated more, but they were not a controversial item for the local vote, so that effectively what Waldeck proposed was fairly close to universal suffrage. Hagen’s proposed requirement, house or business ownership, would have been much more restrictive. Waldeck, Hoverbeck and Hagen represented a party, the Progressives, that was a mixture of democratic and left-liberal elements. They were capable of utterances on either side of the suffrage issue depending on circumstances. Thus we have seen Waldeck opposing universal suffrage for the North German Confederation, and Hoverbeck also expressed himself against “empty head-counting suffrage laws”. They wobbled back and forth on other occasions as well. Diest effectively pointed out the contradictions within the Progressive Party during the debates, claiming that Waldeck would not find many supporters for universal suffrage in his own party. Thus even within one fractional part of Prussian liberalism there was no unity on suffrage issues.445

Most liberals did not want to go as far as the Progressives. In order to attract their support Hagen proposed a compromise amendment that would set the census at a maximum of 200 Thaler in towns under 10,000 population, 250 Thaler in towns of 10–50,000, and 300 Thaler in towns over 50,000. Lasker, the National Liberal leader, proposed another amendment to set the census at a maximum of 300 Thaler, the limit in the rest of Prussia. National Liberals justified their amendment on a number of grounds. Hennig attacked the three-class system as irrational (the three-class system was not at issue, but municipal suffrage debates were always stand-ins for debates over the Prussian suffrage), and no longer representative of social conditions. At the same time he rejected universal suffrage, because while it might have some national justification when all were liable to military
service, this justification was lacking on the local level. In local communities, only those who contributed to their financial burdens, that is paid a certain amount of taxes, deserved a say. Furthermore, in obedience to the centralizing tendency common among many German liberals, both Progressive and National Liberal, Hennig wished to see the law in Schleswig-Holstein brought into line with that in the rest of Prussia outside the Rhineland (the three-class system was used in the Rhineland for local suffrage).446

The Old Liberal Schwerin, although he too now attacked the three-class system (he had supported it as Interior Minister in 1861), defended the census as proposed in the draft law. Schwerin stressed that in his opinion “with reference to political [national] elections so-called universal suffrage does not further freedom, and still less so in local elections.” Freedom could only be protected through a limited suffrage, a suffrage limited to those “in whom one can presuppose that they have the necessary intelligence and the necessary independence, to give their vote consciously.” No stable politics could be founded on universal suffrage. He regretted that circumstances had required an “experiment” with universal suffrage in the North German Confederation. In order to avoid the three-class system one needed to have guarantees “that people who were not independent would not get the vote and that decisions in town questions would not be in the hands of the masses.” The exact level of the census was less important to Schwerin than the fact that there was one. He supported the draft because the Schleswig-Holstein provincial assembly had chosen the figures in it.447

In the end all the proposed amendments were rejected and the legislation passed on voice votes. What is the significance of these debates? Firstly, they seem little changed from those of 1861 discussed in the previous chapter. Prussian liberals continued to show little interest in including or educating the lower classes in political participation. The second factor of significance in these debates is the continued inability of Prussian liberals to unite on any alternative suffrage proposal. The draft was accepted by a majority of Conservatives and Right-Liberals, and the amendments of both Waldeck and Lasker were voted down by comfortable majorities. Thirdly, everyone on the liberal side criticized the three-class Prussian suffrage, yet no majority could be found to change it. It was accepted for lack of any viable alternative.

Liberal disunity, liberal inability to unite on one incarnation of the language of capacity and embody it in a suffrage reform led to liberal rigidity in Prussia. German liberals were not at all inclined to reform the Prussian suffrage. Between 1873 and 1878 the National Liberals and the Progressives together had an absolute majority in the Prussian lower house. Many Conservatives disliked the three-class Prussian suffrage which had made them a more or less permanent minority there since 1858. Thus the Conservative-dominated Prussian House of Lords as well as the government was potentially open to suffrage reform (it was only in the 1880s that Prussian
Conservatives swung around to favor the three-class system). But the liberals did not introduce any reform measures in the lower house.

In 1873 a suffrage reform measure was introduced into the Prussian House of Delegates. But it was introduced by the Catholic Center Party. The Center Party, with its national leader Windthorst as spokesman, introduced a measure calling for the introduction of the Reichstag suffrage in Prussia, that is universal, direct and secret voting for every male over the age of 25 who did not receive poor relief. To torment the liberals, Windthorst mocked the idea of education as a criterion for the vote, and attacked a mere plutocracy. The response of Prussian liberals from both the left and right of the liberal spectrum, that is from both the National Liberal and Progressive parties, is revealing. The list of liberal leaders who signaled their desire to speak against Windthorst’s measure is impressive: Lasker, Virchow, Rickert, Jung, and Hänel, among others. No liberal wished to speak in favor of it.

Lasker mocked Windhorst in response. He was glad to see the leader of the German Catholics opposing the Pope’s Syllabus Errorum (the manifesto by Pope Pius IX published in 1864), which declared the Church opposed to democracy and universal suffrage. But this did not bring him to favor the Center Party’s proposition. He wished to kill it by a formal postponement. There was too much legislative business already on the agenda to deal with the suffrage question. Then Lasker got around to the real reasons he favored inaction. It was easier for the Center Party, with its strong discipline, to act together than for liberals. Even if liberals agreed on universal suffrage (a big “if”), many wanted to retain an indirect ballot, although Lasker himself did not (Lasker was a National Liberal, but universal suffrage combined with indirect voting had been the traditional preference of the Progressives). Lasker announced that he personally favored public rather than secret balloting. And, Lasker admitted, many liberals still opposed universal suffrage. Besides, universal and secret voting would only give the same result as the Prussian suffrage already did, that is a liberal majority, as had been demonstrated by the Reichstag elections. In short, liberals didn’t like universal suffrage, and couldn’t agree on what they did like.

Virchow, speaking for the Progressives, was slightly more open to suffrage reform than Lasker. He proposed bringing the bill back for debate before the parliamentary session was over. By a vote of 271–94 the bill was tabled. By a show of hands the Progressive proposal to bring it back for later debate was defeated. Thus ended the last attempt to alter the Prussian suffrage when liberals were the majority. Liberals defeated a Catholic attempt to introduce universal suffrage because they feared the effects of a mass of Catholic voters. But liberals made no move to reform the suffrage themselves and showed no interest in making concessions to the lower classes.

It is always tempting for a majority party to refuse to change the rules under which they have become the majority. But even when, as was the case
after 1879, liberals were a permanent minority in the Prussian lower house, they were not favorable to suffrage reform until near the end of the Empire, and then they remained unable to agree on what form it should take. Prussian liberalism persisted in its attitudes towards the suffrage in 1865–85.

However, neither Prussian nor German liberalism disappeared, unlike French liberalism after 1875. If German liberals were unable, unlike their English counterparts, to retain their rhetorical dominance down to 1885 and beyond, German liberalism nevertheless retained sufficient resonance in German society to remain a political power, if no longer the dominant power: “Liberalism and the liberal parties were in crisis since the 80s, really in decline, they lost influence among the voters, among youth, in public opinion. The time of their greatness and power seemed past. But they still maintained themselves.”

One might say of nineteenth-century German liberalism that its day never came, but its sun never set. At their peak in the 1870s liberal parties received 45 per cent of the national vote. In the 1880s they declined to about 37 per cent, in the elections of the 1890s about 32 per cent, in 1903, 23 per cent, in 1912, 26 per cent. The figures for Prussia are almost identical. In their strongholds of Württemberg, Hesse, and Baden liberals controlled absolute majorities of the lower house until around 1890. By 1913 they had a majority nowhere in Germany, and controlled only 30–40 per cent of state seats at best. In Bavaria they had declined from 44 per cent in 1871 to 18 per cent in 1912. In all these states except Prussia the electorate was broadened between 1870 and 1913, but remained limited. Thus German liberalism declined everywhere, but never disappeared.

In order to maintain itself, German liberalism after 1890 had to become something it had never been in its heyday – the representative of particular economic interests, predominantly those of urban consumers and Free Traders, although a wing of the National Liberal party was identified with the protectionist impulses of heavy industry (coal and steel). The discourse of capacity was of no particular use for this, and the liberalism it embodied disappeared with it. It seems to be a European constant that when liberal parties split, most of their voters chose some kind of conservatism, rather than democratic or socialist radicalism. This was certainly true of Germany after the First World War.

However, this picture of German liberalism as a discourse unable to grow yet able to survive needs modification, particularly if one is to glance past 1885 or 1890 to briefly look at the fate of German liberalism down to the First World War. How adaptable German liberalism appears, and how successful in its adaptation, depends greatly on where one looks. If one concentrates solely on the Reichstag strength of the German liberal parties, or on the refusal of Prussian liberals even after 1885 to modify the Prussian suffrage or adapt the language of capacity to new circumstances, one gets one picture. If, on the other hand, the view is broadened to look at German
states other than Prussia, or at liberalism in urban government, then the picture is different.

Prussia is in fact in many ways an exceptional (albeit exceptionally important) case. Its three-class suffrage differed from most other German states, where a census was usually employed. Even more strikingly, the Prussian suffrage seems to have had virtually no impact on liberal election results (although it had enormous effect on Socialist results). If one compares the percentage of Prussian seats won by liberal parties in Reichstag elections based on universal male suffrage, 1870–1913, with the percentage won in Prussian elections based on the three-class system, the differences are insignificant. Yet the Prussian National Liberals steadfastly refused to accept any important changes in the Prussian suffrage down to 1906. They were unwilling to accept the transition from notable politics to mass politics, and continued to speak the language of capacity in the old way when talking about voting. Only in the last years before the First World War did the Prussian National Liberals come out in favor of the elimination of indirect elections, expansion of the influence of the third class, and various forms of plural voting. Even then a strong faction of the Prussian party wanted no change. It is true that after 1892 the Prussian Progressive program included universal suffrage in Prussian elections (although not in urban elections), but there was by no means a consensus even within the Progressive Party on this.455

But while Prussian liberalism stagnated, elsewhere in Germany liberals did consent to broaden the suffrage while retaining limitations. Research has focused on Saxony as an example of liberal flexibility and success, and as a potential model for German liberalism nationally – partly because Gustav Stresemann, an important figure in German politics in the 1920s, was a prominent pre-war National Liberal figure in Saxony. The Saxon case is interesting, and in some respects unique. In 1893, for the sake of eliminating socialist representation from the Saxon lower house, liberals changed the suffrage from a low census to the three-class system. The change both eliminated the representation of the SDP, and made the liberals into a permanent minority vis-à-vis the conservatives. It produced considerable discontent in the population, the more so because unlike in Prussia, the Saxon three-class suffrage produced radically different results from the Reichstag suffrage. One would expect this to have blocked any further Saxon suffrage reform, but in 1909, the Saxon suffrage was again reformed, with liberal support, and transformed into a system of plural voting. The result was that a chamber that in 1905 had been divided between Conservatives (65 per cent) and Liberals (35 per cent), in 1909 had roughly 40 per cent Liberals, 32 per cent Conservatives and 27 per cent Socialists. The Saxon example implies not just German liberal flexibility, but continued liberal strength in Germany, at least under the right suffrage (the Socialists continued to dominate the Saxon Reichstag delegation). In Saxony, a predom-
inantly urban region, liberals seemed able to successfully compete in mass politics with a little help from the suffrage laws. Saxony seems to present a picture of German politics much closer to that of English liberalism.456

Where liberalism remained dominant throughout Germany was in urban government. From Hamburg to Nuremberg, from the Rhineland to East Prussia, liberals dominated town governments and successfully fought tooth and nail to retain a limited suffrage that ensured their domination. They controlled 60 per cent of towns with populations over 10,000 in the Rhineland and Westphalia. Even in Catholic Munich they held half the seats on the town council. They did this with the aid of a suffrage which varied, but was in general limited to 25–50 per cent of the adult male population, based on property qualifications. And in the towns, liberal government was a very different thing from liberalism at the national level. As we have seen, the German variants of the rhetoric of capacity showed little interest in the lower classes after 1848. But in the towns, German liberals acted much more like British liberals. They frequently pursued progressive policies in housing, education, and sanitation. Nipperdey notes: “One can here perceive an overlooked alternative of German history: the possibility of a transforming and progressive liberal politics under a different old-fashioned suffrage favorable to the notables. Urban social liberalism, one can say with Langewiesche, rested on an illiberal suffrage.”457 Or rather, in the terms used here, was dependent on a liberal suffrage.

But after noting these strengths in the federal states and in local government, it must be emphasized that German liberalism 1890–1914 was only partly liberal, as the word “liberal” had been understood in 1830–85. It was more the representative of certain economic interests and a certain kind of nationalism, less the mouthpiece of the discourse of capacity, than it had been hitherto. Although considerable elements of the old liberalism persisted in urban liberalism and the Prussian liberal parties, much of what was still called German “liberalism” was pursuing an evolution similar to Opportunism in France, and thus leaving the essential political content of nineteenth-century European liberalism behind.

The picture of European liberalism in 1885 is both varied and similar. Everywhere this study has looked, in England, France and Germany, liberalism had seen its best moments pass by. Yet the relative position of liberalism was very different in the three countries. Still a great power in England, even if the cracks that would bring down the liberal coalition were becoming ever wider. Absent from the political scene in France. Somewhere between the two in Germany. Why was the language of capacity unable to maintain itself as the dominant form of political discourse? To answer this question, we must turn to an examination of the relationship between political language and society, between liberalism and bourgeois culture.
Part II
Language and Culture
4
The Discourse of Capacity in Context

“The social state... modifies even those things which it does not cause.”

The previous chapters define liberalism as a political language and show how that language was used in European parliamentary debates about suffrage between 1830 and 1885. They also describe the decline of liberal political language in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The second part of this book suggests some reasons why liberalism was so successful in its heyday, and why that success ended. It shifts focus from the analysis of political language to cultural history, in order to draw analogies between them. Such analogies are not subject to proof in the same way that the existence of a discourse can be demonstrated. They rely on what Weber notoriously called “elective affinities”, and on congruences in forms and structures. Analogies of this sort help to provide a “thick description”, to borrow Geertz’ phrase, or more simply “understanding”, in Dilthey’s older language, rather than direct and demonstrable causal explanations. Nevertheless, whatever theoretical vocabulary may please, understanding the relationship between aspects of nineteenth-century culture and the discourse of capacity is crucial to providing a context for the successes and failures of liberal political language over the course of the nineteenth century.

“Culture” and “cultural history” are terms perhaps even more ambiguous than “liberalism”. When Jacob Burckhardt talked about the history of culture, he meant by “culture” anything that was independent of religion or the state, whereas today both religion and politics are often included by historians under the heading of culture. What is meant by “culture” here are sets of values and attitudes (mores) on the one hand, and social structures on the other. This chapter will focus on certain values and attitudes, and certain facets of social structure, which contributed to the success of liberalism and the language of capacity in the mid-nineteenth century.

Three cultural contexts were particularly favorable to the reception of the discourse of capacity and hence of liberalism in nineteenth-century Europe.
Perhaps the most important cultural component of the success of the discourse of capacity was the pervasive sense of hierarchy in nineteenth-century Europe. This sense of hierarchy was the essential background for a second cultural factor in the widespread acceptability of the discourse of capacity: the ideal and reality of social mobility, and its limits. Finally, a third context for the success of liberalism was the way in which the nineteenth-century middle classes defined themselves, definitions which were crucial to how capacity was defined by liberals. Individually and jointly, these three cultural contexts made a powerful contribution to liberal success at mid-century. Their slow and then more rapid evolution made an equally powerful contribution to liberal decline in the fin-de-siècle. As this chapter will show, after the watershed period of the 1880s, all of them had evolved to a point that deprived liberal language of the political resonance it had once possessed. Cultural change made the contradictions that had once been a source of liberal strength into a fatal weakness, and helped turn the Party of Contradictions into the Party of Nostalgia when it preserved its old language, or just a familiar brand name when it did not.

**Contexts: hierarchy**

Liberal judgments about who possessed political capacity were judgments about status, of the group or the individual. The language of capacity was intended to create, reinforce and express such judgments, and to set the boundaries between groups and individuals of varying status. Concern about social boundaries exists in all times and places, but it was magnified in the period of transition and insecurity during which liberal political language was dominant. Groups draw boundaries around themselves for many reasons; to define their own identity, to distinguish their ideologies from others, to establish their status compared to other groups. “Boundary work is an intrinsic part of the process of constituting the self, [boundaries] emerge when we try to define who we are. . . . By generating distinctions, we also signal our identity and develop a sense of security, dignity and honor.” Liberalism was in part a means of drawing boundaries within mid-nineteenth-century European culture, and more particularly a way of determining bourgeois status through the ability to participate in politics. Being able to vote was an important indicator of an individual's status, of rank within bourgeois culture. The suffrage and the language of capacity in which it was conceived were integral to the way in which liberals drew the boundaries of bourgeois culture. The language of liberalism provided re-assuring boundary-lines to an elite culture greatly in need of them.

Boundaries can be of many kinds. The type of boundary-system liberals preferred was based on a hierarchical view of society. “Hierarchy” here does not mean a simple division into those on bottom and those on top. Liberalism was not usually very appealing when people looked at society in those
Looking at society as divided into two classes, the class on top few and powerful, the class on bottom numerous and weak, was a prescription for revolution or dictatorship, which liberalism rejected. Liberals usually preferred to see society as a more graduated hierarchy. Consider the analysis of Montpellier society made in 1768 by a local observer, in which society was alternately divided in three ways: into rich and poor; into three estates made up of nobility, middle class, and common people; and finally into “a carefully graded ordering of rank and dignity, in which each layer melded and merged almost imperceptibly into the next.” The language of capacity, while reconcilable at a pinch with the first, and more easily with the second, was most comfortable with the third way. This third way may be called “hierarchy”, and the historian David Cannadine suggests that in England this way of looking at society usually dominated between 1830 and 1885. Peter Gay gives an Italian example of this way of looking at social structures, quoting a Prime Minister of Piedmont, the northern Italian kingdom that eventually united Italy: “the hierarchical instinct dominates the whole of society. . . the social distinctions generally carried by terms such as nobles, bourgeoisie, people and plebs and which are elsewhere sufficient to describe social gradations, here in Piedmont are quite inadequate and make it necessary to use a whole series of sub-categories”. In fact, under most circumstances people throughout Europe usually looked at their society as a hierarchy in this sense.462

It would be fascinating to be able to map the development of the language of capacity, especially its swings between the language of social representation and the language of individual representation, against a history of the varying ways in which people understood hierarchy at different times and in different countries. Unfortunately, historical studies of hierarchy are largely lacking. There are many studies of class, defined as rich vs poor or as aristocracy, middle class, and workers and peasants. There are few studies of class as hierarchy, class as a set of multiple gradations on more than one scale. Cannadine is right to stress “the lack of due attention to hierarchy as a way of seeing society and as a system of social belief”.463 For contemporaries, what was overwhelmingly important was the fact that the world they lived in, the world as they perceived it, was hierarchical in this way. It was a world in which people were constantly ranked and ordered in many ways and in which one’s social standing was of enormous importance. Liberal language was spoken in a world in which hierarchy was an assumption.

Mid-nineteenth-century Europe was a society in transition that mixed democratic and aristocratic elements, egalitarian and non-egalitarian assumptions, and this was true of its understanding of hierarchy as well. As Daumard notes of the French bourgeoisie, bourgeois society was both egalitarian and highly stratified. During the July Monarchy everyone was subject to the same laws, but not everyone could serve on a jury. This example captures in a nutshell the egalitarian and hierarchical aspects of both bourgeois
society and liberalism. “These anomalies corresponded to the conviction that people were neither identical nor interchangeable and that only those who had the necessary capacities had the vocation to fully exercise their responsibilities in public and private life.” There were many ways of defining capacities and hierarchies: talent, money, education, manners, dress, morals, gender, employment, family structure. But, Daumard goes on to say, all bourgeois “found it inconceivable that a society could exist without hierarchy.”

When England invented the passenger railway, notes F. M. L. Thompson, “It was only natural that the country which invented the railway should immediately devise three separate classes of passenger compartments, strictly separated, but each open to anyone who could pay the appropriate fare.” Even when creating public education systems, those classic ladders of social mobility, nineteenth-century governments, always emphasized that different ranks of people would receive different kinds of education. “So each class would benefit from a systematic education, improving standards for all yet entrenching the existing social order.”

A concrete example of this vision of hierarchy at work, outside of suffrage questions, is available in the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851, the venue for Paxton’s celebrated Crystal Palace. As a recent study of the Exhibition notes, “the organizers as a group stood for something that can best be described as liberalism”. Ranging from Prince Albert to dissenting clergymen to businessmen, they were a good cross-section of the liberal constituency. They thought carefully about what would be included in the Exhibition and who its audience would be. They knew that “the key to the exhibition’s success was that it should be inclusive enough to claim representativeness, but not so inclusive that it risked alienating certain critical constituencies.” The residuum, those at the very bottom of society, had to be left out. It is telling that an attempt to create a working-class organizing committee to work in parallel with the Royal Commission raised liberal fears of reviving Chartism, and it was disbanded.

From the planning stage, therefore, the Great Exhibition was a classic liberal event, an example of simultaneous class mixing (aristocracy, middle classes and “respectable” workingmen all attended) and class segregation. With different admission prices on different days, and with different areas within the Exhibition acting as de facto congregating points for visitors of different classes and occupations, the Exhibition “reflected and reinforced hierarchies and division within Victorian society”. Even when gathered in the same place for more or less the same purpose, “the classes kept to themselves, and behaved differently from one another, despite the fact that they were all mixing under one roof.”

Nevertheless, one of the great triumphs of English liberalism at the Exhibition was that observers were impressed less by the class segregation than the cross-class unity that the Exhibition also represented. Most contemporaries were struck by the fact that “all classes and ranks were attending and
participating equally in an event." This “class-bending” was performed in two stages. First, during the early weeks of the Exhibition when all ticket prices were high, it was between the gentry and the middle classes. Later, between both those groups and the respectable working classes, on the low-price admissions days. The organizers deliberately attempted to encourage the “upper” sections of the lower classes to come to London for the Exhibit, organizing low-price trains and cheap, safe London accommodations – all the while maintaining a minimum admission price of 1 shilling as a bar to casual attendance by the residuum. A relatively (if not absolutely) inclusive liberal idea of British identity “based as much on social integration as on social segregation” was on display. It might be added that this new identity was based largely on ideas of character and “respectability” that were closely linked to the language of capacity. Like the notion of capacity, the Great Exhibition was democratic and aristocratic (e.g. liberal), breaking down some barriers while leaving others, inclusive to individuals but within limits that excluded the potentially dangerous classes. If the organizers seemed far more afraid of those below than those above, this was partly because of the nature of the event, and partly because of where one looks. In admitting visitors, it was the riotous poor who were feared. Only those with the capacity to behave (and dress) respectably were acceptable. In admitting objects to be exhibited, it was not royal fiat or hereditary attributes that counted, but judgments of merit by an impartial committee. As the Exhibition’s historian notes, the liberal ethic of hard work was not just aimed against the lazy lower classes, it was also a critique of the “non-working” aristocracy. The liberal struggle on two fronts was present, even though one received more emphasis than the other.469

The Great Exhibition is thus a classic example, not so much of liberal political language, but of liberal culture near the height of its success. It embodied liberalism structurally, its transparent glass setting incarnating liberal ideas of a rational politics open to the light and inhabited only by those with capacity. What is most important is its demonstration of a successful vision of hierarchy that provided a broad audience for liberal political language, the discourse of capacity.

Some historians have suggested that this sense of hierarchy represented the persistence of an “aristocratic spirit”, opposed to “middle-class politics”.570 But although there were aristocratic elements in the mid-nineteenth century’s vision of hierarchy, hierarchy as a way of viewing society is not necessarily any more aristocratic than bourgeois, as Daumard’s description of the attitudes of the French bourgeoisie reminds us. A hierarchical vision of society can be compatible with democracy. Tocqueville suggests that in democratic societies, money is the only distinction that remains between people.571 If education is added as a second distinction among people accepted in democratic societies, then the two chief indicators of political capacity used by liberals, which were also the two chief ladders of hierarchy
as liberals understood it, will appear perfectly consonant with democratic society. A democratic hierarchy is not necessarily a contradiction in terms, however paradoxically it may strike the ear. The success of the discourse of capacity was encouraged by a context in which a hierarchical vision of society was widespread. Reciprocally, one of the uses of the language of capacity was to help constitute and to reinforce this vision, to create grounds for distinguishing among people and means of boundary-making.

England was the society of hierarchy and deference par excellence in the minds of contemporary observers. French and German visitors (not least Tocqueville) were struck by it, as was the American novelist Henry James, in 1878: “The essentially hierarchical plan of English society is the great and ever-present fact to the mind of a stranger; there is hardly a detail of life that does not in some degree betray it.” No one was embarrassed by this omnipresent ranking, at least not very many English people: “In England boys begin swaggering about their social position as soon as they leave the nursery”, and every group had someone further down the line before whom they could swagger, until one reached the level of the work-house. People were willing to give respect to their superior as a condition for being respected by those below. There was “a common acceptance by (as it seemed) the greater part of every articulate social group, of a hierarchical social order...”.

Historians, as noted in preceding chapters, have argued that the English suffrage reforms of the nineteenth century, at least those of 1832 and 1867, were intended to preserve and extend hierarchy and its accompanying deference. Thus in 1868 the voting behavior of Carlisle railway workers was presumed to follow the preferences of their employers, not out of coercion, but out of esprit de corps. Well after 1868, and well after the introduction of the secret ballot, factory workers still tended to vote the way their employers did, just as agricultural laborers still followed the voting patterns of the landowning gentry. This was the way hierarchy was supposed to work. Many liberals conceived of the secret ballot, introduced in England in 1873, as a way of increasing proper deference in voting and preventing people from being “illegitimately” influenced by the wrong forces, like bribes, intimidation, and free drinks. The secret ballot was deserving of support, W. E. Forster declared in introducing the Ballot Bill in Parliament, “because I feel sure all are anxious to destroy illegitimate influence, and also, for the reason that the more you destroy that influence the more you will increase the legitimate influence...”. The idea was not to eliminate influence, but to promote the right kind. The point of suffrage reform, and by extension of the language of capacity, was to reinforce hierarchy, not dilute it or diminish it. The relative long-term success of English liberalism may be partly attributed to the way in which the English Reform Acts allowed hierarchical deference to flourish, and conversely to the peculiar strength of hierarchy in England, the one European country unshaken by revolution. Bagehot
noted that: “England is the type of deferential countries, in which the numerous unwiser part wishes to be ruled by the less numerous wiser part. The numerical majority . . . is ready, is eager to delegate its power of choosing its ruler to a certain select minority. It abdicates in favor of its elite . . .”. And this was a good thing: “A country of respectful poor though far less happy than where there are no poor to be respectful, is nevertheless far more fitted for the best government. You can use the best classes of the respectful country.” Bagehot’s use of the language of capacity here melds perfectly into the language of deference and hierarchy.476

Mid-nineteenth-century French society was also hierarchical, although perhaps less so than England (comparative studies would be welcome). Even universal suffrage could be transformed into an occasion for demonstrating not equality, but deference. In his memoirs, Tocqueville recounts the story of the elections at Tocqueville after the revolution of 1848. The voters of the village lined up in alphabetical order, and Tocqueville took his place with the Ts – because he knew that in a democracy, you wait until people offer you the first place, you do not take it. They marched off to the small town where they were to vote, but on the way, as Tocqueville tells the story, the villagers halted for a rest and spontaneously asked Tocqueville to speak to them and tell them what to do. He carefully reminded them of their duties without telling them for whom to vote, and reports that in fact he received almost all their votes. Thus equality and hierarchy were combined in one event. More generally, when universal suffrage was instituted in France after the revolution of 1848, many French notables who had not been wealthy enough to vote under the July Monarchy welcomed it, not as a means of creating political equality, but as a means of demonstrating their influence over the mass of new voters.477

Historians of France have been surprised that “there continued to lurk a persistent liberal attachment to a paternalistic vision of society”.478 This attachment to paternalism was another aspect of the hierarchical assumptions characteristic of both the language of capacity and of middle-class society in the mid-nineteenth-century: “a French bourgeois was a man who was socially superior and conscious of it. He was situated more or less high on the social hierarchy, he had more or less prestige and influence. The lower level was very low . . .”. Daumard’s description of French society in general and the French middle class in particular is that of a hierarchy, a society with many levels in which everyone was strongly conscious of their standing. French education was directed towards “instilling the sense of hierarchies.” A manual of etiquette from the 1840s directed members of the middle class, when carrying an umbrella, to offer shelter to others in case of rain, but only if they were sufficiently well-dressed. On the other hand, one should accede with good grace if a poor person asked for shelter. Within the middle class, one felt oneself a member of an elite: “At their own level, every bourgeois considered himself as belonging to an elite, for reasons
which were based first of all on his personal attributes...". “The French bourgeoisie thus appeared as a society of elites”. It is easy to see how the language of capacity could find an audience among those who held such attitudes.479

That nineteenth-century Germans also felt a keen sense of hierarchy will come as no surprise. Wehler suggests that class divisions and distinctions were stronger in Germany than anywhere else in Europe, and that paternalism, both by the state and within the business enterprise, was a particularly German trait.480 Rather than multiplying references that would only duplicate the comments discussed above, we can focus on one peculiar way in which the sense of hierarchy manifested itself in nineteenth-century Germany: middle-class dueling. Dueling, of course, was originally an aristocratic institution. But in the 1830s dueling by the middle classes began to be legally recognized by German states, and it was widespread among the German middle classes after mid-century. Frevert argues that, rather than representing the adoption of aristocratic standards by the middle class, this indicates that the middle-class “derived their own meanings from these [aristocratic] models, meanings which directly corresponded to the bourgeois cult of individuality rather than being opposed to it.” One of the functions dueling had served for the aristocracy had been to distinguish them from the bourgeoisie, who were not legally permitted to fight duels. When the German middle classes adopted the duel, they too did not mean that the duel ought to be for everyone. The right to duel was one way in which the German bourgeoisie separated itself from the lower classes and even the lower middle classes, who lacked the education and cultural status necessary to transform physical confrontation from a dishonorable criminal act into an affair of honor. When a couple of Berlin waiters fought a duel in 1870, rather than being given honorable detention in a fortress, the usual punishment meted out to duelists who happened to be caught in the act, they were sent to prison. The Kaiser refused them clemency, with the concurrence of the Prussian Minister of Justice, who remarked that “the condemned belong to a class of society in which it is not customary to settle one’s affairs in a duel”. Formally, of course, the legal equality of persons had existed in Prussia since 1848. But in practice equality, even where it existed by law, was tempered by a strong sense of hierarchy whether when dueling in Berlin or voting at Tocqueville.481

This picture of hierarchy as a leading trait of nineteenth-century European culture needs to be supplemented in one important respect before its affinity with the language of capacity can be fully appreciated. The language of capacity always provided for the acquisition of capacity and hence the vote by individuals who had not previously had it, as well as for the loss of voting rights with the loss of capacity. Hierarchy in the liberal and democratic/bourgeois understanding embodied in the discourse of capacity was not something fixed, something personal initiative could not alter. The
social mobility of individuals was an essential part of this democratic understanding of hierarchy. Social mobility and hierarchy were two sides of the same coin.

**Contexts: social mobility and its limits**

Social mobility was both a fact and an ideal of mid-nineteenth-century European culture. An example from Germany will set the tone for the rest of Europe as well. During the German Empire (1871–1918), 90 per cent of all children attended elementary school, no more than 6–7 per cent attended all kinds of high school combined, and no more than 2 per cent received an *Abitur*, the high school diploma that allowed entry to university. On the other hand, after 1900 over half the university students came from lower-middle-class households, or middle-class households without a university-educated parent. The point of the juxtaposition is this: within a world in which the bulk of the population lived in poverty (in England, France and Germany about 80 per cent of the population was lower-class in 1870–1914), where most people would never attain the kind of social mobility symbolized by a university education or even a high school diploma, there were nevertheless a large number of individuals moving up. Looking beyond educational statistics to the kind of income figures that represent mobility from the lower classes into the middle class (a university education represented entry into the upper reaches of the middle class), we find a rapid growth in the number of those with middling incomes, even if their percentage of the population did not necessarily increase very fast before 1880. Most of society stayed poor, but a large number of individuals rose into the middle classes, even if not necessarily very far up in their ranks. Thus Daumard gives the following estimates for France: of the 15–20 per cent of the population that could be considered middle-class, about 10 per cent of these, that is 1.5–2 per cent of the total French population, were people who had risen from the lower classes. Thus a poor person had perhaps one chance in 50 of moving into the middle class. Whether this was a lot or a little depends on one’s point of view. Daumard says: “The penetration of people from the lower classes into the lower ranks of the middle class was not insignificant, either in absolute numbers or in proportion to the numbers of the middle classes. But these lower-class successes did not amount to much for the lower classes as a whole.”

Nineteenth-century Europe was a culture in which small steps up, from the lower classes into the lower middle classes, were a plausible hope for the elite of the poor. But most of the poor knew they were going to die poor. What was crucial from the viewpoint of liberalism, for the credibility of the liberal rhetoric that everyone would eventually deserve to vote, was that these lower-class successes existed and included significant numbers of individuals. In England, between 1850 and 1870 the number of people...
with middle-class incomes increased by 70 per cent, while the population increased by only 25 per cent. Those with incomes over £150/year rose from 307,000 in 1860 to 833,000 in 1894.\textsuperscript{483} For the progressive aspects of the language of capacity to make sense, it had to be possible for individuals to rise (and here the liberal program of civil rights and equal opportunity helped), many individuals had to rise in reality, and there had to be more rise than decline. Had there not been social mobility for individuals, a gradually if very slowly expanding middle class, this claim would have lacked credibility.

Some historians have suggested that in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially after 1870, liberal promises of social mobility ceased to be credible economically, and that this is one of the main reasons for liberal failure. To concentrate on its political aspects, this claim is based on the fact that liberals appealed in large part to the shopkeepers and artisans who began to be squeezed by economic developments after 1870. But this argument does not take into account the fact that the middle class, as defined by income figures, was expanding more rapidly after 1870 than before, even if it was white-collar workers rather than shopkeepers who were benefitting. Nevertheless, this observation does point to a reason for a decline in audience receptiveness to the discourse of capacity in one segment of the population, at least.

Throughout the nineteenth century, in any case, most people did not join the middle classes and, when suffrage was limited, did not become voters. “What remains to be explained, therefore, is not the contrast between the continuing immobility and the belief in mobility, but why this frustrating tension between the two terms functioned better than the old idea of partitioned worlds.”\textsuperscript{484} Most people did not rise very far, and yet they seemed to accept the rhetoric of self-improvement. The reason this rhetoric worked, as did the closely-related discourse of capacity, cannot be explained by statistics about social structure. It is to the other side of culture, to attitudes and values, that we need to look to see how the kind of social mobility that existed within the hierarchies of nineteenth-century Europe contributed to the resonance of the discourse of capacity.

Lord Palmerston summed up the crucial attitudes in his famous “Don Pacifico” speech to Parliament: “We have shown the example of a nation, in which every class of society accepts with cheerfulness the lot which Providence has assigned to it; while at the same time every individual of each class is constantly striving to raise himself in the social scale.”\textsuperscript{485} The discourse of capacity congratulated the social climber, flattered his self-esteem, and held him up as an example to others. It saw the elite as connected to the rest of the nation by ladders with many rungs, which all were encouraged to climb, in their own person or through their descendants. The crucial question was not, “Have you reached the middle class?”, or “Do you have a vote?”, it was “Have you improved yourself?” In a speech to medal-winners
at the South London Industrial Exhibition of 1865, Lord Palmerston compared social ascent to the great British horse race, the Derby:

Three or four hundred horses entered for the race, but only one won the prize. All the rest failed to obtain the object of their ambition. But those luckless horses that did not win the Derby won other races. If they were good for anything they all won something... And so I say to you – you are competitors for prizes... you may not become members of the Cabinet, but depend upon it, you will, by systematic industry, raise yourselves in the social system of your country – you will acquire honor and respect for yourselves and for your families.486

The point was that the race was open to all comers, and that all stood a chance of winning something.

Openness to social mobility was part and parcel of the nineteenth-century concept of hierarchy, and at the same time a justification of it. The Journal des Débats, one of the leading organs of French liberalism, repeatedly stressed the openness of the hierarchy to newcomers, as well as the possibility of decline for those who lacked the necessary virtues: “One acquires this position [bourgeois status], one loses it. Work, thrift, capacity give it; vice, dissipation, idleness lose it.” “Whoever in the lower classes has intelligence and honesty enters into the ranks of the bourgeoisie along with his family, and remains there with his family unless the spirit of waste comes to undo the work of industry and thrift... The bourgeoisie constantly recruits among the lower classes, there are constantly new bourgeois families.”487 What is at issue is not the accuracy of these statements by French and English liberals, it is the attitude they express. Whether contemporaries agreed or disagreed about the reality, they agreed with the attitude that social mobility was a good thing and a necessary part, not of an egalitarian society, but of a hierarchical culture. And they accepted the desirability of spreading the desire for social improvement. Lynch, in her study of family policy under the July Monarchy, argues that what was new about nineteenth-century discussions of the poor family, in contrast with seventeenth and eighteenth-century discussions, was that nineteenth-century middle-class activists thought the lower classes could solve their problems and rise in the social scale by adopting middle-class practices. What was new was that the middle class believed in the possibility of social mobility and change.488

None of this is meant to suggest that social mobility was unlimited, either in practice or by certain attitudes. We can extend to the Continent Bédarida’s summation of the English situation: “And so was built a delicately balanced hierarchy where bridges and barriers alternated. Mobility was counterbalanced by a mass of prejudices and taboos.” There was a heavy dose of social snobbery that extended down through all classes in the hierarchical societies of nineteenth-century Europe. Nevertheless, the accent was
on “removable inequalities”, as Bagehot put it. Removable for the individual, that is. What was missing from the conceptions of social mobility and hierarchy that flourished among the European middle classes from 1830 to 1885 was an opening for entire social groups and classes to change their status. Every kind of good fortune could be imagined for the individual, but there was little in the way of sociological imagination, little in the way of imagining change in the status of larger groups. Sociological imagination was not entirely missing – English liberals could speak of certain classes in 1867 having attained the political capacity their betters had possessed in 1832 – but English liberals were exceptionally open and even their sociological imagination was cramped. Furthermore, after 1880 liberals began to express doubts even about the social mobility of individuals. The Revue des deux mondes no longer vaunted the wonder of individuals rising, and liberal writers and officials in France, Germany and Austria tried to find ways to limit university and high school enrolments, which they thought were growing too fast and including people from unsuitable social backgrounds. There would not be enough room at the top for such people, and then where would they go? Would they not become revolutionaries?

Education is a good example of the limits to liberalism’s sociological imagination, limits that contributed much to liberalism’s decline. The educational systems that liberals sponsored allowed individuals but not classes to change places. It was a limited education, an education appropriate to society as it was, different according to the different stations those being educated were likely to occupy. All nineteenth-century educational systems followed this pattern – and all were either created or considerably influenced by liberals. Scholarships and means of ascension for the gifted, by all means, but for most, a system with built-in limits. This was an education based on the varying capacity of individuals to receive it (whether their capacity varied because of their individual limitations or their social situation depended on what kind of liberal was speaking). Most individuals would lack the capacity to be fully educated, just as in practice most lacked the capacity to be given the vote. All liberalisms shared an acute sense of the limited capacities of much of society, a sense that there was only a relatively small circle to whom, for example, the trust of voting could be extended without endangering society. This attitude Tocqueville characterized as essentially aristocratic, and it is another respect in which liberalism betrayed its ambivalent position between aristocratic and democratic ways of thinking:

It is not that aristocratic peoples absolutely deny man’s capacity to improve himself, but they do not think it unlimited. They think in terms of amelioration, not change; they imagine that the conditions of the societies of the future will be better but not really different; while admitting that humanity has made great advances and may be able to go still further, they assume in advance certain limits to such progress.
Liberals did not share the aristocratic assumption that things would not fundamentally change – they believed in and favored eventual universal suffrage. But for the present they wanted, in Tocqueville’s terms, amelioration and not change. Democrats for the future, aristocrats for the present, this tension was fundamental to even the most optimistic liberals of the nineteenth century. In the long run, it helped destroy liberalism.

**Contexts: defining the middle class**

What mattered about social mobility was not so much the ability of individuals to attain the highest ranks of society, but their ability to reach the middle class. But what did it mean to rise into the middle class? Once we leave behind Marxist or purely material definitions of class, and look at the many ways in which a hierarchical society assigned status, the question becomes complicated. Yet it remains an important question, because the ways in which the nineteenth-century middle classes defined themselves were also crucial to the ways in which liberals defined capacity. From the viewpoint of much of the discourse of capacity, what mattered most was deciding who really belonged to the middle classes, the classes which were presumed to have the capacity for political participation. The cultural contexts of liberal success and decline discussed in this chapter are mostly ones attributed by historians to the “bourgeoisie” or the “middle classes” – yet another Pandora’s Box of language. As these words have lost the precise relationship to the means of production given them by Marxism, “middle class” and “bourgeoisie” have taken on meanings more like those they possessed before Marx, meanings partly economic and partly non-economic. They have become descriptions of culture, ways to describe a characteristic combination of values, attitudes and social position. In order to understand both the success of the language of capacity and its decline, it is useful to put them into the context of middle-class culture. The point is not to derive liberalism as a discourse from middle-class culture, or vice versa, following some kind of base/superstructure model (which would be the base?), but to better understand the historical context in which liberal language was spoken and heard. Overall the middle classes made up about 15 per cent of European society in 1830–85, perhaps a little less at the beginning of the period and a little more at the end. But this 15 per cent was never a single bloc. It was a hierarchy, with overlapping groups jockeying for position on more than one scale. This is what encouraged contemporaries to speak of middle classes in the plural, and sometimes to emphasize their differences rather than their similarities. Both differences and similarities were real.

How the middle classes defined themselves in the mid-nineteenth-century helped determine how capacity was understood by liberals (the reciprocal is also true, the language of capacity helped the middle classes constitute themselves and define their boundaries). Middle-class status was not defined...
by wealth alone, and social mobility was rarely conceived in purely financial terms. To join the middle class meant not just acquiring a certain amount of capital, but practicing a certain lifestyle, acquiring and displaying certain moral values. Rich prostitutes were never members of the bourgeoisie. Wealth and ability were not separated from the moral conventions of society; in the nineteenth century the word “mérite” had moral connotations in French which it no longer has today.493 Thus in looking at how the nineteenth-century middle classes defined themselves, considerations beyond wealth must be taken into account. These considerations show how the social categories of nineteenth-century culture reinforced the discourse of capacity, and vice versa. By regarding the middle class as people with certain attitudes and values, more than as people with a certain relationship to the means of production, we can compare liberalism with a particular set of cultural presuppositions, rather than attempting the impossible task of collating diverse liberalisms with a particular set of economic interests that often had nothing particularly liberal about them. Liberalism as a political culture, a political language, was an aspect of what has come to be termed “bourgeois culture”. Indeed one of these bourgeois cultural presuppositions was the language of capacity. For example, the historian Kocka does not talk about “capacity” as such in discussing bourgeois values, but the words he does use are often synonyms for it: “respect for achievement”, “education”, “value of hard work”, “self-worth”, “rational lifestyle”, “striving for independence”, all of these are variations on the theme of capacity and the means to attain it.494 Likewise the pragmatism and utilitarianism often associated with the middle-class worldview were often fundamental to justifying the language of capacity against the language of rights, as was noted earlier, especially in Chapter 1.

Defining the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie in cultural terms is not easy now, nor was it then. It is nevertheless necessary: “In the course of a quest which can take many forms, the history of the bourgeoisie can serve as Ariadne’s thread . . .”. But it is tough to find the endpoint. Gambetta admitted in 1874 that “it is impossible to say where this French bourgeoisie starts or stops . . .”. “Bourgeois” and “middle class(es)” were fluid terms, yet both contemporaries and historians have found ways to set them apart from others. One modern historian gives three criteria for membership of the English middle class: 1) Consciousness that one was a member of it. 2) Having certain kinds of occupation, and not others, e.g. not manual labor, nor anything that was paid daily or even weekly. 3) A minimum income of £100–150/year, depending on locality. Of these three it is important to emphasize the first criterion. “In the end, the definition of the Victorian bourgeoisie must depend as much on self-perceptions, however wishful, as on solid economic facts”.495

These middle-class self-perceptions were not entirely based on wishful thinking, however. There were reasons to which even the poorest bourgeois
could point to emphasize the fact that he was not a member of the lower classes, reasons that had more to do with lifestyle, manners, morality and education than with cash in the bank or employment. Other things, too, entered into the picture. While some emphasize the importance of the kind of job one held, Chadwick’s famous 1842 Sanitary Report, while acknowledging the importance of occupation, said that in determining an individual’s class, most stress ought to be placed on how and where he resided, that is on the kind of house and the kind of neighborhood in which he lived. According to Rémusat, wealth was neither necessary nor sufficient to make one a bourgeois, being a bourgeois meant some knowledge of humanist culture (Bildung, his German counterparts would say), good manners, the possession of a certain amount of leisure. Germany was probably the country where most emphasis was placed on formal education in defining the middle class, especially its upper reaches. Here, from around 1800, the neo-humanist ideal of the development of the individual personality through education (theoretically many kinds of education but in practice the study of Greco-Roman literature) took strong root. Possession of humanist culture marked one as a bourgeois almost regardless of the state of one’s finances, in Germany and elsewhere. Conversely, wealthy bourgeois acquired culture or its trappings (i.e. large libraries and classical statuary) as a sign of status. In Germany, formal education was a prerequisite for obtaining coveted positions in the government bureaucracy, and thus higher education had considerable utilitarian value. But in France, lycée education was not so much a means of pre-professional training as a sign of the cultural distinction necessary for entering the upper reaches of the middle class.496

Besides educational criteria there were other non-economic or only partly economic criteria for membership in the middle classes. People naturally developed shorthand words for summarizing these varied markings of membership in the middle class, words such as “respectability” and “independence”. The definitions of “respectability” and “independence” differed among social strata, but the widespread use of the terms testified to the power of the attitudes and values they embodied, with some variations. Indeed Blackbourn suggests that in Germany it was in the realm of mores that the propertied and educated were most united:

This bourgeois identity included a shared belief in property, hard work, competition, achievement, and the rewards and recognition that were expected to flow from them; in rationality, the rule of law, and the importance of living life by rules. Correct table manners, sartorial codes, the emphasis placed on cleanliness and hygiene, the importance attached to timetables, whether in the school, on the railway or at mealtimes – all are instances of the way in which these bourgeois values informed everyday life.497
To this set of attitudes and values we might add Daumard’s description of bourgeois civility, based on the desire to obtain and grant respect while keeping others at a certain distance, both literally and figuratively. Moderation and prudence, in politics as in private life, went along with this. Above all, as recognized by historians of England, France and Germany, there was a common middle-class sentiment that life ought to be centered on the home, with a strong distinction between what was public and what was private, and an emphasis on the private (very much in conformity with Constant’s notion of private life and private freedoms as the center of modern life). This emphasis on the private was a distinction from aristocratic and lower-class life, centered on the public worlds of Court, country house, and pubs. Again, these lists of middle-class attitudes and values, despite some national differences of emphasis, would have been recognizable throughout Europe. Being respectable might also, depending on one’s social position and geographic location, include some or all of the following: owning a good suit for Sunday wear, having a savings account, being literate, never having received public assistance or lived in the poorhouse, not shouting in public, premarital virginity, having a servant, owning one’s house, etc. As Fitzjames Stephens put it in 1863: “To be respectable is . . . to come up to that most real, though very indefinite standard of goodness, the attainment of which is exacted of everyone as a condition of being allowed to associate upon terms of ostensible equality with the rest of the human race.” Thus “respectability” was made up of a variety of both non-economic and economic criteria, of varying accessibility, all of which, however, had moral importance attached to them in nineteenth-century culture.

Some desiderata for respectability had contradictory economic implications. Thrift was certainly a middle-class value, and possession of a savings account was a sign of respectability sometimes suggested as a criterion for the suffrage. But it was not uncommon for bourgeois families to make financial sacrifices for the sake of renting a high-status apartment, or for members of the lower-class to make similar sacrifices in order to have a Sunday suit or to avoid a pauper’s funeral. A certain level of display was as much a part of respectability as was thrift.

The way to attain respectability (and independence) was through work. Work itself was respectable, while idleness was not. Nineteenth-century liberals, from Guizot to John Stuart Mill, loved to celebrate the virtues of work. Mill was incensed when the poor were referred to as “the working classes”, implying that the middle classes did not work. Indeed, unlike the classical ideal of the leisureed citizen, free to devote himself to politics and the common good, liberalism largely became the apotheosis of work (this did not necessarily mean paid work – charity work was good too, and was appreciated as a form of labor). Speaking of French bourgeois society, Daumard writes: “Work was the cornerstone of the edifice, on the condition that the work was crowned with success”.
In the 1840s Chadwick described the ideal rise to respectability and independence as follows:

The man sees his wife and family more comfortable than formerly; he has a better cottage and garden: he is stimulated to industry, and as he rises in respectability of station, he becomes aware that he has a character to lose. . . . He strives more to preserve his independence, and becomes a member of benefit, medical and clothing societies; and frequently, besides this, lays up a certain sum . . . in the savings' bank. Almost always attendant upon these advantages, we find the man sending his children to be regularly instructed in a Sunday, and, where possible, in a day-school, and himself and his family more constant in their attendance at some place of worship on the Lord's day. . . .

The order in which middle-class values appear here is family, housing, work, respectability and rank, character/reputation, increased independence, thrift and provision for the future, education, religion. The economic and non-economic attributes of social mobility are mingled, and all are invested with moral and hierarchical value. Respectable conduct combined with hard work was sure to lead to “independence”, just as increases in education and property would lead to upward social mobility. The language of capacity would crown all this by saying that the respectable and independent classes of society possessed the capacity for political participation.

The paths that led to respectability were not for everyone, however. Middle-class culture limited its vision of social mobility to a minority, as already noted. To cite Chadwick again, “give [a man] the means of making himself comfortable by his own industry, and I am convinced by experience that, in many cases, he will avail himself of it.” NB: in many cases. Not all, or even a majority, were promised respectability. But all were given lots of good moral advice about how to attain it. The discourse of capacity was used to give advice and inculcate attitudes and values, thus reinforcing the culture from which it came.

The seeming cacophony of criteria for respectability and independence, or for membership in the middle classes, can be sorted into the two categories already noted. The two great ladders to middle-class status were property and education (Bildung und Besitz, as the Germans like to say and Anglo-Saxon historians love to repeat). These two terms are broadly construed. Under property we may subsume material criteria like housing, clothing, furniture, and under education things like manners, speech, values, family structure. Through looking at these various aspects of another person, insofar as they were visible, contemporaries could place that person’s rank in various hierarchies, and make an overall judgment about whether she or he belonged to the middle class and, in the case of males, possessed the capacity to vote.
Liberal ideas about what constituted the capacity to participate in politics were intimately related to liberals’ wider value systems, to the values they used to evaluate society and individuals. Adaptable as it was, liberal discourse neither was nor was intended to be, value-free. The language of capacity was a means of spreading liberal attitudes and values, as well as a way to determine who should be able to vote. Nineteenth-century liberals, rather than espousing an ideology of value-neutrality, were devoted to furthering their own values and those of middle-class culture.

These values and attitudes are often associated with the entrepreneurial middle class. But the point of defining the middle class here is not to echo the still-repeated refrain that “Liberalism was, of course, primarily a movement of the rising bourgeoisie”. Bourgeois culture, and liberalism, could and occasionally did include attitudes that ran counter to the commercial attributes associated with the middle class. For example, the kind of modern humanism characteristic of “aristocratic liberals” such as J. S. Mill, Tocqueville, and Jacob Burckhardt included an intense dislike for the “commercial spirit,” for money-grubbing, and represented one example of what McClelland describes as “an elite bourgeois ideology directed against a common bourgeois value system.” There was always a tendency for some on the liberal fringe to move towards the aristocratic edge of the aristocratic/democratic divide within which liberalism moved. Others moved towards the democratic edge. As Furet put it in his discussion of bourgeois culture, “the misfortune of the bourgeois is not only to be divided within himself. It is to offer up one half of himself for the criticism of the other half.” Bourgeois culture in the mid-nineteenth century contained many of the same centrifugal forces that destroyed liberalism. If for “bourgeois” in the quotation just cited we substitute “liberal,” we have here a pretty good description of the Party of Contradictions in decline, a party whose own contradictions and whose own arguments, taken by halves, offered its opponents, often come from its own ranks, powerful ammunition.

Despite these long-term weaknesses (what discourse/culture lacks some?), the language of capacity was well-suited to expressing the diversities and celebrating the similarities within middle-class culture. Liberalism’s affinities with important aspects of that culture are clear, and for most of the period 1830–85, in England, France and Germany, the discourse of capacity was the dominant form in which politics was expressed, and liberal parties were among the leading political forces in society. But from the 1870s on, the discourse of capacity was less widespread, and after 1885 the position of liberalism, as we have seen, was no longer the same. Why? Why was the language of liberalism, the discourse of capacity, no longer a successful means of political expression at the end of the nineteenth century? The twentieth century has shown that in the long run modern society is not very egalitarian outside the political realm. Why was modern society not prepared to tolerate political distinctions indefinitely, the distinctions the
language of capacity was created to justify, when it tolerated economic distinctions? Why were political distinctions between individuals and classes generally accepted during the liberal moment, and rejected afterwards, when so many other distinctions, often justified by some sort of appeal to capacity, continued to find acceptance? The answer lies in the evolution of bourgeois culture, the dominant force within democratic society.
Hence also we may see the reason why languages constantly change, take up new and lay by old terms. Because change of customs and opinions bringing with it new combinations of ideas, which it is necessary frequently to think on and talk about, new names, to avoid long descriptions, are annexed to them; and so they become new species of complex modes. 508

The usual suspects: the traditional explanations for the decline of liberalism

Two kinds of explanation have traditionally been presented for the decline of nineteenth-century European liberalism. One set of explanations emphasizes social causes, another political developments. Among the social explanations, a number of historians have developed the Marxist theme of the gradual disappearance of the middle class accompanying the development of industrial capitalism. In its most vulgar form, this strand of historiography sees the decline of liberalism as a result of the disappearance of the middle classes and the division of society into two groups, the proletarian democrats/socialists/communists vs the representatives of big capital, the conservatives/aristocrats. No room is left in the middle for petty bourgeois or liberals.

At a distant remove, Lothar Gall’s more subtle analysis of the “pre-modern” nature of liberal politics derives from this vision. He suggests that liberalism was fundamentally “pre-modern” in its outlook, based on a pre-industrial picture of society. 509 It was thus natural that liberalism declined as the world became increasingly modern and industrialized. This analysis refers to the obsolescence of the liberal vision of an ideal society of independent small tradesmen and farmers, in which everybody could hope to join the middle class and achieve economic, political and moral independence. It suggests that this ideal was increasingly unrealistic as the nineteenth century progressed and large-scale industrialization and the
development of mass marketing meant the relative decline of the petty bourgeoisie. When the liberal vision of a society of independent entrepreneurs and small farmers grew too estranged from reality, liberals were forced to abandon it, and with it their claims to represent the whole of society, giving up their bid for political hegemony.

The fundamental objection to the view that the middle classes disappeared, whether put in vulgar or sophisticated terms, is that the middle classes did not disappear or even decline in numbers. The sophisticated version has an element of truth in it, but obscures more than it reveals. If the description of liberalism as “pre-modern” means that nineteenth-century European or even German liberalism was less modern than it should have been, the implication is false. Liberalism’s goal was to be just as modern as the society around it, no more, no less. There was no reason for liberal politics to try to anticipate future economic developments before they actually happened. To attempt to go beyond contemporary social reality was precisely the kind of revolutionary attitude that liberals rejected. The purpose of liberal politics was to create a situation in which political representation and the state mirrored society as it really was, not as it might become. Liberalism’s social vision was not backward or pre-modern until c. 1880–90 at the earliest. The middle classes did not decline, and middle-class culture did not cease to be a leading factor in European society even after that time. Liberalism before the 1880s can be seen as backward only in relation to conceptions of modernity that adopt the perspectives of a later period when discussing the past. Even so, the real question is why liberalism didn’t or couldn’t adapt its vision to a society that had changed. Bourgeois culture persisted and even thrived in the twentieth century, yet liberalism did not. If liberalism was not pre-modern, why did it decline?

It declined, first slowly (usually) and then more quickly (usually), because the middle classes and middle-class culture changed and developed in ways the language of capacity was unsuited to express. Liberalism’s difficulties came largely from the fact that middle-class attitudes and values had spread beyond Guizot’s wildest dreams, and in so doing transformed European culture. It was not the disappearance of its audience that hurt liberalism, it was the fact that the audience began to overflow the seats allotted to it that brought the liberal performance to an end.

At first glance this is puzzling. Liberalism, as a continuation of the Enlightenment, had considerable emancipatory potential. It was not a defense of the status quo and never a reactionary movement. Liberal discourse provided enormous motivation for the individual, and a diverse set of paths by which individuals could improve themselves. Liberalism was “a philosophy of self-help.” All liberals could imagine and support social mobility by individuals. Liberalism was not only a culture of limits, it was a culture of possibilities. For the individual, liberalism always offered a path upwards – thus the kind words of all liberal parties and factions throughout the nine-
teenth century for education. But liberalism lacked a sociological imagination, the ability to adapt to wholesale social and cultural changes rather than retail change in the fortunes of individuals. As will be seen below, liberal rhetoric was dependent on cultural presuppositions that became ever more questionable after 1880, precisely at the time when bourgeois values were increasingly predominant in European society.

The traditional political explanation for the decline of liberalism, sometimes given in tandem with arguments about the decline of the middle classes and sometimes independent of them, is based on the decline of “the politics of notables,” and its replacement by “mass politics”. In other words, the replacement of a politics that relied on relatively small numbers of local notables, landowners, businessmen, clergy, teachers, and so on, by a politics in which party organizations mobilized large numbers of voters. When this transition took place varied both nationally and regionally, but overall it happened earlier in France and later in England. The German time-frame is a matter of some debate, with the 1890s as the traditional date (like England), and some historians recently arguing for the 1870s (like France), at least in certain regions. Whenever and wherever it happened, the transition to mass politics took more or less the same form. Instead of the dignified statement of political principles, followed perhaps by a brief local meeting of invited guests, now “campaigns were organized by electoral committees, which collected funds and canvassed voters; aspirants to office stumped constituencies, declaiming at banquets, lodge meetings and public assemblies; and what was not conveyed by word or gesture was communicated in print by local newspapers . . .”. At the same time as campaigning became more organized at the local level, national party organizations became more important, supplying funding, advice and, increasingly, candidates.

The way in which political language was used also changed. Throughout Europe, in the mid-nineteenth century the oratory that mattered had usually been speeches made in parliament. In the 1880s and especially after 1890, what counted were the speeches made at public meetings. Political parties had to adapt or go under. In many accounts liberalism, wedded to outdated political practices just as it was attached to outmoded social groups, could not adapt and so went under. German and English liberals were better at adapting than French, and managed to maintain themselves longer as a political force – which suggests some of the problems with the thesis that the transition to mass politics was enough to make liberalism disappear. But it is clear that “aloof and distant notable politics” did disappear, and that this traditional political explanation for liberal decline does have some relevance.

The French, so often the pioneers of modern political culture, took the lead in developing mass politics as well. After 1871 the new style of politics rapidly became prevalent in France. Gambetta crisscrossed the country giving
public speeches, “the traveling-salesman of the Republic”, in a way that had no parallel with the politics of the July Monarchy. The new politics left liberal elites vulnerable and inexperienced in their practice of universal suffrage. In this account French liberalism did not long survive the advent of mass politics. In Germany the transition to mass politics occurred later, or at least its effects on liberalism became evident somewhat later, in part because liberal electoral totals were buoyed by the prestige of unification in 1871, and by the liberal alliance with Bismarck until 1879. Not that liberals did not react with dismay to the leveling effects of universal suffrage on the prestige and authority of local notables even in the 1870s. When liberal electoral decline did come in Germany, “the decline of German liberalism between 1880 and 1900... stemmed in large part from the inability of liberal notables... to adapt their style of political leadership to the exigencies of mass politics as practiced by conservative rural populists”. An 1887 election in Hesse provides a classic example of this (and one equally applicable to the French liberalism of a decade previous). The liberal candidate “proceeded as before, arriving three weeks before the poll to meet with a few merchants, teachers and educated bourgeois (i.e., the local notables) behind closed doors. In the meantime, however, [the opponent] was stump ing the villages, achieving maximum visibility among the peasantry, and building the popular momentum for his unexpected triumph” (this story nicely parallels the liberal Rémusat’s defeat in the Paris by-election of 1873).

In England the decline of notable politics was slowest among the three nations studied here. Although the Second Reform Act of 1867 “launched the transition towards the mass politics in which we now live”, the transition was very slow. Still, “during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Britain entered the age of mass democratic politics...”. The same transformation visible in France and Germany occurred in English politics: “the new environment also encouraged two more modern responses, machine politics and the proliferation of appeals to opinion by public speaking”. Chamberlain’s National Liberal Federation began the process of creating the kind of party organization appropriate to the new era. The old ad hoc electoral committees suitable to notable politics were replaced by permanent local party organizations. Gladstone had been affronting Whig notables with his public speaking tours for years, but his famous 1886 remark represents a turning point in its explicit disavowal of notable politics: when it came to matters of “truth, justice and humanity, ... all the world over, I will back the masses against the classes”.

The advent of mass politics has often been considered one of the major causes of liberal decline, and sometimes the sole cause. What Nipperdey says of German liberals has been said by other historians of other countries (albeit least of England): “Liberalism is a thing of educated, bourgeois notables; when the people enter politics, they bring difficulties with them”.

The Decline of Liberalism
However, this thesis has recently been strongly challenged for Germany. If it is not true for Germany, and it has never been strongly argued for England, the argument that liberal decline in France was caused by the advent of mass politics would seem to be either exceptional or due for re-examination itself, and thus the idea that the decline of liberal parties was largely due to the rise of mass politics would have to be abandoned. The German case thus demands a more extended examination here.

In Sperber’s view, German liberals adapted rather well to the rise of mass politics. When German liberal parties lost votes, it was not, in general, because they were lackadaisical notables campaigning against energetic and organized opponents, as in the 1887 Hessian election described above (and overall the 1887 elections were a great success for German liberals – the last they would have). Sperber agrees with the conventional wisdom that the 1890s were a turning-point in the fortunes of German liberalism, in which the liberal parties lost substantial numbers of voters to both the right and the left, but this was not the result of notables’ ineptitude in the face of mass politics. Mass political participation actually peaked in 1887, the last great liberal success, won using essentially the old methods of notable politics. The liberals, especially the Progressives, were fairly well-organized for mass politics in the decade thereafter. When they lost massive numbers of voters, they lost despite their adoption of modern political techniques. Eugen Richter’s Progressive Party was a triumph of early electoral organization, and nevertheless it faltered badly in the 1890s. Although Sperber compares Richter to the English liberal leaders Cobden and Bright because of similarities in their political positions, in other ways Richter seems more like Gladstone or even Chamberlain (although Richter was a ferocious opponent of tariffs), because of his insistence on central political organization and on efforts to reach out to the masses in speeches and pamphlets. He wrote an “ABC of Politics” in catechism style to appeal to lower-class voters. “Richter’s experience suggests . . . that a solid organization, successful fundraising, and an extensive press and pamphlet literature were not enough for a party to succeed . . .”. The other main German liberal party, the National Liberals, also moved towards modern styles of political organization, although more slowly, but this did not help them either.

Sperber suggests an alternative explanation for the decline in German liberals’ electoral fortunes, and one that is particularly intriguing in light of the lack of any coherent liberal position on economic issues in the mid-nineteenth century. He suggests that “as economic issues became more central to popular politics in the 1890s, but the liberal parties remained focused on other questions, a large proportion of their voters went off to other parties or lapsed into apathy”. Liberal parties continued to emphasize the constitutional questions dear to them but no longer of much interest to the electorate, or made nationalist appeals that were largely beside the point in these elections. Unable to take a concerted stand on the issue of tariffs,
the liberals lost urban voters to the Social Democrats and agrarian voters to
the Conservatives and Anti-Semites because liberals continued “to campaign
on Bismarckian themes in the 1890s or by refusing to take a stand on this
key economic question.” When the German liberal parties emerged from
their tailspin at the end of the decade, it was with a substantially new look.
Nationalism now largely replaced both the discourse of capacity and con-
stitutional questions in their rhetoric, and they took clear economic posi-
tions (although National Liberals and Progressives differed considerably in
which economic positions they took). But this was not enough to restore
them to their once-dominant status.518

Sperber suggests another way in which German liberalism changed in
the 1890s: after that decade, the German liberal parties were no longer the
parties of the Protestant middle class. Liberals no longer dominated the
electoral allegiance of this group, once the core of their support. Most of
the Protestant middle class deserted liberalism in the 1890s, and when the
liberal parties recovered, it was not through the reconquest of old voters,
but through gaining the allegiance of new ones. In a real sense, then, the
1890s were the end of the old German middle-class liberalism. By the decade
of the 1900s liberal support came evenly across class lines. This new support
was not as reliable as the old, however. Far more than was the case with
other parties, German liberal voters after the 1890s were swing voters, not
to be depended on for the next elections. The rise of mass politics in the
1890s was clearly antithetical to the discourse of capacity, but Sperber’s work
demonstrates it was not fatal to German liberalism, nor even necessarily very
harmful to it.

Before ending discussion of the political explanations for the decline of
liberalism, one further topic needs to be addressed. A phenomenon some-
times associated with the rise of mass politics and the decline of liberal
parties is the increase in special-interest groups and various kinds of politi-
cal pressure organizations. In Germany the late 1880s and 1890s saw the
foundation of a mass of single-issue lobbies, often with large memberships,
from the Colonial Society and the Navy League to the Zionists and various
Peasants’ leagues. One historian goes so far as to describe the post-1886
British Liberal Party as little more than a collection of pressure groups. These
groups used political language appropriate to their own cause, no longer the
discourse of capacity, but instead the language of rights and needs, which
was generally more useful to them. This, of course, was particularly the case
when it came to economic issues about which the discourse of capacity had
little to say. The existence of these pressure groups, whose organization
and fund-raising ability often compared favorably with those of the liberal
parties, helped encourage party splits when the discourse of capacity was no
longer enough to hold together the liberal coalition, in a world in which
the political issues (and especially the economic ones), and the culture had
changed radically from that of the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, British
liberalism did split in 1886, into Unionist and Home Rule factions. On the surface, the fracture was due to the Irish question, but beneath the surface lay a whole series of other internal contradictions, as ever with liberalism, which the discourse of capacity could no longer hold together. German liberalism had always been split on the national level, but in the 1870s there was not much local distinction between National Liberal and Progressive groups, whereas by the mid-1880s there was.519

One kind of leading late-nineteenth-century pressure group had a special relationship to liberalism: nationalism. Nationalism and liberalism were logically although often not psychologically distinct phenomena. Logically, their prime overlap was in the positive weight both gave to the creation of a political community. Both also emphasized autonomy and self-determination. In the earlier part of the nineteenth century, these common desires were enough to make them almost inseparable fellow-travelers. However nationalism, despite its earlier role in cementing liberal alliances and attracting disparate groups to the liberal fold (yet more potential contradictions!) played a destructive role in late liberalism. Nationalism was a factor in the rise of liberalism, especially in Germany, but in the end it was perhaps an even more decisive factor in its decline throughout Europe, particularly in England (the Irish Home Rule question) and in Germany (as early as the mid-1860s but especially after 1879). The growing importance of nationalism increasingly made the language of capacity seem both inappropriate and old-fashioned, because the language of capacity made distinctions that, when seen through the eyes of late-nineteenth-century nationalism, were opposed to the nation's unity. Liberalism, with all its reservations and contradictions, could never be nationalist enough, at least not while remaining liberal. To a certain extent nationalist rhetoric took over the function that the discourse of capacity had once fulfilled. It acted to hold together disparate social interests in ways the discourse of capacity no longer could, and in the German liberal electoral revival of 1900–14, nationalism played a role.520 But insofar as nationalism served this function, it also served to replace what had been the content and the language of liberalism in the mid-nineteenth century. Nationalism was indeed a contributing factor to the decline of liberalism – but not the only one, or even the most important.

It may be questioned whether this linguistic development was inevitable. After all, the language of capacity had been developed in part in order to express the claims of various social groups and social interests. Why did such groups and interests no longer find it possible to express their desires in the language of liberalism? Why couldn’t liberalism be as successful as it had been before? The transition from a politics of notables to mass politics accompanied the disappearance of the language of capacity and the decline of liberal parties, but for the most part does not explain it. It is helpful to bear it in mind in accounting for the slow decline of liberalism in the
decades before 1885, but hardly useful at all in explaining the rapid disappearance of the language of capacity from political use afterwards. The more or less rapid expansion of the suffrage between 1830 and 1885 also doubtless played some role in liberal decline. However, the persistence of weakened but still formidable German and British Liberal parties through several decades of mass politics and broad suffrage (although the language of capacity declined more rapidly than party organizations did) suggests that the new form of politics explains only a little of the demise of liberalism.521

The watershed of 1885

What happened to liberalism at the end of the century was related to changes that occurred in nineteenth-century culture contemporaneously with the decline in the discourse of capacity. These changes did not happen all at once, of course. They had been slowly accumulating over decades, just as the discourse of capacity was experiencing greater challenges from right and left. The slowly accumulating nature of these cultural changes thus moves more or less in time with the slow decline that the discourse of capacity experienced in the decade or two, depending on locale, before 1885. But cultural changes appear to have reached a critical mass toward the end of the century (or perhaps political language simply lagged behind them). Two kinds of cultural change in particular made the discourse of capacity increasingly incomprehensible to its audience in the years after 1885 – the changing nature of the middle classes and the spread of consumer culture.

The fact is that the 1880s appear as a watershed of European history in an amazing number of respects. While historians often discern a certain unity in the broader period 1815–1914, the histories that cover this period typically note a break somewhere between 1870 and 1899. The period 1815–1914 is united by the dominance of middle-class culture. What makes 1885 (the date when suffrage debates ended, though just a convenient midpoint from the standpoint of cultural change), a watershed is the transformation which took place in bourgeois culture around this time. In Tocquevillian terms, in 1885–1914 Europe remained a society in transition between aristocracy and democracy, but the transition had suddenly speeded up, and the end was in sight.

Many things happened to European culture in the years around 1885. Contemporaries noticed the change. In France the founding of the Third Republic in 1871 and its consolidation in 1877 clearly marked an epoch. In Germany, the foundation of the Empire in 1871 and the end of the Kulturkampf and Bismarck’s alliance with the liberals in 1879 marked others, although in Sperber’s analysis the period 1887–90 was arguably the most important turning-point. In England there is even more room for debate over periodization. A. V. Dicey put the end of liberal England in 1870, Elie Halévy in 1900, and Virginia Woolf in 1910. Woolf’s reasons are worth
quoting: in 1910 “human character changed . . . all human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature”. What Woolf was referring to is what will be described below as a change in the way people understood hierarchy, a change which accompanied the rise of consumer culture. By most estimates, pace Woolf, this cultural watershed was passed in England too in the 1880s, although a later date would help account for the relative persistence of British liberalism.522

The significance of this watershed will vary depending on the perspective from which it is viewed. To a certain extent, all or almost all the developments sketched in this chapter were underway for a considerable time before 1885. Insofar as they were, they helped contribute to the slow but perceptible decline in the use of the language of capacity, the increasing challenge from democratic rights talk that began in the 1870s, or even earlier in the French case. After 1885 these developments accelerate both quantitatively and qualitatively, and the growing cascade of cultural changes accompanies the disappearance of the language of capacity from political use.523

How did European culture after the watershed differ from European culture before it? To give only an arbitrary selection: important demographic changes occurred around 1880. In Britain fertility peaked in the mid-1870s, and after 1878 entered a long-term decline. The age of women at marriage rose, and marriage became less frequent, both contrary to what had previously happened in eras of economic prosperity. To look at a very different set of phenomena, the 1880s and 1890s saw the intensive development of the department store and of “shopping” as an activity, an activity portrayed, both in contemporary novels such as Zola’s Au Bonheur des Dames and in today’s academic studies, as a challenge “to received notions of stable class and gender identities, and clearly demarcated physical spaces”. The “flâneur”/shopper, described by Baudelaire in the 1860s as a leisured male, turned into a woman, and a woman of undetermined class at that. To further confuse established ideas of class, the lower classes even began to smoke cigars and drink champagne on occasion.524

These changes extended into every corner of European culture, from the living room to the ministerial Cabinet. In France, a study of furniture styles reveals the 1880s as a watershed too. In this account, the period 1789–1880 was a transitional one (which, in the terms developed here, marks it as the period of liberalism), while in 1880 a new stylistic regime began. Throughout Europe, a mass press made its appearance, cheap newspapers appealing to a literate but uneducated audience. White-collar employment increased by leaps and bounds, often badly paid yet distinguishing its personnel from the traditional lower classes. In Germany in 1882, white-collar employees numbered 530,000, 4 per cent of the total workforce. By 1895 their numbers were over 1.1 million, 7.8 per cent of the workforce, and in 1907, 2 million,
11.7 per cent of the workforce. The persistent political prominence of the European aristocracy began to fade after 1880. After 1880 bourgeois increase their presence in the British Cabinet (1880–95, 47 aristocrats and 30 bourgeois; 1895–1905, 17 aristocrats and 21 bourgeois; 1905–1914, 13 aristocrats and 23 bourgeois). 1885 is also the jumping-off point for the number of British peerages awarded to commercial and manufacturing representatives. Their proportion of the whole had held steady at around 12 per cent since 1846, but after 1885 rose to 30 per cent and remained at that level until 1911. In France, after 1877 the aristocracy disappeared from the ministries they had once dominated, except for the military departments. Even the Prussian army, the great fortress of aristocratic privilege, saw aristocratic army officers decline from 65 per cent in 1880, to 45 per cent in 1893, and 30 per cent in 1913, despite conscious efforts after 1895 to halt the decline.

All these changes add up to a growing homogenization of European culture: “by the 1890s we had moved into a new era of mass or homogenized culture”. These “profound social transformations that took place from the 1880s, in which working-class culture and much else was remade” could not fail to have an effect on the way in which political language was used. But in what way did they affect the discourse of capacity in particular?

It has always been difficult to make convincing arguments that trace changes in ideas or political language directly to broad social changes. They almost never display a one-to-one correspondence – England was the first European nation to experience consumer culture, and yet the one where notable politics persisted longest. Focusing on two aspects of these changes may make the connection between the growing homogeneity (or “democratization”, in Tocquevillian terms) of Europe and the decline of liberalism stronger. First, the new middle class, by its very size, seemed to overturn some central assumptions of the language of capacity. Second, the new developments in consumer culture re-ordered the conception of hierarchy which had underpinned liberal language. These developments contributed to the redefinition of the middle classes in ways which also militated against traditional liberal vocabulary. In so doing, they contributed to the growing political irrelevance of the language of capacity, and of liberalism as the mid-nineteenth century had understood it.

**The new middle class**

The middle class increased rapidly in fin-de-siècle Europe. What matters here is less a rise in real income for the lower classes (although that occurred) than different choices in how they disposed of their income. The real growth of the middle classes came through the acceptance of a considerable proportion of middle-class attitudes, values, and the behaviors associated with them by large sections of the lower classes. Historians, particularly of
England, have indeed wondered whether this process did not start earlier. If so, it would only testify yet again to the variable time-lag between cultural changes and political/linguistic changes. In any case, the *bourgeoisement* of the lower classes had advanced much farther by 1885, in France and Germany as well as England.

The progressive imitation of the middle classes by the lower classes took place on many levels. For example, domestic servants would go home and try to duplicate as much as possible their middle-class employers’ furnishings. Thus Flora Thompson describes her maids’ behavior:

> Instead of the hard Windsor chairs of her childhood’s home, she would have small ‘parlour’ chairs with round backs and seats covered with horsehair or American cloth. The deal centre table would be covered with a brightly coloured woollen cloth between meals and cookery operations. On the chest of drawers . . . would be displayed – a best tea service, a shaded lamp, a case of silver teaspoons with the lid propped open. . . . Somewhere in the room would be seen a few books and a vase or two of flowers.

The need to seem “respectable” by the display of furnishings typical of the middle class was all-important among the English lower classes: in Salford, “a draped lace curtain was a necessity for any family with pretensions to class, and oil cloth on the floor, if only in the kitchen”.

This was conspicuous consumption. These things were mostly for display, not use – what was often used would be much humbler. Some middle-class observers might decry the “waste”, but they were missing the larger point. As the middle classes had emulated the aristocracy, now the lower classes were doing their best to imitate them, making financial sacrifices in order to attain a middle-class appearance of respectability, instead of buying more gin. English per capita alcohol consumption declined after the 1870s. Even if their incomes did not rise to middle-class standards, thus preventing them from being as respectable as they would have liked, by “cultural or moral criteria”, “the great majority of the mid-Victorian working classes were thought to be independent and self-respecting . . .”. Independence and respectability had always been the identifying marks of the middle classes, and frequently the criteria for political capacity and the vote. To the extent that the lower classes were characterized, based on “cultural or moral criteria”, as independent and self-respecting, it became harder to justify excluding them from political participation. To look at one of these cultural and moral criteria, the eminently middle-class virtue of thrift, by 1880 30 per cent of the adult male English population were members of “friendly societies”, organizations devoted to providing the lower classes with savings accounts and insurance benefits and requiring monthly payments. If one is willing to allow membership in a burial society as evidence of thrift (rather than proof of a lower-class feeling for the necessity of
display), then the number is over 60 per cent. Even at the lower figure, it would mean adding another 25–30 per cent to the 15 per cent of England that qualified as middle-class by the standard of income. By looking at the figures for insurance policies, by the late 1870s one can even bring the number of the thrifty to 75 per cent of the population.531

Some historians, while admitting the increase in the number of “respectable poor” at the end of the nineteenth century, maintain that this respectability was essentially different from middle-class ideas, and represented a new lower-class culture rather than the adoption of middle-class values. Gareth Stedman Jones argues that the new lower-class culture of London, visible in the 1870s, dominant from the 1890s, was based on the music-hall, pub and race-course, not the evening-school, church and library. But Jones too notes that a watershed is crossed around 1885, and recognizes that if lower-class culture might have its own peculiarities, and might not conform in all ways to middle-class ideals (did middle class culture live up to them either?), it had in important respects become much closer to middle-class ways. Citing Charles Booth, the great middle-class investigator of late-nineteenth-century London, he notes: “There is an inescapable tone of assurance, even of complacency, running through his final volumes – in marked contrast to the anxiety which coloured his first investigations.” This difference was not due to any improvement in the material conditions of the lower classes, but to “the growing stability and orderliness of London working-class society”, that is, to their growing acceptance of many social norms hitherto confined to their social superiors. 532

It was not just in England, pioneer though it was in many respects, that middle-class attitudes and values spread throughout society, and even to the aristocracy. The increasing embourgeoisement of the European aristocracy in the late nineteenth century cannot be overlooked. John Stuart Mill noted it in the 1850s, and the Duc d’Aumale, the son of King Louis-Philippe of France, in the 1860s: “Let us be serious... we are all, whether we like it or not, bourgeois men, and that is indeed all we are.... what the bourgeoisie wants today almost all of France will want tomorrow.” 533 If one couldn’t make distinctions between aristocrats and bourgeois any more, of what use was the language of capacity?

More important, however, for the demise of the language of capacity was the spread of bourgeois values to the classes below. In France this was greatly aided by an extensive system of public education which had as part of its mission the teaching of values. After 1877 these were the secular values of Republican France, and they were very much the values of the bourgeoisie: “prepared by bourgeois, they incontestably tended to make people accept, even love, bourgeois society”. Thrift was taught in math class, where the students figured out how much money could be saved by not smoking or not going to the café for a year, with the conclusion that such behavior would eventually produce enough savings with which to buy a house. “Thus
he [the teacher] prepared us to dominate our instincts and our desires in the name of enlightened self interest”. The teachings of the French primary school found an increasingly receptive audience in the years after 1880. While at first parents were hostile to it, either from loyalty to the Catholicism previously taught (which had also helped inculcate many middle-class values and attitudes) or from resistance to middle-class norms, by the end of the century parents were reported as being generally supportive. As a practical demonstration of support, by 1905 there were 662,000 children in mutual aid societies based on the elementary school, making regular contributions to insure each other against financial misfortunes. What could be better proof of the spread of middle-class values? If there has been debate over the extent to which British and French culture were subject to bourgeois attitudes and values, it is nothing like the debate over such questions in Germany. This debate, however, seems finally to have been decided in favor of the bourgeoisie. “Even the principals of the controversy have begun to admit...that middle-class values and patterns of social interaction became dominant by the turn of the century...”. Again, this was as much a matter of their spreading upwards to the nobility as downwards to the proletariat, but here it is the lower classes which are our chief concern. And in this respect Wehler notes that “the proletariat likewise oriented itself increasingly towards the claims and practices of bourgeois culture, which from the most varied directions seeped into supposedly independent working-class culture”. The German case need not be explored in detail. As in France and England, bourgeois culture spread “astonishingly widely” in the late nineteenth century: “When here by culture we mean not just high culture...but norms and values,...lifestyles, ways of thinking and daily practices...nobility, peasantry, proletariat – they maintained their own cultural spheres. But nevertheless all stood under strong pressure to adapt themselves to the model, to the prescriptive character presented by bourgeois culture”. Such was the situation throughout late nineteenth-century Europe. If everyone, or almost everyone, or the majority, or something approaching it, appeared to be bourgeois in one way or another, how could one distinguish those with capacity from those without it? The capacity to participate in politics without bringing on anarchy would seem so universal in a bourgeois world that it made more sense to talk about it as a natural right. Those who still did not think that everyone who wore a decent suit was politically capable seemed merely eccentric, in a world where everyone wanted a decent suit, and anyone could have one, if only on credit.

**Consumer culture and the transformation of hierarchy**

Recent historical work on nineteenth-century European societies, particularly those of France and England, has tended to focus on the development
of consumer culture, partly replacing the vocabulary and concerns of an earlier generation of historians, interested in *embourgeoisement* and "mass culture", with discussions about the rise of the "consumer". Whatever vocabulary one may choose to frame it in, what is being suggested here is that the spread of middle-class attitudes and values to a large portion of the working class was a part of the creation of this new consumer culture. Middle-class attitudes and values encouraged new demand for objects and for new means by which to obtain them (cheap mass-produced goods, low-priced department stores, widespread availability of credit, etc.).

Most historians currently accept the notion of a first stage of consumer culture that came into being throughout Europe in the latter part of the eighteenth century. This first stage of consumer culture, limited in scope and usually maintained within hierarchically structured limits, harmonized well with the language of capacity, as the example of the Great Exhibition shows (see Chapter 4). But as with so many other things, a new stage of consumer culture (or its invention, in some eyes) started roughly in the period 1870–1890: "consumerism took a definably new shape toward the end of the nineteenth century", "the generations of the 1880s and, especially, of the 1890s were richly inventive in what we would now call consumer lifestyles". There is, as usual, some dispute about this periodization. For example, Auslander argues that her "bourgeois period" of furniture consumption in 1880–1914 should not be confused with mass consumption because mass consumption requires the frequent replacement of goods, which did not become common until the 1950s, not just their acquisition, which became widespread in the 1880s. Gunn maintains that consumer culture did not become entrenched in Britain until after the First World War. But even if later there was a further significant evolution of consumerism, the qualitative change that took place around 1885 seems to be generally admitted.

One of the characteristics of consumer culture was that people were encouraged to express themselves through the ownership and display of things, which was increasingly possible for many. In giving examples of the imitation of bourgeois norms, it is common to emphasize thrift, but it is perhaps even more important to emphasize consumption and display. A respectable individual did not wear rags in order to increase his weekly bank deposit. In the late nineteenth century, much of middle-class identity was, as always, established by patterns of material display and consumption. But these patterns were now distributed differently across a society that had widely accepted middle-class values and become a "consumer culture".

In the late nineteenth-century advertising appeals changed their tenor too. Instead of vaunting the utility of a product, one emphasized instead emotional and sensual values. It was noted at the Paris Exposition of 1900
that the advertising increasingly appealed to the fantasies of the consumer, to the imagination, not to utility. The combination of hedonism with romanticism that Campbell suggests is the essence of consumer culture was thus becoming accessible to a much larger number than had hitherto been the case. This change in emphasis from fact to fantasy pleased neither conservatives nor socialists. It did not accord with bourgeois values either, as the earlier nineteenth-century had understood them. But it was part of the process which made the image of middle-class respectability almost universally accessible, that middle-class image which had come to be coveted by a very large proportion of society.539

But real possession, if only of a mass-produced imitation, was also part of consumer culture. Advertising was intended to sell products, and to buy those products consumers had to have money, which was often not at hand. The solution was credit. Credit was nothing new, and poor people had been buying meat on credit at the local butcher shop for a very long time. What was new in the late nineteenth-century was the way in which goods designed for the middle class, or to produce the image of a middle-class existence, became widely available on credit: “couriers had customarily bought their luxuries with borrowed money; at the other end of the social scale, the poor had long purchased food on credit. During the consumer revolution the habit of borrowing permeated the ranks of the bourgeoisie, and credit buying began to be used for a wide range of goods”. Installment plan purchases became the rage. In France the Dufayel firm, selling household goods on a 20 per cent down-payment, served over 3 million customers between the 1870s and 1900. Selling on credit allowed the masses to purchase the trappings of respectability that enabled them to produce a middle-class appearance. Once the poor ate from wooden dishes and the bourgeois from porcelain. Now, while the quality of the decoration might differ, everyone could eat from porcelain. Middle-class culture could spread in ways that were impossible earlier in the century. Now everyone could obtain, thanks to credit, that well-dressed look which “causes an inward peace of mind which religion is unable to bestow”, as an 1884 cartoon put it, or at least the state of grace represented by a middle-class external appearance. Lower-class individuals wishing to emulate their betters could now improve their appearance without improving their character, an option hitherto restricted to more exalted social strata.540 They might even choose to take on this appearance and take it off when convenient, a particularly upsetting notion from the viewpoint of the language of capacity.541

Middle-class external appearances, the Sunday suit, not spitting in public and other forms of public self-restraint, all these things were increasingly widespread in the new consumer society. In a world where public appearances were similar, what was the sense of making public distinctions between people, what was the justification for assuming that the mass of
the population was incapable of participating in public life, in politics? How could the language of capacity make sense in a world where so many people were capable, thanks to credit, of buying a middle-class appearance if they wanted one, and where almost everyone did seem to want one?

Liberals who spoke the language of capacity were not necessarily sympathetic to the new consumerism. They were prone to talk about “vulgarity”, ignoring the fact that the parody of their own taste expressed in mass-market copies was the best sign of the penetration of middle-class values to a larger audience. In fact, “one of the strengths of this bourgeois regime was persuading those who aspired to its ranks to consume in a bourgeois fashion, while excluding those who did not do so”. But while the new consumer society may appear to academic critics of the late twentieth century as reinforcing the domination of the middle class, it profoundly upset earlier notions of hierarchy: “Consumerism is . . . an open invitation, and individuals from various groups both aspire to and achieve the capacity to enjoy consumer items outside their accepted group boundaries. This is one of the reasons each phase of consumerism generates complaints: “inappropriate” people . . . buy entertainment tickets when they “should” be saving their money . . .”

The language of capacity was a form of elitism – not everyone was capable, at least not in the present. One of liberalism’s corollaries was the assumption that at present not everyone wanted to be capable, that is, had the desires or possessed the necessary attitudes and values to want to attain the status of a voter, of a member of the middle classes. The language of credit, of consumerism, assumed the opposite. It assumed that everyone was capable of buying the trappings of a middle-class existence, and wanted to. Everyone deserved to own object x, everyone deserved credit – except bankrupts, bankruptcy being one of the few things which generally made one incapable of either voting or getting credit at the turn of the century.

The extension of middle-class culture and its simultaneous transformation into consumer culture occurred at the expense of the nineteenth century’s notion of society as a hierarchy, and thus at the expense of the relevance of the language of capacity. Unlike those who spoke the language of capacity, democrats who saw the people as an undifferentiated whole and political participation as a right (like credit!) could only benefit from the spread of consumer culture. French Republicans made a cult of the public in ways French liberals never could, ways which were familiar, however, to French advertisers.

Yet from a liberal perspective it would be a mistake to describe consumer culture in purely negative terms. In terms of civil rights, consumer culture presented many positive features. It encouraged equality before the law. For example, the growing consumption of goods helped increase the legal rights of women, who were often in control of household consumption, and thus
needed credit, something hitherto impossible for those of their gender. But consumer culture played havoc with older ideas about hierarchy – as the example of extending women's rights also shows. And this in turn contributed to making the language of political liberalism incomprehensible.

After the watershed of 1885, people did not suddenly view each other as equals. Hierarchy did not disappear from European culture, but it was transformed. This worked in two ways, both damaging to the language of capacity. One way has already been discussed – the broadening of the middle classes and the spread of consumer culture undermined some of the acknowledged public differences between people and the sense of deference which accompanied them. This encouraged what has been described as a "general cultural reorientation in this period [1880–1910] towards pluralism and democracy". Such a reorientation left no room for the language of capacity as a political discourse, except when used in a universal way which made it into a minor sub-dialect of the language of rights (e.g. "we are all capable of exercising our rights").

The second way in which liberalism suffered was not through the attenuation of social differences, but through another, simultaneous redrawing of the social map in the 1880s which worked to accentuate social difference: the increasingly widespread view of politics as class struggle. It is a curious fact that at the same time as consumer culture was entering a new stage, at the same time as bourgeois culture was achieving its greatest success and spreading most, the idea that politics was a fight between the rich and the poor, workers and owners, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, became institutionalized in European politics. The period 1885–1914 is when the great European socialist parties were founded, at the same time as it is a turning-point in consumer culture.

Socialism took advantage of the increased appetite for material possessions consumerism created, and the decline of deference which it encouraged, but otherwise acted very differently. However, one way in which consumerism and socialism worked together was to destroy the audience for liberalism. The rise of socialist parties, parties based on a two-class rather than a hierarchical vision of society, helped to destroy the language of capacity, just as the spread of the middle class, socialism’s enemy, also worked to make the language of capacity irrelevant. Once people accepted the socialist view that politics was a matter of the expression of one of two classes’ interest, then the language of capacity fell on deaf ears. In this context the liberal argument that one needed certain capacities to be able to judge one’s own interest and the interest of one’s class seemed merely a device with which to cloak the self-interest of the rich, and the language of capacity was not a flexible means of integrating the social hierarchy, but a tool for distinguishing the class that could vote from the class which could not. In other words, a device of the bourgeoisie to fight the proletariat, which the proletariat must reject.
Liberalism and democratic society

The inability of the language of capacity to deal with the new consumer culture, and to express the new forms of a successful bourgeois culture, account for much of the decline of the language of capacity, and thus for much of the decline of nineteenth-century European liberalism. Bourgeois culture flourished, but the discourse of capacity did not, because the discourse of capacity was unable to adapt to the changes in bourgeois culture that reached critical mass in the 1880s. Liberalism’s straddle between aristocratic and democratic society was increasingly unstable as aristocratic society dwindled further into the distance and as the middle class developed in ways unforeseen by nineteenth-century liberals.

Both the rise of consumer culture and the rise of socialism can be seen as aspects of the increasing democratization of European society. Consumer culture was designed to enable ever-larger numbers of people, with ever-lower financial means, to experience a lifestyle that was, in appearance at least, ever more alike. There is no intent to repeat here Tocquevillian laments about the dictatorship of mediocrity and the homogenization of taste; the point to note is that consumer culture was more egalitarian than the middle-class vision of hierarchy that had been widespread before 1885. That socialism was based on a democratic ideal of equality will hardly be contested. Thus both these democratic phenomena, consumer culture and socialism, were naturally opposed to liberalism, at least to that portion of liberalism that was based on the discourse of capacity. Civil rights could be reconciled with democracy. The discourse of capacity could not be, at least not in politics.

The language of capacity was increasingly useless in some of the leading cultural and political contexts of Europe after 1885. Liberalism was unable to assimilate the *embourgeoisement* of the lower classes, because although it was designed to deal with the social mobility of individuals, it had never had the sociological imagination to prepare for the rise of whole classes, and still less that of women. For male individuals to enter classes with political capacity, or to acquire the necessary individual capacity themselves (depending on the version of liberalism espoused) was one thing; the wholesale incorporation of the mass of the proletariat into political life was something quite different. Liberals had always reserved that for a theoretical future – and the conditions they imposed on entry to the Promised Land of Political Participation were harsh. Consumer culture *offered* people goods on credit, presuming they would pay later. In a consumer culture it only made sense to offer them the vote the same way, to presume they would use it wisely instead of demanding proof of their capacity first, thus giving credit instead of demanding cash.

When a political language loses its audience, politicians no longer use it. Liberalism, which had appealed in part because of its affinities with impor-
tant aspects of European culture in 1830–85, lost appeal as that culture was transformed and reconstructed at the end of the century. In the fin-de-siècle, liberalism “became an influence, not a power.” From the 1870s onwards liberalism gradually ceased to be the Party of Contradictions and became instead the Party of Nostalgia, a party and a discourse left behind and abandoned by the new society. Between 1870 and 1914 the discourse of capacity ceased to have effective public appeal. As the century progressed the language of capacity was spoken less and less, and when it was uttered it often took on an elegiac tone. Parties that retained the name “Liberal” gave the name new meanings, economic, nationalist, or civil-rights oriented, depending on circumstance. But they were no longer liberal parties as the mid-nineteenth century had understood “liberal” to mean.

Late-nineteenth-century liberalism was unable to maintain its old position astride the Tocquevillian fence, one foot stepping into democracy, one leg still caught up in aristocracy. The arrival of consumer society meant the disappearance of that middle ground between aristocracy and democracy upon which liberalism had stood. The fence liberals had been sitting on was removed from beneath them, and liberalism was abandoned for more one-sided commitments. Liberals were compelled to go over to their enemies on one front or another, to become either democrats or conservatives. Because they occupied a central position between conservatives and democrats, and because individual liberals emphasized different aspects of the liberal struggle, liberal ideas, methods and language had proved attractive to many during an era of transition. The transition over, the discourse of capacity that had been liberalism’s distinctive mark fell out of use, and liberalism ceased to represent a viable political center. Because different aspects of liberalism appealed to both conservatives and democrats, liberalism eventually found dissolution to be its most natural course, and Liberal parties dissolved into Conservative, Democratic and even Socialist political groupings. Or else liberalism became a “New Liberalism”, sustained by economic interests (e.g. free trade, urban consumers, or even the iron and steel industry) who had no use for an outmoded political language. The centrifugal forces lurking among liberal contradictions could expand freely once the bond created by the discourse of capacity was relaxed.

In conclusion, we may note how the downfall of the discourse of capacity forms part of the working out of Benjamin Constant’s distinction between ancient and modern freedom. Ancient freedom was about political participation, modern freedom about freedom from interference in one’s private life. In the transitional, aristocratic/democratic culture of 1830–85, the ancient idea of freedom as political participation was still powerful, although facing increasingly strong competition from the modern conception of private freedom. Liberalism as the discourse of capacity established a sphere in which capacity, the capacity to participate in public life, took precedence over private rights. For liberals, the social contract was null and
void in politics, because the rights it spelled out were relevant only to private
relations. Instead of the equal status of signatories to a private contract, in
public life people had varying statuses, dependent on their personal or their
groups' capacity.

Liberalism as a discourse of civil rights was about the freedom of the
private individual in private life. This aspect of liberalism was consonant
with modern, democratic tendencies. But liberalism as a discourse about
public capacities, not private rights, was not consonant with modern demo-
ocratic freedom, which gave precedence to the private over the public and
denied that public life had any autonomous existence except as a means
of guaranteeing private freedoms. Democratic political language would
embrace the civil rights aspect of liberalism and reject the discourse of capac-
ity. It would argue that the only way to guarantee private rights was to
extend to public life the formal equality private rights entailed. The liberal
synthesis, the combination of support for private, civil rights and a politi-
cal discourse which rejected rights, appropriate for an age of transition
between aristocracy and democracy would disappear. Those who held to
civil rights would become democrats of one sort or another, conservatives
or socialists according to personal taste, but always using the rhetoric of
rights. Those to whom the language of capacity was more important than
civil rights would become Nietzscheans and Social Darwinists. Liberal elitism
could even, in other circumstances, help prepare the way for a Leninist vangu-
guard party or a Nazi Führerprinzip, just as outside Europe it had been used
to justify imperialism and colonialism. Standing between aristocratic and
democratic societies, liberalism was in practice an unwilling midwife at
democracy's birth, not its mother, despite liberalism's contribution to the
democratic tradition of civil rights. In the nineteenth century, liberalism was
always democracy's opponent.

In the new democratic rhetorical world the differences of property and
education that had once provided ammunition for the language of capac-
ity continued to exist. But as a result of the cultural transformation which
Europe had undergone, property and education were no longer part of a
person's public definition, an aspect of citizenship in the community. They
were now private attributes, which distinguished people from others in
private relationships, not with regard to the ability to participate in public
life. In private, liberalism still continued to be an influence, even a power.
As a language of politics, it was dead. Liberals had never intended the politi-
cal distinction between liberalism and democracy to be immortal – liberal-
ism was an expedient for the era of transition between aristocracy and
democracy when not everyone was yet capable of participating in politics.
But from the liberal point of view, the language of capacity met a prematu-
re death, premature because not everyone was yet capable. Nevertheless,
democracy and the democratic language of political rights displaced liber-
alism and the language of capacity at the end of the century. In the years
after 1885, the discourse of capacity died. Political liberalism continued as a label, but with a new content, new wine in an old bottle.

All too frequently historians are attracted to beginnings rather than endings, a natural temptation that this book seeks to avoid. Nevertheless, the Concluding Note will give in to temptation long enough to consider some ways in which the discourse of capacity lives on – outside politics.
Old discourses never die, they just find a different context. Prudent historians are reluctant to declare the definitive end of anything, and the discourse of capacity is no exception to this rule. After the First World War, in Europe and even in America, echoes of the language of capacity continued to be heard. The discourse of capacity did not return to political life, at least not through the front door of electoral politics. But it was sometimes heard in the more dimly lit corridors of power, where it could still be spoken among the discerning few. In this manner old-fashioned liberal discourse pursued its latter-day vocation of acting as an influence, not a power.

But a new form of the discourse of capacity also appeared, as early as the end of the nineteenth century. Transmuted into “technocracy,” into apologetias for “the rule of experts,” the discourse of capacity took on new life. Bureaucratic and scientific rationalism, relatively minor forms of the discourse of capacity in mid-nineteenth-century liberalism, became its leading expressions in the twentieth century. Capacity guaranteed by education and expertise replaced capacity guaranteed by property as the dominant form of this neo-liberal discourse. Criteria of capacity were no longer used to exclude people from political participation, but from professions. Fortified by educational credentials, those possessing professional capacity sometimes hoped to influence political decisions they could no longer decide themselves. The discourse of capacity thus continued to be used in the relatively new contexts of education and the professions. But it was also sometimes used by those with professional capacity as a means by which to influence political decisions. The discourse of capacity thus could acquire a new kind of political relevance, not by limiting the suffrage, but by using expertise to limit the actions of the politicians universal suffrage elected.

Nineteenth-century liberalism in its dominant period did not foresee these developments of the discourse of capacity, although J. S. Mill in On Representative Government (where Mill proposed a council of experts to play a role in legislation) hinted at it. But Mill, writing for an England in which formal educational qualifications were still of secondary importance, was not in a
good position to judge how formal education would became the chief criterion of capacity, for a discourse of capacity that was not overtly political. It is to late French liberalism that one must turn to get a glimpse of the discourse of capacity in transition between contexts and audiences. Edmond Schérer's 1883 pamphlet, *Democracy in France*, has already been cited as an example of the political despair of French liberalism. But Schérer also sounded a note of hope for the future: "The sociologists assure us that the law of the modern state is an ever-increasing differentiation of functions; but the differentiation of functions will not happen without the search for the people most apt to fill them, and, in consequence, without the weighing of capacities". Thus, in Schérer's view, the discourse of capacity might one day return.

Other late French liberals were not content to wait for the laws of sociology to take their course. Emile Boutmy, founder of the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques, wrote in 1878:

> Privilege no longer exists; democracy will not recede. Forced to submit to the right of the greatest number, the classes which call themselves the upper classes can only retain their political hegemony by invoking the right of the most capable. It is necessary that behind the crumbling wall of tradition and their prerogatives, the democratic flood shall encounter a second rampart made up of striking and useful merits, of superiorities whose prestige will impose itself, of capacities of which it would be folly to deprive oneself."

In 1830 this would have been the prelude to justifying the limited suffrage of the July Monarchy. In 1878 it was the introduction to a fund-raising appeal to found a private university. Rosanvallon has noted the way in which many French Republicans, followers of Ferry and Gambetta, seemed to continue quietly pursuing Guizot's ambition of creating a social and political elite through education. Fouillé is met again in this context, writing a plea for general education based on Greco-Roman literature titled *Classical Studies and Democracy*. His contemporary Vial suggested that the classical education possessed by the middle classes would allow them, in fact, to "supervise and rectify the decisions of universal suffrage". Rosanvallon, who sees the French Third Republic as the continuation of nineteenth-century liberalism, goes so far as to baptize the Third Republic "the society of capacities". For Rosanvallon, the Third Republic was the society of capacities because it "combined the two principles of civil and political equality and the hierarchy of intelligences".

Thus in late-nineteenth-century France, speakers of liberal language were already finding a new context for the language of capacity in education. Desperate to maintain a political footing, French liberals tried to turn control of secondary education into a substitute for control of parliament,
with limited results. But if the direct political results were disappointing, other results were more satisfactory in the long run. Consumer culture accepted professional distinctions based on education (if not, in the end, education based on Greek and Latin), more readily than political distinctions based on a vanished social hierarchy. Democratic political equality, political participation for most or all males based on their rights, was entrenched after 1885, and socialists contended with democrats over extending equality to economics. Inequalities founded on education, however, remained largely unchallenged, and represent the last place where the twentieth and twenty-first century world still seems to hesitate between aristocratic and democratic models, and thus where the discourse of capacity is at home.

The growing professionalization of twentieth-century culture recreated a space where the discourse of capacity could be effective. In this regard Schérer proved prophetic in his predictions about the results of the increasing division of labor. He would have been pleased to learn that “the twentieth is not, pace Franklin D. Roosevelt, the century of the common man but of the uncommon and increasingly professional expert”, as one historian puts it. The distinguishing characteristics of the modern professions are to be found in “expertise” and “credentialism” (i.e. formal educational qualifications), along with “autonomy” (which the mid-nineteenth century would have called “independence”). Thus those considered to be experts possess capacities, and guarantees for those capacities, which those who are not experts do not possess, just like mid-nineteenth-century voters. The growth of this new version of the discourse of capacity led the historian Perkin to baptize his study of English history after 1880 (note the date) The Rise of Professional Society. Perkin defined what he called the professional ideal this way: “The professional ideal was based on trained expertise and selection by merit, a selection made not by the open market [or by universal suffrage], but by the judgement of similarly educated experts”. Nineteenth-century liberalism’s promise of eventual universal suffrage reappeared in the new discourse of professional capacity. Now it was not the capacity to vote which would one day be universal, but the exercise of a profession, whether lawyer or “sanitation engineer” (garbageman), with capacity guaranteed by appropriate education and testing.

Professionalism recycled the discourse of capacity in ways that would have been welcome and familiar to nineteenth-century liberals. The great change in the discourse of capacity in its “apolitical” afterlife was the disappearance of property as a guarantee of competence, a development which earlier liberals would have found surprising. This educational/professional context has allowed the discourse of capacity to continue to find an audience and play a role. In its new context, the professional version of the discourse of capacity often imitates the old political version: no one has a right to be a doctor, only the right to try and become one by obtaining a medical degree.
just as Guizot argued there was no right to vote, only a right to become a voter by acquiring property.

Most use of the discourse of capacity today is in relatively apolitical contexts (although a Foucauldian would claim that no context is apolitical). But the continued political use of the discourse of capacity deserves particular attention in the context of this study. The professional variant of the discourse of capacity could be used as a means of finding a new audience for the discourse of capacity in politics. Those who use professional discourse of capacity sometimes, intentionally or not, take up the struggle against democracy that was much of what defined nineteenth-century liberalism. Experts sometimes use the discourse of capacity to restrict the area in which democratic claims about universal rights can be made. Expert authority limits democratic politicians’ scope of action by opposing expertise, based on professional capacity, to the will of the majority. Surrendering politics to democracy, elections to universal suffrage, neo-liberal discourse thus simultaneously restricts the scope of political authority. An opponent of this has described it in the following terms: “The ideological destruction of the political effected by liberal philosophy provided the necessary background for an ideology of professionalism which based legitimate social power on the foundations of private monopolies of expert knowledge”. If we substitute “discourse of capacity” for “liberal philosophy” in the above passage, then liberalism is not merely the background for an “ideology of professionalism”, the “ideology of professionalism” is itself a variety of liberal discourse, a dialect of the discourse of capacity.

Perkin takes a somewhat friendlier view of the rise of experts, perhaps because he compares it to the real past rather than a Utopian quasi-Marxist future. He prefers the professional ideal and its meritocratic, education-based version of the discourse of capacity to either the aristocratic or entrepreneurial ideals of earlier societies: “Whereas their ideal citizen had been a limited concept, applicable to only one group in society, however many amongst the rest aspired to it...the professional ideal could in principle be extended to everyone”. Of course, from the nineteenth-century liberal point of view, suffrage could in principle have been extended to everyone eventually – in this too the professional ideal is the continuation of the discourse of capacity in a new context. But just as in the nineteenth century the moment when everyone would acquire political capacity seemed far off, so in the twentieth the moment when everyone would acquire professional expertise seemed distant.

The way in which “apolitical” versions of the discourse of capacity have circled back to contest political issues has been in part the result of accident, in part the result of intention. The liberals of the 1880s did have something like this development in mind. The birth of sociology and the modern social sciences can be partly attributed to this desire to find a way around the power of the majority, if one thinks of such eminent sociologists as
Durkheim, Pareto, Weber, Tarde and Le Bon. But whether we should attribute the twentieth-century use of the discourse of capacity in professional contexts to anti-democratic intentions is more doubtful. In 1885–1914 liberalism in its mid-nineteenth-century meaning was still more than a memory, and the three-class Prussian suffrage still a reality. The political backdrop for the discourse of capacity in professional and educational contexts was very different in 1950 or 2000.

Regardless of intentions, slippery things that pave the road to hell, the language of “expert knowledge”, like all dialects of the discourse of capacity, does allow for “anti-democratic use”. Experts can try to close off democratic political discussions. Certificates of competence, i.e. diplomas, establish a hierarchy of competences which may limit the decisions universal suffrage may make. The language of expertise thus can shrink the number of questions open for political rather than professional debate, and thus the range of democratic/political vis-à-vis expert/neo-liberal power. As early as 1837 we find a French liberal appealing to competitive examinations as a substitute for the American and democratic principle of elections: “Perhaps,” wrote Louis de Carné in the *Revue des deux mondes*, “in the future scientific testing will be imposed as a condition of eligibility for the various degrees of the hierarchy, whether political or administrative. Then national sovereignty would still find an external limit”, and thus democracy be restrained by professional competence. The twenty-first century does not require educational certification for voters nor for those running for office. But the discourse of capacity can be used to limit the freedom of action of both voters and elected representatives.

However, the political influence regained for the discourse of capacity by means of expert advice to the public should not be over-estimated. Experts, after all, are typically found on several sides of any issue. On issues where political controversy exists, it is rare that all sides cannot find certified professional opinions to support their point of view. Even when only one side can do so, the side supported by professional opinion does not necessarily win, such as in the American controversies over the teaching of evolution in biology classes. Political controversy does not seem to have succumbed to the discourse of capacity. A different issue, however, is the extent to which a unified body of professional opinion can succeed in preventing certain questions from becoming matters of political controversy at all, choking off opportunities for democratic debate. But evidence that this situation is a common occurrence is lacking.

There is another way in which the discourse of capacity may have retained some political resonance: through the creation of organizations of professionals whose sphere of professional competence is politics, that is, through the creation of the modern political party. As early as 1868, Duvergier de Hauranne the younger suggested that political parties might in the future play the role once played by a limited suffrage. Duvergier was a French
liberal who admired the suffrage produced by the British Second Reform Act of 1867. His ideal suffrage would have found a way to represent the “real social forces” of a nation, and he thought equal votes for all as bad as equal property for all. But he thought limiting the suffrage in France politically impossible. His solution: the organization of powerful political parties. Strong party organizations would act as the replacement for a limited suffrage. “The more a democracy is ignorant, capricious, inexperienced, incapable of conducting itself and directly governing affairs [Duvergier had just described the French in this way], the more it is necessary that the organization of parties be independent and strong.” And thus: “The organization of parties is not only the necessary corrective for the flaws of democracy, it is also the sole effective remedy, the only one sufficient for a cure”.

Duvergier was largely ignored by French liberals, but he may well have been at least partly correct in foreseeing the role political parties would play in Europe and America, channeling and directing voters. While party candidates have to be elected by the voters, party leadership, and usually the choice of the parties’ candidates, are much less subject to direct democratic decision. Political parties are professional organizations, at first largely dominated, outside the socialist parties, by traditional propertied elites, but gradually more and more led by “professional” politicians who have no other claim to status. Party organizations act as “experts”, choosing political issues and candidates, pre-selecting the issues universal suffrage will be asked to resolve. Beyond the party organizations themselves, organized political pressure groups and professional lobbyists representing social interests might be seen in a similar light.

But just as in the case of expertise choking off democratic discussion, this view of political parties has more abstract than real resemblance to nineteenth-century liberalism. In the contemporary political world there is no method of selecting which interests deserve representation, nor in what proportion. All interests, whether “real” or not, can form parties, and parties can be and are formed to represent those who, in the nineteenth-century liberal view, ought to have been excluded from political participation. Modern politics and modern political organizations owe far more to democratic consumer culture than to a liberal vision of social hierarchy.

At present the discourse of capacity is not so much a political challenge to democratic rights-talk as it is a challenge to democratic discourse outside politics, in the professions, education, and through them in civil society generally. The contemporary importance of the discourse of capacity is not in its direct political influence, but in its dominance of education and the professions. It is here that its real contemporary political importance must be sought, not in either political organizations that have little of liberal language in them nor in a dubious description of a world controlled by “experts”. In civil society the discourse of capacity has sometimes been used as an instrument to attack consumer culture and the bourgeoisie. Already
in the nineteenth century the discourse of capacity was sometimes used to attack commercial society, as liberals like Mill and Tocqueville did. But what restrained liberal language from often being used to attack capitalism in the nineteenth century – the equation of property with capacity – largely disappeared from twentieth century use of the language of capacity. At first glance, using the language of capacity to attack the bourgeoisie might seem surprising. But because post-First World War dialects of the language of capacity have been based on education rather than property, the discourse of capacity has served the professions and the academic world in their occasional reactions against free-market capitalism. That liberal discourse can be used to attack capitalism will astonish only those who ignore liberalism’s partly aristocratic roots and its origin as a political rather than an economic discourse. How the discourse of capacity can be used against capitalism can be seen in the description that Larson gives of the ways in which late twentieth-century professions seek legitimation:

On the one hand, [professional legitimation] appealed to precapitalist and anti-market elements: an ethic of craftsmanship emphasizing the intrinsic value of work, and an ethic of community, albeit a hierarchically organized community, emphasizing the duties as well as rights of the privileged – an ethic of noblesse oblige transformed into one of savoir oblige. On the other hand, the general justificatory discourse invoked a transcendence still higher than the laws of the market; the transcendent objectivity of reason...

It is easy enough to see how Guizot’s sovereignty of reason, for example, could find a home in this atmosphere. It would have disconcerted him, however, to discover that the wealthy were being described as incompetent. It is also easy to imagine the contemporary professional transforming Thiers’ remark: “Everything for the poor, except the government!” into “Everything for the layperson, except the right to tell us what to do (and how much we should be paid)!“ And just as nineteenth-century liberals liked to claim that they, or the middle classes, represented a universal class that had only the general interest at heart, so do professionals regard themselves (and are often generally regarded) as disinterested and unselfish servants of society. Thus Haskell cites the English historian R. H. Tawney, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim, and the American philosopher Charles Pierce as apostles of the idea that professionalism fostered disinterestedness, unlike entrepreneurial capitalism. Durkheim and Tawney are significant choices from the point of view of this study, Durkheim especially, given the many ways in which he balanced on the cusp between liberalism and democracy. Indeed, he and some other professionals had a great deal in common with aristocratic liberal variants of liberalism in their “deep revulsion against the libertarian excesses that they associated with the triumph of capitalism...that depicted the
capitalist marketplace as a moral desert in which unscrupulous businessmen scrambled for filthy lucre in an orgy of self-aggrandizement.559 Professionals at home in this anti-commercial atmosphere might well be attracted to the discourse of capacity in forms that emphasize education and intelligence. In the discourse of capacity they find a vocabulary ready-made to condemn as incompetent those who pursue lucre. With regard to their own career paths, the language of capacity can both emphasize the openness to entry that is part of the ethic of professionalism and reinforce the professional hierarchy.

The notion of hierarchy continues to be important in understanding why the discourse of capacity continued to be employed after the First World War in educational and professional circles. The discourse of capacity found resonance in an atmosphere of professionalism and expertise in part because professional circles recreated or preserved many hierarchical attitudes and values familiar to the mid-nineteenth century, both in their own internal structures and in how they related to other professions. Professions form a “hierarchically organized community”. Although in using this phrase Larson did not have in mind the same sense of “hierarchy” used here, it is in fact the multi-faceted perception of hierarchy described in Chapter 4 which best fits a society made up of many different professions, all competing for status both against each other and within their own ranks.

Professionalization was an aspect of democratic society that Tocqueville did not consider, for the very good reason that it occurred largely after his time (he died in 1859). When Tocqueville discussed education, he had in mind literacy and practical education, rather than university diplomas and professional credentials. His vision of an egalitarian democratic society in which money was the only remaining distinction between people must be amended for the twentieth century to include education and professional status, which today are important in ways they were not in his time. The evolution of democratic society since the nineteenth century has created a new educational/professional context in which something like the old hierarchies can survive in a limited form.

The existence of professional hierarchies largely based on education helps explain the persistence of pockets of liberal language, with its dual aristocratic/democratic background, but more particularly its “aristocratic liberal” variant. The values of aristocratic liberalism of the nineteenth century, espoused by liberals like Jacob Burckhardt, Mill, and Tocqueville, persist, especially in present-day academia.560 Aristocratic liberalism’s anti-middle class, anti-commercial accents serve academics well in their fight against consumer culture. Thus audiences receptive to the discourse of capacity continue to exist in contemporary democratic society, if not in contemporary democratic political systems.

This situation does not appear to be temporary. In our technological age, who doubts that education has a future? And thus that the professions will
continue to provide a potential audience for the discourse of capacity, if only for private consumption. Tocqueville had occasional doubts about the future of private property, but the course of history up to now suggests that inequality in property is perfectly compatible with a democratic society. In another development Tocqueville did not live to see, property has identified itself with consumer culture, and so democratized itself as available to everyone, if only on credit. Education has tried to follow suit, with rather less success – it has proven easier to make everybody in the developed world rich, at least in nineteenth-century terms, than to give everyone a good education. Tensions between property and education have risen since the decline of liberalism as a political force, and the disappearance of a discourse of capacity based on property. These conflicts are reinforced by the persistence of the discourse of capacity in education and the professions. Property and education may well turn out to be the terms of the Hegelian dialectic of the postmodern era. Indeed, it is arguable that struggles between property and education, between, in a sense, the intelligentsia and commercial culture, have already determined much of the course of twentieth-century history, from the Russian Revolution to the rise of Fascism, and will be the source of yet further conflicts until the issue is resolved, or transcended, as Hegel would have it.

This book has been about the flourishing and disappearance of a nineteenth-century political discourse. This Concluding Note ends as an introduction to a twentieth- and twenty-first-century struggle. The history of that conflict will be the subject of my future work.
Notes

2. One need only think of Clemenceau’s famous statement that the Revolution must be accepted “en bloc”.


13. As Benjamin Constant noted, the democrats of the French Revolution had not seen any merit in protecting the private rights of the individual against the community, nor were constitutional limitations on the power of government over civil society necessarily part of the program of nineteenth-century democrats. See Constant, “The Ancient and the Modern Ideas of Freedom”, in Constant, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: 1988); Nipperdey, *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck*, p. 257. As others have noted, the liberal emphasis on civil rights also served to distinguish them from what is sometimes called the “classical republican” tradition. For a summary, see Steve Pincus, “Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 103 (June, 1998), pp. 710–11.


16. Following contemporary usage, “universal suffrage” here will refer to voting rights for all adult *males*, except in the rare instances when votes for women are in question.

17. The examples of Robert Lowe and François Guizot will be discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.


20. Lengthy discussions took place in England in 1831–32, 1866–67, and 1884, in France in 1831, 1846–47, 1850–51 and 1874, in Prussia and Germany in 1848–50, 1861, 1866–67, and 1873, as well as less important debates on other occasions. Such discussions took place in other European countries as well during this time period.


22. For some pertinent remarks, see Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism*, p. 126.

23. The different roles played by parliaments in different countries had remarkably little influence on liberal attitudes and language, partly because liberals often were trying to create a parliament that would be capable, in their view, of exercising power when it got the chance.


25. Debates over the introduction of universal suffrage to Italy in 1912, and over a truly secret ballot for the German Reichstag in 1903, among others, provide material for further research.

26. This division is roughly parallel to Jaume’s distinction between “individualist” and “notable” liberalism in French liberal thought, *L’Individu effacé*, pp. 19, 164.

31. Other kinds of liberals also used the criterion of “independence,” but linked it to purely social or political conditions, whereas for Kant the social/political prerequisites for independence were merely guarantees of the intellectual and moral capacity of the individual, rather than ends in themselves.
32. Heinrich Sybel, Über die Emancipation der Frauen (Bonn: 1870).
33. The word “party” is used here in a very loose sense. Political parties, in the modern sense of the term, were non-existent in 1830 and only beginning to form by the 1860s and 1870s.
40. The old rules were in a few cases very democratic, and in one or two approached universal male suffrage.
42. A strong tendency in German liberalism favored plural or weighted votes. See the discussion of the Prussian suffrage law of 1850 in Chapter 2.
43. Parry, Rise and Fall of Liberal Government, p. 125.
44. “Whig” will be used here as an equivalent for the moderate wing of English liberalism. It is the term conventionally used for this period to designate the party inclined to favor political reform, while “Tory” was used for their opponents. What matters here is that the Whigs spoke the language of capacity in 1832.
47. No distinction is made here between debates concerned with the franchise itself and debates concerned with the reapportionment of seats, which in some ways had greater immediate political impact. Many speeches dealt with both issues.
48. It is inevitable that the selection of evidence may bias the results. It is possible, for example, that a study that concentrated on contemporary periodical literature would reveal more individualist-oriented liberalism than was to be found in Parliament in 1831–32. Even if this were so, however, it would not detract
from Parliament’s dominant position in practice, nor the significance of the kind of liberalism dominant there.

49. John Russell, Hansard, 1 March 1830: 1057. See also Lord Milton, 1 February 1832: 1115.

50. Earl Grey, 3 October 1831: 946. See also R. Grant, 7 March 1831: 170.


52. Attorney General, Sir James Scarlett, 30 August 1831: 895. See also John Hobhouse, 3 March 1831: 1297.

53. John Campbell, 7 July 1831: 812.

54. Lord Stanley, 7 December 1832: 520.

55. Brougham, 13 April 1832: 423, 426. The use of “people” to mean the “middle class” as distinct from those beneath them, called the “populace” or the “residuum” among other terms, was widespread in nineteenth-century England. See e.g. Francis Burdett, 6 July 1831: 896–7. See also Asa Briggs, “The Language of Class,” in Briggs and John Saville, eds, Essays in Labour History (London: 1967), pp. 56–7.

56. Graham, 8 March 1831: 220–1. See also Russell, 17 December 1831: 496–7; 1 February 1832: 1125.

57. John Williams, 19 September 1831, 207.


59. Brougham, 13 April 1832: 423.

60. Lord Russell, 12 December 1832: 497.

61. Macaulay, 6 February 1832: 366. Macaulay and Brougham were the two most extreme apostles of the middle classes in 1832, interested in maintaining the deferential attitude of the lower classes, but not of the middle classes. See Vincent Starzinger, Middlingness: Juste Milieu Political Theory in France and England (Charlottesville: 1965), p. 66.


63. Macaulay, 2 March 1831: 1193; Robert Grant, 7 March 1831: 171–2.

64. Russell, 12 December, 1831: 166.


67. Thomas Denman, 25 August 1831: 202, 635.

68. Kennedy, 3 October 1831: 1106.

69. Lord Durham, 13 April 1832: 356.

70. Lord Plunkett, 28 March 1831: 1044.


72. Brougham, 6 July 1831: 869–70; 17 October 1831: 251–2; Macaulay, 2 March 1831.

73. Lord William Lennox, 5 July 1831: 810.

74. Lord Durham, 13 April 1832: 421–2; Brougham, 13 April 1832: 421–2.


76. Godson, 17 December 1831: 452.

77. Russell, 24 June 1831: 338.


80. Earl Grey, 7 October 1831: 327.

206  Notes

82. Lord Morpeth, 19 September 1831: 168. See also John Campbell, 5 July 1831: 828.
83. Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 73.
84. Francis Jeffrey, 4 March 1831: 71. See also Parry, *Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 6.
86. Sir Henry Bunlurg, 19 September 1831: 227. See also Robert Grant, 22 March 1832: 712; Brougham, 28 March 1831: 1063–4; Robert Grant, 21 September 1831: 401; Russell, 22 March 1832: 715.
87. Earl Radnor, 5 October 1831: 1396.
89. Brougham, 13 April 1832. Brougham further believed that this rational part of society included “an overwhelming majority” because of the progress of education, though whether he meant an overwhelming majority of the middle class or an overwhelming majority of the male population as a whole is unclear.
93. Interestingly, definitions of capacity based on social interests tended to be relatively more restrictive than individualist ones before the 1860s, but not thereafter.
95. The number of voters was also increased by a new requirement that there be at least 150 voters in each district. If not enough regular voters could be found to make up the required number, voters were added from the next most heavily taxed.
100. Humblot-Conté, Moniteur Universel, 1 February 1831, p. 230-2. See also Duvergier de Hauranne, Moniteur Universel, 2 February 1831, p. 273-1; Baron Mounier, Moniteur Universel, 1 April 1831, p. 678-2.

101. The bill set an absolute minimum property qualification of FF10/year, within its otherwise proportional qualifications for the vote. Regardless of even the FF10 qualification there were always to be at least 30 local voters. See Moniteur Universel, 14 February 1831, pp. 319–22.

102. Gillon, Moniteur Universel, 1 February 1831, p. 217-2; Tracy, Moniteur Universel, 14 February 1831, p. 319-1.

103. Dupin-ainé, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 281-1. See also Daunou, Moniteur Universel, 1 February 1831, p. 216-1.


106. Delpon, Moniteur Universel, 1 February 1831, p. 224-2; Humblot-Conté, Moniteur Universel, 5 February 1831, p. 274-2; Rambuteau, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 276-2; Humblot Conté, Moniteur Universel, 5 February 1831, p. 274-2.

107. Moniteur Universel, 28 February 1831, pp. 435–6. The Assembly automatically counted the taxes paid by married women, along with that of minor children, to the credit of the husband/father.


109. Dupin-ainé, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 281; Mathieu Dumas, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 315-2.

110. Guizot, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 279–1; Dupin-ainé, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 280-3.

111. Bernard, Moniteur Universel, 24 February 1831, p. 402-3; Annison, Moniteur Universel, 4 March 1831, pp. 499-3–500-1; Tracy, Moniteur Universel, 14 February 1831, p. 319-1; Prunelle, Moniteur Universel, 24 February 1831, p. 409-1.

112. Delpon, Moniteur Universel, 1 February 1831, p. 224-2; Duvergier de Hauranne, Moniteur Universel, 2 February 1831, p. 273-2; Rambuteau, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 403-1.


114. Las Cases, Moniteur Universel, 4 March 1831, p. 492-1; Duc de Decazes, Moniteur Universel, 29 March 1831, p. 642-1.

115. Laborde, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 294-3.

116. Dupin, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 281-3; Duvergier de Hauranne, Moniteur Universel, 2 February 1831, p. 273-2; Paixhans, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 277-3; Laborde, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831, p. 294-3; André (Haut-Rhin), Moniteur Universel, 23 February 1831, p. 394-2; Bernard, Moniteur Universel, 24 February 1831, p. 402-3.


118. Delpon, Moniteur Universel, 1 February 1831, p. 224-2; Duvergier de Hauranne, Moniteur Universel, 2 February 1831, p. 273-2; Rambuteau, Moniteur Universel, 10 February 1831.


120. Laborde, Moniteur Universel, 5 February 1831, p. 294-3.

121. This was actually a measure sponsored by Legitimists who hoped in this way to increase clerical influence, as most such teachers were clergy.

122. Moniteur Universel, 5 February 1831, pp. 303-4, 315–16.

123. Barrot, Moniteur Universel, 5 February 1831, p. 303-3.


133. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 56.

134. The exception to this was the English University constituencies, Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of London, in which all graduates had the right to vote. But outside these, no adjunctions were considered in England.

135. Caumartin, *Moniteur Universel*, 14 February 1831, p. 333-1, 333-2; Jean-Landry Gillon, *Moniteur Universel*, 10 February 1831, p. 293-2; Puvis, *Moniteur Universel*, 1 April 1831, p. 316-2, 316-3. Rosanvallon notes that over the course of the July Monarchy the notion of property as representing a stake or interest was used less, and calling wealth an index of other kinds of capacity increased. This can be seen in the discussions of suffrage reform in 1842 and 1847 below.


They by and large continued to reject internal revolution, however. What most German liberals could support was foreign war in support of nation-building. To go beyond the period covered by this chapter, it was because most liberals regarded the Austro-Prussian conflict as a civil war that they opposed it when it broke out in 1866, whereas they supported war against Denmark in 1848 and France in 1871. The Danish war of 1866 is an interesting combination, favored when seen as a foreign war, opposed when seen as an episode in the Prussian Constitutional Conflict.


David Hansemann’s 1840 memorandum to the King of Prussia, from which this is taken, is reprinted in Hansen, ed., *Rheinische Briefe und Akten* (Düsseldorf: 1997), v. I, p. 238.

Hansemann, 1840 memo, in Hansen, v. 1, pp. 228, 237. See also Hansemann, 1830 memo, p. 53.

S., “Demokratie”, in *Staats-Lexikon, oder Eryklopädie der Staatswissenschaften*, ed. by Karl von Rotteck and Karl Theodor Welcker (Altona: 1843), v. 4, pp. 241-2. The *Staatslexikon* was perhaps the most widely read liberal work of the period.


Rotteck, “Census”.


1840 Memo, p. 239; *Frankreich und Preussen* (Leipzig: 1834), p. 3.


169. Dahlmann for history and Rotteck for reason are the archetypal representatives whom Nipperdey cites. See Nipperdey, *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck, 1800–1866*, pp. 341–2.


172. For more on Hansemann and what set him apart from other German liberals, see Alan Kahan, “Liberalism and Realpolitik in Prussia, 1830–52: The Case of David Hansemann”, *German History*, October, 1991.


181. Later Jordan would come round to the idea of a census based purely on “material interest” as his criterion, but his earlier position was common. See Bullik, *Staat und Gesellschaft*, pp. 61–2.


196. On the affinity of professors and bureaucrats, see Heffter, *Deutsche Selbstverwaltung*, pp. 170, 187.


205. The eventual attempt by Bismarck to exclude bureaucrats from serving as representatives was fiercely and successfully resisted by German liberals, in sharp contrast to the efforts of French left-liberals to exclude bureaucrats from the National Assembly during the July Monarchy.


209. The title indicates a businessman of considerable and long-standing wealth.


211. *Vereinigte Landtag*, v. 3, pp. 646–8, 651.


221. Scheller, Aktenstücke, p. 377.
222. For the discussion, see Aktenstücke, pp. 394–5.
226. The numbers do not add up to 15 because some amendments fit into more than one category. See Schilfert, Sieg und Niederlage, p. 219n.2.
228. By the time the bill came up for its second reading the compromise over the Emperor had been struck and universal suffrage was passed without debate or considerable opposition. Schilfert, Sieg und Niederlage, p. 248.
231. Sometimes even the English word “trust” was used. See Beseler, Stenographischer Bericht, p. 5268-1.
235. v. Beckerath, Stenographischer Bericht, pp. 5246-2–5247-1; See also Bassermann, Stenographischer Bericht, pp. 5251-2–5252-1; Matthies, Stenographischer Bericht, pp. 5291-2, 5292-2.
237. In common with the Vorfinz, they also differed from French and English liberals in their support for universal passive suffrage, that is the right for anyone who could vote to be elected without further qualification.
242. According to the imposed constitution, those who paid no direct tax were to be excluded from the suffrage, but this was never applied in practice. However, only those who were entitled to participate politically in their local community could vote, which effectively reduced the electorate from about 3.6 million to about 2 million, thus excluding up to 40 per cent of adult males at the first elections, although this percentage declined rapidly thereafter. By 1861 Prussia had 3.3 million voters for a similar population. See Manfred Botzenhart,


244. The Prussian figures are taken from Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred*, p. 270.


261. This indeed sounds like a good German justification for independence, and in the newspaper articles Baroche was citing Lamartine had gone on to suggest restrictions on the suffrage that unfortunately were unconstitutional (ironically Lamartine opposed the new suffrage law).

262. Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, p. 56. It is also clear that the liberalism of 1850 still had something in common with what Constant would have called the ancient idea of freedom.


280. Note the similarity with Waitz’s draft suffrage law at Frankfurt excluding from the suffrage anyone paid daily, weekly or monthly.

281. Note the similarity with Waitz’s draft suffrage law at Frankfurt excluding from the suffrage anyone paid daily, weekly or monthly.


291. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government*, p. 167, and see also p. 194. The dominance of liberalism and its language is unconsciously demonstrated by Keith McClelland, who recognizes that in the 1860s and 1870s even among the lower classes there reigned “a narrower political definition of the putative citizen than any dominant strand of popular radicalism had been prepared to draw between 1790 and 1848”. See Catherine Hall, Keith McClelland and Jane Rendall, *Defining the Victorian Nation: Class, Race, Gender and the Reform Act of 1867* (Cambridge: 2000), p. 101. See also pp. 96, 227, 229.


299. Baines, 22 March 1860, *Hansard*, p. 1093. But all such calculations, past and present, are apt to be inaccurate. Note that following T. J. Heyck’s estimate of 2 per cent for the aristocracy and 20 per cent for the middle class, up to a quarter or more of the middle classes still lacked votes in 1850. See Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life*, pp. 20, 27–8.


308. Sheehan, *German Liberalism*, p. 96.


315. Lette, *Stenographische Berichte*, 3 May 1861, pp. 1050-1/2, 1065-2; Duncker, *Stenographische Berichte*, 3 May 1861, p. 1060-2; Vincke, *Stenographische Berichte*, 3 May 1861, 1046-1. Lette is the same man who was a prominent speaker at Frankfurt in 1848. His view here apparently represented a considerable evolution, since at Frankfurt he had proposed a weighted suffrage system (see above). This may or may not have been a real change. His amendment at Frankfurt gave equal weight to all those who met his census condition, and only gave lesser weight to those he presumably considered unqualified, but had to include to have some hope of obtaining passage.


326. *Preussischer Jahrbücher*, cited in Gagel, *Wahlrechtsfrage*, p. 31. Gagel also notes, p. 32n.3, that in Prussia c. 1860 there were only 770,000 people employed in industry, vs. 1,090,000 artisans and 3,430,000 in agriculture. A broad suffrage might thus have led above all to increased Conservative influence because of their dominance over the agricultural population.


339. On the fusion between liberals and democrats, see Girard, *Les Libéraux Français*, pp. 194–7, 200–1. This process has been described from a different but complementary perspective by Sudhir Hazareesingh in *From Subject to Citizen: The Second Empire and the Emergence of Modern French Democracy* (Princeton: 1998).


342. This re-use of elements of liberal rhetoric by its opponents is not, however, sufficient reason to call the Opportunists or Radicals “liberals”.


348. On Duvergier’s lack of influence, see Jaume, *L’Individu effacé*, p. 546 n.35.


351. Dupont-White was one of the French liberals who favored centralized government. His book in favor of centralization brought down on him the wrath of John Stuart Mill, as expressed in Mill’s essay on the subject.


356. Herbette, “Conférence Tocqueville”, 15 April 1873, pp. 286–7. The Conférence Tocqueville was one of several contemporary discussion groups that acted like shadow parliaments, formed by up and coming young men of particular political persuasions.

357. M. Batbie, “Rapport fait au nom de la commission chargée d’examiner les lois
constitutionnelles sur le projet de loi électorale”, report number 2320, Assemblée nationale, 1874, pp. 2–4.
359. See Chapter 3.
371. As can be seen even in these brief remarks, Schérer was not merely a liberal, but an "aristocratic liberal" as defined in my book Aristocratic Liberalism: The Social and Political Thought of Jacob Burckhardt, John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville (New York: 1992, New Brunswick: 2001).
375. Except that Fouillée was sure that women lacked the necessary capacity to vote. This was one area where liberalism remained an influential political language. Fouillée, “La philosophie du suffrage universel”, pp. 119–20. This was true in England too, where from Gladstone to Asquith women were rejected for the vote in terms of capacity. See Martin Pugh, “Liberals and Women’s Suffrage, 1867–1914”, in Eugenio F. Biagini, ed., Citizenship and Community: Liberals, Radicals and Collective Identities in the British Isles, 1865–1931 (Cambridge: 1996), p. 51. The same could be said with regard to race, particularly in the Imperial context of restrictions on black voting, but this would take us too far from our subject. Here see Hall, McClelland and Rendall, Defining the Victorian Nation.
378. Rosanvallon raises this question in Le sacre, p. 343.
379. Maurice Agulhon, La République, 1880–1932 (Paris: 1990), vol. 1, pp. 113–14. Mark Hulliung, Citizens and Ciyzens: Republicans and Liberals in France and America (Cambridge, MA: 2002) also wants to claim that Solidarism, espoused by Léon Bourgeois and Emile Durkheim, was a form of Orleanist liberalism. He is on firmer ground in describing Léon Duguit, a noted early twentieth-century legal theorist, as a liberal, but himself admits that Duguit’s “failure as a politician was a foregone conclusion” (p. 51).


385. The roughness of all these figures was acknowledged at the time, but sometimes not sufficiently noticed by historians since. For example, Gladstone knew for certain that there were not 900,000, but 1,038,000 voters registered. But he also knew that many of these people had votes in more than one constituency, and so he estimated that 1,000,000 votes meant only 900,000 voters. Others put the number even lower, at 800,000 or less. See Gladstone, *Hansard*, 12 March 1866, p. 56.


391. Layard, *Hansard*, 16 April 1866, p. 1433.


395. Gregory had been a Conservative MP until 1847 and then formally independent until 1865, when he joined the Liberals after Lord Palmerston’s death.


401. Moore has argued that traditional notions of group representation based on deference were breaking down in the 1850s and 1860s. This process was doubtless underway, as the greater strength of individualist language in the 1850s and 1860s compared to 1832 shows, but it had not progressed very far, from the evi-


404. In practice, English voting registration procedures would have meant that a two-year residence requirement would in reality have translated into a two-and-a-half or three-year requirement, close to the French law of 1850. Note too that the English household suffrage applied only to the boroughs, not the counties, until 1884.


408. For Bagehot, see Crane Brinton, *English Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (London: 1933), p. 182. On Goschen, see the discussion of the Third Reform Act below.


415. Plural voting, based on residency in one district and property in others, represented a considerable number of votes. Blewett estimates that of 7.9 million votes in 1911, about 500,000–600,000 were plural votes (one individual in 1900 is known to have had 23). But this figure is merely an educated guess and contemporary estimates ranged from 200,000–1,000,000. Neal Blewett, “The Franchise in the United Kingdom 1885–1911”, *Past & Present* 32, December 1965, pp. 31–2, suggests figures for plural votes of 6–8% of the total number of votes, without presenting any analysis. Seymour says “No statistics are in existence showing without
question what proportion of ownership electors possessed votes in more than one constituency.”


453. The exception to this pattern is the election of 1887, when the total number of votes cast for liberals was the greatest ever. Like the British elections of 1906, however, its significance is debatable, the more so as the Reichstag elections of 1887 were a victory for a National Liberal/Conservative alliance, and a defeat for the left-liberal Progressives.
Notes

22: Peter Gay, *Pleasure Wars*, p. 5. Gay also contends that this description was true for Europe as a whole.


467. Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven: 1999), pp. 130, 134–5, 146, 228–9. Had the notion of a “discourse of capacity” been available to Auerbach, he could have employed it with good effect.


469. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition*, pp. 96, 151, 158.


478. Hazareesingh, *From Subject to Citizen*, p. 222.


483. Bédarida, *A Social History of England*, p. 53; Best, *Mid-Victorian Britain*, pp. 103–4; Gourvish, “The Rise of the Professions”, in *Later Victorian Britain*, eds. Gourvish and O’Day, p. 15. The astute reader will compare the 307,000 with incomes over £150 in 1860 with the approximately 900,000 voters at that time, and wonder if the English suffrage was already dominated by lower-class voters in 1860. In the judgements of contemporaries, this was not the case. Three reasons can be suggested for the discrepancy: 1) Income figures for England are inexact, being derived from the separate categories of the Income Tax. An individual with £50 income in several categories would not show up in these figures, and there were many such. 2) £150 is an overall estimate for the lower threshold of middle-class income in 1860. In many rural areas £100 would have been enough. 3) Many people qualified for middle-class status based on criteria other than income, about which more will be said below.


Notes

505. Nipperdey, *Germany from Napoleon to Bismarck*, p. 252.

507. Furet, *Le passé d’une illusion*, p. 23. Another of Furet’s statements also rings true of liberalism: speaking of the bourgeois he says: “part of himself thinks his enemies are right, since they speak in the name of his own principles.” We only need to add, of some of his own principles against some of his others. See Furet, pp. 29–31.


509. See Lothar Gall, “Liberalismus und bürgerliche Gesellschaft”, *Historische Zeitschrift* 220 (1975): 324–56. This analysis has since been taken up by many others.


Notes


527. Bailey, Popular Culture, p. 49.

528. See Bédarida, A Social History of England, p. 57; Best, Mid-Victorian Society, p. 290, although Best thinks this process reverses after 1875, because he focuses on the rise of the Independent Labour Party, ignoring the spread of bourgeois values within the trades union movement. On the latter see Bédarida, pp. 68–9.


532. Thompson, The Rise of Respectable Society, p. 202; Gareth Stedman Jones, Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832–1982 (Cambridge: 1983), pp. 207–8. It may well have been that elements of the lower classes possessed these attitudes and values much earlier, but that earlier the middle and upper classes did not perceive the lower classes to possess them. This is the argument of Wahrman, Imagining the Middle Class, pp. 379, 381.


540. Williams, Dream Worlds, pp. 92–4, 97; Bailey, Popular Culture, p. 66.

541. On the idea that lower-class individuals used the appearance of respectability as a way to deceive their betters, see Bailey, Popular Culture, pp. 38–9.

544. J. S. Mill represents an honorable exception.
556. See Jaume, *L’Individu effacé*, p. 546n.35.
557. The classic discussion of this subject is found in Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, tr. by Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: 1968).
560. See Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism*. 
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Note
The chief primary sources cited are transcripts of parliamentary debates in England, France, and Germany, references to which appear in the endnotes. What follows is a list of primary sources cited to supplement parliamentary debates, as well as secondary works cited.

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Index

1789, 1793 see French Revolution
1831 9, 35–48, 61, 78, 125
1842 9, 36–7, 44–50, 86, 124, 167
1848 see Revolutions of 1848
1851 83, 102–6, 138, 156, 158, 164
1852 85–8, 92
1859/60 85–93
1854 85, 88–9, 100–1, 123
1861 3, 9, 76–7, 85, 95–102, 145
1867 26, 32, 78, 85–6, 88–92, 94, 100–1, 107, 111, 120, 141–3, 148, 158, 164, 175, 198
1869 110–11, 141, 143–5
1873 9, 56, 113, 114, 141, 145–6, 158, 175
1874 9, 110, 114–15, 117–18, 135, 166
1884 9, 13, 106, 109, 118–20, 122, 132, 134–41, 186
1885 7, 9, 11, 14–15, 22–3, 109, 110, 118, 121–2, 135–6, 139–41, 147, 149, 153, 155, 164–5, 170, 179–83, 185, 188–90, 192, 195, 197

Adjunctions see Suffrage
Adullam, Cave of, Adullamites 122, 125, 130
Agulhon, Maurice 121
Althorp, Lord 23, 29–30
Anarchy
and despotism 2, 4, 7, 106, 112
and equal voting 73
and political participation 184
and Terror 1
 Anglicans see Liberal, Liberals, Liberalism
Aristocracy, Aristocratic
and democracy 4, 155–7, 170, 179, 189–91, 195, 200
and liberalism 200
and lower classes 96, 168
capacity as 39, 41, 43, 57
dueling and 160
embourgeoisement 183
French Legitimist 36
German 53–4, 56, 61, 95, 96
intellectual 47
liberals reject hereditary 6, 157
liberalism 118n.370, 170, 199
proportion 92, 92n.298, 181
Reform Act of 1832 and 22, 29–30, 32
Tocqueville defines 4, 164–5

Bagehot, Walter 133, 158–9, 164
Baines, Sir Edward 89–92, 131–2
Banquet Campaign 50, 67, 78, 83
Barrot, Odillon 40, 43, 45–6, 49, 67, 79, 105, 112
Bassermann, Friedrich Daniel 71, 73–5
Battie, M. 110, 115–17
Baudelaire, Charles-Pierre 180
Beaumont, Gustave de 49, 105–6
Beckerath, Hermann v. 62, 72–3, 75–7
Béranger 40, 42, 46
Biedermann, Friedrich Karl 71, 74–5
Bildung und Besitz 28, 47, 54, 73, 169
Bismarck, Otto v. 2, 3, 7, 53, 60, 93, 94, 102, 109, 141–3, 167, 170, 175
Blackbourn, David 51, 93, 160, 167–8, 174, 179
Bourgeois, Bourgeoisie see Middle class(es)
Bright, John 40, 85–7, 89, 91–2, 124–5, 130–1, 133–4, 176
Britain, British see consumer culture; Liberal, Liberals, Liberalism; Middle class(es); Suffrage debates
Brougham, Lord 23, 26–7, 29, 31
Burckhardt, Jacob 119, 153, 170, 203
Bureaucrats, Bureaucratic see Capacity; Liberal, Liberals, Liberalism
Burrow, John W. 139
Camphausen, Otto v. 59, 63, 76
Cannadine, David 155–6, 175
Capacity
aristocratic 160, 164, 195
boundary 6, 154, 158, 165, 187
bureaucracy and 58–9
consumer culture and 14, 180–1, 185, 187, 189
definition 6, 154
democratic 156, 160, 164, 189, 191, 195, 197, 200
hierarchy and 14, 73, 154–60, 162, 187–8, 197, 200
Jewish 56
lower class 26, 27, 31, 40, 54–5, 60, 68–70, 72–4, 79–82, 85, 87, 89–92, 96, 98, 100–5, 113, 119, 121, 123–7, 132, 134, 143–6, 149, 184, 188–9
modern freedom and 190–1
nationalism and 178
origins 7, 16–17
respectability as criterion of 69, 80–1, 89, 156, 157, 167–9, 181–3, 186
suffrage and passim
utilitarian justification of 38–9, 48, 52–3, 59, 68, 71–2, 115, 124, 167
women’s see also Gender 13
Catholics, Catholicism 3, 4, 60, 121, 146, 149
Cens, Census see Capacity, Suffrage
Chadwick, Edwin 167, 169
Chamberlain, Joseph 139–40, 176
Chartism 34–5, 66, 83–4, 156
Civil rights 3, 7–8, 71, 107, 111, 121, 162, 187, 189, 191
Cobden, Richard 46, 84–5, 176
Communitarian 81
Constant, Benjamin 7n.13, 43, 82n.261, 168, 190
Consumer culture 13–14, 179–81, 184–9, 195, 199, 203, 204
Crystal Palace see Great Exhibition
Dahlmann, Friedrich Christoph 52–4, 56–7, 74–5
Daru 103–5, 115
Daumard, Adeline 155–6, 159–61, 163–8
Daunou, P.-C.-F. 39, 45
Declaration of the Rights of Man see French Revolution
Deference 12, 26, 57, 92, 98, 131, 158–9, 175, 188
Democracy, Democratic
aristocracy and 155, 157, 170, 179, 189, 190–1, 195, 200
bureaucracy favors 59
civil rights and 7, 189
defined 4, 157
hierarchy and 157–8, 160–1, 195–6, 197, 200–1
rejects adjunctions 44
right to vote, rights-talk see also universal suffrage 6, 7, 24–5, 35, 68, 81, 180, 191, 196, 198
strong in France 35, 38–9, 107–8, 110–11, 118
threatens anarchy 7, 71
weak in England 21, 86, 133, 135, 138–40
Despotism 2–4, 6–9, 12, 51, 102–3, 106, 112–13, 126
Dicey, A. V. 179
Discourse of Capacity see Capacity
Disraeli, Benjamin 89–90, 122, 132–3, 141
Dissenters, Nonconformists 3, 87, 127, 140
Doctrinaires 5, 12, 31, 36, 38, 49, 108, 125
Droysen, Johann Gustav 59, 68, 74–5
Duel, 160
Dufaure, Jules 47–8, 105, 112, 114–15, 117
Duncker, Max 75, 95–8, 101
Dupin, P.-C.-F. 39–40, 42
Dupont-White, Charles 113
Durham, Lord 28–9
Dürkheim, Émile 121, 197, 201
Duverger de Hauranne, E. 38–9, 41–2, 44, 46, 49–50, 105, 106, 111–12, 114, 117, 197–8
Edinburgh Review 27
Education see also Capacity. 156–7, 159–61, 164, 166–7, 169, 174, 183, 184, 191, 193–6, 199–200, 202–4
Elitism 15, 92, 119, 121, 187, 191
Enlightenment 1, 3–4, 6–7, 15–16, 26, 39, 43, 51, 58–9, 173
England see Democracy, Liberal
Equality
among those with capacity 98
as equal opportunity 72, 162, 164
capacity and 115, 194
Democracy and 4, 119
German ideas about 52–3
hierarchy and 159, 164, 195, 201
independence does not mean 26
legal 44, 58–9, 104, 117, 160, 187, 191
political 4
socialism as 195
Ferry, Jules 120, 194
Forckenbeck 95, 99
Forster, W. E. 124, 158
Fouillée, Alfred 114, 119–20, 194
France see Democracy, Liberal
Franchise see Suffrage
France, French see Democracy, Liberal, French Revolution
Frankfurt National Assembly 67–76, 83, 88, 97, 116
French Revolution
1789 1–2, 175, 180
1793 1–2
and civil rights 7n.13
Declaration of the Rights of Man 1
effects on liberals 2–3
French liberals want to end 35
Jacobinism 1
language of capacity and 16
liberal ambivalence towards 1–2
liberals heirs of 2
liberalism response to 7
requires comparative study 9
Terror 1
watershed 16–17
Frevet, Ute 160
Furet, François 5, 120, 170
Gagern, Heinrich v. 72–5
Gall, Lothar 55, 58, 172
Gambetta, Léon 112, 120, 166, 174, 194
Gay, Peter 1, 78, 155, 166, 169
Index 237

Gender 13, 34, 40, 40n.106, 90, 111, 115, 120, 156, 180–1, 187–9
Germany see Liberal
Girard, Louis 107–8, 110–12, 118
Gladstone, W. E. 90, 100, 109, 120, 122–5, 128–40, 175–6
Gneist, Rudolf v. 95–6, 98–9
Goschen, George 130–1, 133, 135, 138
Graham, Lord 26, 89–90, 124
Great Exhibition 156–7, 163, 185
Grey, Earl 23–4, 27–31
Guizot, François 5–9, 15–16, 37–8, 40, 48, 50, 54, 84, 111–12, 119–20, 126, 168, 196
Habermas, Jürgen 2–3, 44, 82
Halévy, Elie 166, 179
Hansemann, David 52–4, 60, 76
Hartington, Lord 139–40
Haskell, Thomas 195–7, 200–2
Hazareesingh, Sudhir 108, 111, 118, 121, 159, 168, 175, 183
Hesse, Electoral 11, 60–2, 147, 175
Hierarchy
capacity and 154–60, 162, 187–8, 197, 200
consumer culture and 180–1, 198
democracy and 14, 157–8, 160–1, 195–7, 200–1
English 158
French 159
German 160
in nineteenth-century Europe 154–7, 160–1, 163–5, 187–8
liberalism and 4, 6, 73, 121, 194
social mobility and 163–4
Holbach, Baron d’e 16–17
Home Rule 109, 139–40, 178
Hugo, Victor 103
James, Henry 158
Jews 3–4, 56
Jordan, Sylvester 53, 57
July Monarchy 5, 54–60, 61, 73, 78–9, 81, 83, 86, 88, 102, 104–5, 108, 110–11, 113, 128, 155, 159, 163, 175, 194
Kant, Immanuel 12, 57
Kocka, Jürgen 5, 34, 55–6, 58–9, 154, 166–7, 173
Laboulaye, Edouard 106–8, 112, 114–15
Lamartine, Alphonse de 9, 82
Lasker, E. 144–6
Layard, Austen Henry 124, 126
Le Bon, Gustave 197
Lette, Wilhelm A. 73–6, 95, 97–8, 101, 116
Liberal, Liberals, Liberalism see also Aristocracy, Capacity, Democracy, Hierarchy, French Revolution, Middle Class(es)
British, English 5, 10, 12–13, 22–3, 25–6, 28, 31–4, 38, 40–1, 44, 50–7, 64, 66–7, 73, 83–8, 91–3, 98, 100–1, 109, 115, 119, 121–4, 126, 131–5, 138, 140–1, 143, 149, 156, 158, 163–4, 174, 176
bureaucratic 10, 51, 58–9, 61, 64
commerce and 30, 44, 64, 170, 199–200
contradictions 1–5, 8, 21, 75, 119–20, 140, 144, 154, 158, 170, 178, 190
credo 23–4, 32, 52
decline 5, 11, 14, 16, 92, 93, 137, 139, 141, 147, 153–4, 157, 162–5, 170, 172–81, 188–9, 204
definition 1–8, 11, 14–16, 53, 72, 114, 153, 196
French 5, 11, 12n.26, 22, 34–48, 50–2, 55, 64, 66–7, 78, 80, 92, 102, 105, 107–11, 113–23, 126, 134, 141, 143, 147, 163, 175, 187, 194, 197–8
German 2–3, 5, 9, 11, 28, 45, 50–61, 64–8, 70–1, 73, 75, 78, 83, 92–4, 97–8, 100–2, 107, 109, 115, 119, 134, 140–5, 147–9, 173, 175–8; Prussian 64, 76–8, 93–5, 97–8, 100, 109, 143–9
individual, individualist see Capacity legitimacy and 6, 25–6, 30–3, 37, 47, 106, 112, 117, 136
social, socially-oriented see Capacity
Locke, John 15–16, 172
Lowe, Robert 9, 48, 124–6
Lower class(es), proletariat 3, 102, 104–5, 155, 157, 159, 160–1, 163, 167, 168, 180–4, 188–9, 199
Mannheim, Karl 16
Marx, Marxism 7, 45, 165, 172, 196
Mass politics 13, 111, 120, 135, 148–9, 174–9
Mathy, Karl 71–2, 74–5
Mevissen, Gustav v. 53, 55, 57, 75
Middle class(es)
capacity of 28
decline 172–4
dominance 12, 29–31, 33–4, 54, 60–1, 88, 92, 126–7, 142, 174, 179, 181–4, 189, 194
hierarchy and 155–60, 163, 187–9
lack cohesion 114
liberalism and 12, 44, 71, 82, 165, 170, 175, 177, 199–200
not mentioned 71, 82, 85, 88–9
social mobility and 100, 161–4, 172, 189
suffrage 27–9, 32, 34, 88, 98, 123, 126–7, 132–3
Montalembert, comte de 4, 79, 105, 106
Morley, John 138
Napoleon III 66–7, 83, 93, 102–3, 106, 110
National Liberal 143–8, 175, 178
Nationalism 51, 67, 94, 149, 176–8, 190
Nefftzer, Auguste 108
New Era 93, 135, 175, 181
Nipperdey, Thomas 3–4, 7, 51, 53–4, 58, 93–4, 147, 149, 167, 170, 175
North German Confederation 94, 100, 109, 141–2, 144–5
Nostalgia 110, 154, 190
Notable politics 113–14, 122, 134–5, 148–9, 159, 174–6, 178, 181
Opinion
liberals favor free expression 7
of individuals 25, 28, 45, 49, 80
professional 197
Palmerston, Lord 89–90, 162–3
Pareto, Vilfredo 197
Paternalism 159–60
Perkin, Harold 195–6
Pfizer, Peter 52–3, 57
Pierce, Charles 201
Political culture 6–7, 10, 14, 32, 52, 64, 166, 174
Professions, professionalization 43, 195, 202
Progress 1, 4, 6, 12, 26–7, 45, 47–8, 55, 92, 119, 164
Progressive Party 97, 100, 142, 144–6, 148, 176–8
Property see Capacity, Middle class
Prussian constitutional conflict 51, 93–4, 109
Reform Acts see Suffrage
Reformation 51
Rémusat, Charles de 36, 46, 108, 110–12, 117, 167
Residuum 26, 85, 134, 137, 156–7
Revolutions of 1848
France 12, 37, 46, 50, 64, 66–7, 78–9, 82–3, 159
Germany 2, 51, 62, 65–7, 73, 78, 93–4; Prussia 64, 76
Revue des deux mondes 10, 111, 119–20, 164, 197
Richter, Eugen 176
Robespierre, Maximilien 1, 3, 17
Roebeck 87, 133
Roosevelt, Franklin D. 195
Rosanvallon, Pierre 37, 45, 83, 113–14, 121, 164, 194, 197
Rotteck, Karl v. 52–5, 60
Royer-Collard, P.-P. 49
Russell, Lord 23–4, 26–31, 84–6, 88–92, 100
Schérer, Edmond 119, 121, 194–5
Schulze-Delitzsch 76, 95, 97, 100, 101
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>239</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schwerin, Graf</td>
<td>75, 95–6, 100–1, 142, 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SDP</td>
<td>134, 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skinner, Quentin</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Adam</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social mobility</td>
<td>40, 154, 156, 161–6, 169, 173, 189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialism, Socialist(s)</td>
<td>5, 79, 92, 121, 134, 147, 148, 188, 190–1, 198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sperber, Jonathan</td>
<td>174–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staats-Lexikon</td>
<td>52–5, 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>26–7, 33–7, 40, 42–3, 52, 78, 80, 86, 88, 107, 124, 183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanley, Lord</td>
<td>25–6, 89–91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephens, Fitzjames</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue, Eugène</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffrage, voting</td>
<td>and liberal ideals 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjunctions</td>
<td>37, 42–4, 46, 48–9, 57, 73, 75, 88, 128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>census</td>
<td>42, 46, 57, 60, 70–4, 79, 81, 95–9, 101, 108, 115, 117, 144–5, 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>debates see Table of Contents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>defines liberalism</td>
<td>5, 8–9, 11–12, 21, 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>franchise</td>
<td>11, 21–6, 30, 31, 38, 44, 60, 71–2, 86–9, 91, 95, 123–4, 127–33, 135–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>household</td>
<td>13, 69, 75, 80, 97, 128, 131, 132, 134–5, 186–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indirect</td>
<td>23, 32–3, 45, 60–1, 68, 71, 73–4, 76–9, 87, 107, 116, 139, 146, 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>office, trust</td>
<td>22–5, 32, 38–9, 50, 52, 72, 72n.230, 114–16, 118, 137–8, 164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passive</td>
<td>60, 63, 73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>registration</td>
<td>80, 105–6, 132, 135, 138–9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>residence requirements</td>
<td>42, 61–3, 80–1, 87, 103–5, 117, 128, 132–3, 135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>right to</td>
<td>22, 24–5, 31, 35, 38–41, 44, 47, 49, 60–2, 80–2, 84–6, 96, 103–4, 111, 113, 120, 133, 137–8, 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>three-class (Prussian)</td>
<td>22, 55, 73, 76–8, 83, 93, 95–101, 104, 141, 144–8, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plural, weighted</td>
<td>22, 57, 70, 73–4, 76–9, 97, 116, 132, 135, 148, 165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sybel, Heinrich v.</td>
<td>13, 54, 63, 142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tarde, Gabriel de</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tawney, R. H.</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terror see French Revolution</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thiers, Adolphe</td>
<td>79–82, 105–7, 109, 110, 112, 114, 117, 118, 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Republic</td>
<td>93, 111, 118, 121, 179, 194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thrift</td>
<td>41, 163, 168, 169, 182–3, 185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevelyan, George O.</td>
<td>136–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unruh, Fritz v.</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utopia, Utopian</td>
<td>4, 48, 196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtue</td>
<td>4, 16, 39, 101, 182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voltaire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vormärz</td>
<td>9, 51–4, 56–8, 60–1, 64, 65, 73, 75, 78, 94, 97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waitz, Georg</td>
<td>67–9, 72, 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waldeck, Benedikt</td>
<td>76, 95, 97–9, 101, 142, 144, 145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watershed</td>
<td>14, 16, 154, 179, 180, 183, 188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weber, Max</td>
<td>142, 153, 197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wehler, Hans-Ulrich</td>
<td>93, 94, 160, 161, 165, 181, 184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcker, K. T.</td>
<td>52, 53, 55, 56, 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whig</td>
<td>11, 21–3, 25, 89, 91, 128, 129, 175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windthorst, Ludwig</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman, women see Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woolf, Virginia</td>
<td>179, 180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>