Reading and Ideology

The Case of the Free Public Libraries Movement

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This article examines social debates on mass reading in Britain, linking them to the free public libraries movement of the mid 19th century. It argues that free public libraries were defended on the grounds of a piecemeal, eclectic, but nonetheless identifiable vernacular theory of ideology that emerged over the course of a century. This theory treated literary texts as containers of ideas and values that could be transmitted to readers. It responded to the social tensions emerging from industrial capitalist society, but located conflict in the realm of ideas, rather than in material reality. It thus offered an idealist account of class conflict, positing both that dissent was rooted in the new phenomenon of mass reading, and that it could be resolved by encouraging workers to consume particular texts. Our aim is to show that, while such a theory of ideology was demonstrably reductive and flawed, it was part of what compelled the British State to pass the Public Libraries Act in 1850 and therefore merits exposition.

Keywords: free public libraries, British State, mass reading, Chartism, industrial capitalism, vernacular ideology

In 1849, the *Select Committee Report on Free Public Libraries* made the case that, by providing free public libraries, the British State could shape its subjects into peaceful, quiescent labourers. Commissioned at the height of the working-class Chartist movement for political reform, the *Report* represented a belief that "managing" the reading habits of the masses was a viable solution to the unrest and class conflict that beset industrial capitalist society. Indeed, several scholars have described the intended function of British public libraries in terms of 'social control' or 'social engineering', but there has yet to be a serious examination of the beliefs that shaped this argument.[1] This article argues that the discourse on mass reading leading up to, and including, the free public libraries movement, presented a piecemeal, eclectic, but nonetheless identifiable vernacular theory of ideology. It identifies two distinctive features of this theory of ideology. Firstly, it comprehended literature as a repository of ideas and values, and the act of reading as a process of ideological transmission. This resulted in not only the elevation of some texts as politically instructive, and the denigration of others as morally deleterious, but in an understanding of readers – particularly uninitiated (working-class) readers – as objects of ideological influence. Secondly, its logic was idealist, in the sense that it elided material conflict in favour of ideational conflict. This is to say that it was believed that particular texts could cause, catalyse, or resolve the class-based tensions of British society. Class conflict was treated more as a problem in the thinking of working-class radicals than an outcome of the material circumstances of industrial capitalist society. Our aim is to clarify that, while the vernacular theory of ideology that emerged to comprehend mass reading may have been flawed, it was pervasive and productive in the sense that it helped to generate the argument for free public libraries. Its understanding of how ideas circulate in society was sufficiently sophisticated and adaptable to endure across at least two centuries and inform policymaking in Britain.

Reading and Revolt

The free public libraries movement emerged during a period of significant social, political, and economic change in Britain. Between 1750 and 1850, the population of the British Isles approximately tripled, while the industrial working class grew with the expansion of industrial capitalism and the factory system of production. Large towns flourished throughout Britain and 'dislocat[ed] old patterns of life and the traditional culture and pursuits of the countryside', creating 'urban communities [that] were cut off from the familiar attentions of squire, vicar, poor-law overseer and schoolmaster.'[2] These communities were seen as adrift from social institutions that served to safeguard the social order, and therefore susceptible to disruptive ideological currents. As Foster argues, it was in industrial towns that class consciousness developed, alongside the radical working-class political formations that impressed Marx and Engels.[3] The new industrial regions 'threw up vigorous protest movements, drawing the attention of men at Whitehall and Westminster to these large, in their eyes alien masses, embedded in the fabric of society'.[4] Reading was part of the intellectual and social life of working-class radicals.[5] During this period, England was becoming an increasingly literate society, with an 'enormous' growth in the production of radical pamphlets, and the popular press more broadly.[6] As we will see in the following section, there were several ways in which the State and elements of civil society attempted to "manage" reading practices. First, though, we will chart some of the history of working-class reading in Britain, and the debates that it inspired.

Even before literacy became widespread, the figure of the popular reader alarmed members of the dominant class. Altick notes that, while the average British subject in 1780 was no more likely to be literate than their Elizabethan counterpart, in the final decade of the century 'the figure of the common reader suddenly became a lowering threat to the nation's very security'.[7]

Between 1710 and 1730, the "charity school movement" made one of the first attempts to educate significant proportions of the working class and peasantry, guided by the belief that children would become "moral" adults if they were '[captured] from the streets, [confirmed] in God-fearing ways and [inoculated] against those habits of sloth, debauchery, and irreligion' which were thought to plague 'the lower orders'.[8] This education differed from that available in grammar schools, in that it was not aimed at social advancement. Rather, it would offer moral instruction as a way to remedy the 'social problem' of the poor.[9] But as the century progressed, popular enthusiasm for "intellectual enlightenment", driven in part by the success of Sunday Schools (established in 1785), sparked fears of the consequences of mass literacy. '[S]uddenly, in the supercharged atmosphere of a nation plunged … into a general war, the potentialities of the press [alarmed] people who prized above all the settled stability of the nation'.[10] Of course, these fears were not just about the press itself, but about its influence on readerships. As we will demonstrate, much concern was shaped by the belief that popular literature would implant "bad" ideas in readers. Important exceptions aside, literature was understood as a 'culture in common', produced by writers and simply "received" by readers. So conceived, reading represented a communicative act between a producer and receiver who never exchanged roles or negotiated meaning together. As an "unorganized" phenomenon, reading sparked fears of subversion, but by the same logic liberal thinkers came to believe that reading could be harnessed to transmit ideas that supported the status quo to a receptive public.

During the mid to late 18th century, the debate was shaped by the argument that reading would leave the working classes dissatisfied with their lives and hence liable to revolt. In 1757, the author and MP Soame Jenyns argued that to 'encourage the poor man to read and think, and thus to become more conscious of his misery, would be to fly in the face of divine intervention'.[11] In this view, the social order was sanctioned not even as natural, but divine. Two anonymous essays published in the 1788 collection *Variety* expanded on the danger of the

reading poor. The author shared the view that reading would make workers conscious of their misery, and argued that this could lead to the total dissolution of the socioeconomic structure.[12] They saw social stratification as natural and necessary, calling labourers 'a useful set of men' who pursue 'inferior tasks … with ignorant contentment'.[13] Here, ignorance was the virtue to be sought, its putative blessings exemplified by the 'chearfulness' of 'ignorant' slaves in the 'West India Islands'.[14] Partly based on the author's impression that reading had made the Scottish working classes less industrious, he asserted that:

> some degree of ignorance is necessary to keep [the laboring class] subordinate, and to make them either useful to others, or happy in themselves. What ploughman who could read the renowned History of Jack Hickerthrift [sic], or the story of the Seven Wise Men of Greece, would be content to whistle up one furrow, and down another, from the morning dawn to the setting of the sun?[15]

This was not an individualized concern, but a social one. Generalized discontent would encourage labourers in England to rise through the ranks of society, thereby leaving the economy baseless and the working class 'extinct'.[16] Reading in general posed the threat, but the ideological content of specific books exacerbated it. The author warned that 'having learned to read, [the working classes] will find bad books full as entertaining to pass their hours away as good ones'.[17] Some believed that stories about Jack Hickathrift and Jack the Giant-Killer (in which peasant or working-class heroes defeated giants) risked bolstering the confidence of the labouring classes, and legitimising dissent. Part of the issue was the authority of the printed word: Rose argues that working class readers tended to believe that such tales were "true", at least in the sense that Bible stories were "true".[18] Thus, figures who favoured "stability" feared that literature might convey damaging ideas to an impressionable working class, who would learn to admire, or even emulate, feats of violence and rebellion.

In the 19th century, anxieties about the ideas and values transmitted by particular texts

endured. The reading public grew (though perhaps less than people feared). For those who believed that texts could convey ideological content, this raised fears of unpredictable influences having regular and sustained contact with the reading masses. The ideological importance of literature was outlined in Hugh Murray's *Morality of Fiction* (1805). Murray viewed fiction as a technology for introducing opinions 'with the view of spreading, and rendering them familiar to the unlearned'.[19] Though he was clear that creative works could, in principle, disseminate positive or negative ideas, Murray was concerned by the prevalence of fictions that glorified moral deviance, and the extent to which such texts might inspire imitation, especially among young and 'inexperienced' readers.[20] For Murray, such a reader would be so '[p]leased with interesting narrative, or brilliant description' that they would neither 'search for defects in the argument' nor pay attention 'to the opinions inculcated', which they would 'adopt … implicitly, and without due examination'.[21] Murray's account stands out in part because it recognizes that, in principle, it is possible to read differently – readers can reject or negotiate ideological content. But, crucially, there is no suggestion that the "common reader" is equipped to do so. Hence, while Murray did not figure reading as an exclusively or inherently passive activity, he suggested that the inexperienced reader would uncritically imbibe the underlying principles presented by a text. In such cases, agency lay with the author, at whose behest a creative work could spread particular ideas, values, and moral principles (benevolent or otherwise).

Literacy continued to rise in the first half of the nineteenth century, in part driven by voluntary schools and other opportunities for informal education. Prior to 1870, education was essentially provided by charitable and voluntary agencies, or private schools. Poor children often received limited schooling, not least because their attendance was often interrupted by the demands of labour (including seasonal labour that would see many children completely absent during harvest periods). One significant figure in the provision of working-class

education was Joseph Lancaster, who popularized the "monitorial" school system in which older pupils 'passed lessons on' to younger ones, thereby allowing teaching-pupil ratios that were effective in terms of cost, if not pedagogy.[22] For Lancaster, this was about saving 'town[s] exposed to all the evils of dissipation and vice' by training students in 'the daily remembrance of [God's] commandments'.[23] The monitorial system was embraced by two rival societies: the British and Foreign School Society (BFSS, established 1808) and the National Society for the Provision of Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Church (NSPEPPC, established 1811). Though the latter was specifically concerned with raising Anglican children, both saw it as a primary aim to produce good Christian citizens. '[B]y means of a summary mode of education', the National Society similarly aimed to provide students with 'such knowledge and habits, as are sufficient to guide them through life, in their proper stations'. In its elimination of superfluous elements, this "summary" education sought to teach religious doctrine and to 'train [students] to the performance of their religious duties by early discipline'.[24] To this end, the National Society used the Bible as an instrument of instruction, alongside religious tracts sold by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK).[25] However, education in both the BFSS's "British Schools" and the NSPEPPC's "National Schools" was generally of poor quality, not least because of the monitorial system, as well as the complete lack of (and resistance to) any kind of standardized inspection before 1839.[26] Sunday schools were also an important part of this picture, as they were popular among the working classes and 'aimed at the children who were either employed in industry during the week or were left to maraud in the streets, in both cases normally without any form of schooling'.[27] Though they only taught for one day a week, they provided some instruction in reading and piety to around 75% of working-class children by 1851.[28] Again, these schools tended to promote submission, to sanctify labour, and to inculcate work discipline in their students, including by teaching obedience to time.[29]

Though the education of children was haphazard and uneven throughout our period, it points to some useful observations for understanding debates on reading. First, education was often conceived in terms of influencing and shaping the character of students, in ways that aligned with the needs of emerging industrial capitalist interests. As Johnson suggests, for all their differences, educational "experts" in the 1830s represented 'a coalition of liberal intellectuals with strong personal or ideological links with industrial capital', with '[t]he apparent exceptions to this – men from landed or clerical backgrounds – none the less [sic] adopt[ing] the viewpoint of capital as a perspective and city or industrial population as an object of concern.'[30] For these "experts", the purpose of education was to maintain and strengthen the social order, by reincorporating the new urban population into existing social structures. As this was not an education that was intended to result in social advancement, it was conceived in limited terms. Rule argues that Davies Gilbert 'spoke for his class and age' when opposing a Parochial Schools bill in the Commons in 1807 by arguing that:

> giving education to the labouring classes of the poor … would in effect be prejudicial to their morals and happiness: it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants to … laborious employments to which their rank in society had destined them: instead of teaching them subordination, it would render them factious and refractory … it would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books and publications against Christianity.[31]

Gilbert was certainly not alone in his concern that a literate laboring class would read all manner of "bad" publications. However, it is worth noting that there was no guarantee that an education in schools would enable children to read literature of any kind. Absolute literacy figures are difficult to calculate for this period, as are educational outcomes. But even by 1847,

out of 12,786 children in Midlands National Schools, only 2,891 could read the Bible, and 651 'books of general information'. In Nottingham, 24 pupils out of 1,109 were considered 'fully literate'.[32] Of course, these are just two examples, and there is no way of knowing how many children and adults learned to read from parents or friends without attending schools.[33] Suffice to say that literacy remained far from universal, though it did generally trend upwards from 1750-1850. But the perception of rising literacy, or the fear of it, was a significant source of social unease, linked to concerns about the religious and social habits of the working classes, and their potential opposition to capitalist society.

Among the working classes, literacy was highly valued, not because it represented any stable means for social advancement (few working-class occupations required it), but chiefly because it allowed individuals to read the Bible and to indulge in the increasingly diverse market of cheap literature.[34] In fact, religious literature was the largest category of work published in Britain between 1816 and 1887,[35] but the growth of cheap periodicals, pamphlets and penny fiction caused alarm in religious quarters. At issue here was the ideological (and moral) formation of readers, particularly in their role as labourers. Religious tracts 'were supposed to keep one from thinking wicked Chartist thoughts, to make one content with his empty stomach and stench-filled hovel'; the wrong texts, such as works of imaginative literature, 'could prove a snare of the devil.'[36] Members of the middle class, too, feared that cheap literature would arouse immoral behaviours and Chartist sentiment. As one example, journalist and author Eliza Meteyard argued that while cheap texts were not inherently bad, the actual texts that were widely circulated acted as a 'pernicious stimulant'. She argued that the worst cheap literature 'upholds sensual indulgence in every form, sets forth the immediate gratification of any lust or passion as a virtue, makes crime alluring, shows a life of lawless adventure to be a life of happiness'.[37] Meteyard strongly criticized *Jack Sheppard*, a highwayman narrative written by William Harrison Ainsworth and serially published in

Bentley's Miscellany from 1839 to 1840. She believed that *Jack Sheppard* and its many adaptations had 'demoralizing and criminal results upon the young'.[38] She was not alone in this, and her concerns were shared by those working within the State apparatus. Indeed, for forty years the Lord Chamberlain proscribed plays with "Jack Sheppard" in their title.[39] The 1852 *Report from the Select Committee on Criminal and Destitute Juveniles* demonstrates official anxieties about the circulation of corrosive ideas through such narratives. Using dubious interviews sourced from the *Sixth Report of the Inspector of Prisons, Northern and Easter District, 1841*, the 1852 *Report* linked Jack Sheppard and similar texts to juvenile criminality.[40] In response to leading questions about their consumption of highwayman narratives, the *Sixth Report* boys spoke about valorising highwaymen, and stealing to raise funds to see adaptations of *Jack Sheppard* at the theatre.[41] Meteyard's essay provides strikingly similar anecdotal evidence, with one boy reportedly claiming that highwaymen narratives 'made me inclined to follow some of their examples … [and] imitate some of their evil deeds'.[42] In these examples, one of the difficulties of mass reading as an ideological practice was laid bare: subversive ideas could circulate more widely than ever before.

An understanding of texts as ideological repositories, transmitted in the act of reading, underpinned the perceived relationship between "cheap literature" and Chartism. Meteyard argued that popular literature had a habit of 'colouring all social arrangements in its own bizarre fashion, [showing] the vices and not the virtues of the higher classes'.[43] She warned that the manufacturing districts were populated with those '[j]ust able to read "down with the tyrant," or "down with the manufacturer," or "destruction to machinery,"' who were 'led to crime through the false notion that the capitalist is the natural enemy of labour'.[44] The insinuation was that Chartist politics were misguided, and crude enough to be understood by the barely literate. At the same time, it betrayed an anxiety that Chartists and their sympathisers were uncritically imbibing ideas that would challenge the social order. Certainly, this underestimated

the complexity of Chartist thought. But in doing so, it located Chartism within an essentially idealist sphere, both suggesting that its growth was the result of misguided reading, and denying that it had a material basis in the continued subjection of labour to capital and the immiseration of large sections of the industrial working classes. Thus, on the premise that reading usually functioned as a process of ideological transmission, critics like Meteyard were able to understand the rise of Chartism without dealing with the historical conditions that generated opposition to industrial capitalism.

While Meteyard's position overemphasised the causal relationship between reading and Chartist sentiment, reading did have a limited but distinctive role in the development of working-class political consciousness. The working classes often accessed literature through locally-organized voluntary libraries and collectives. Circulating libraries were popular, but their subscription fees largely restricted membership to the middle and upper classes. The working classes could access books by other, cheaper means.[45] Hybrid libraries enabled the poor to rent volumes for a penny each without paying a subscription fee, while other libraries charged as little as a penny per week in order to attract a broad clientele. A range of collectives played a role here, each with different aims and audiences – they included mutual improvement societies, trade unions, and mechanics' institutes, as well as working men's libraries, Owenite Halls of Science, and Chartist libraries.[46] In at least some of these organisations, there was a belief that the process of reading would in some way "change" readers, in terms of their moral or political beliefs and behaviours. Mutual improvement societies, for instance, were premised on the 'spiritual and intellectual development of the social individual through corporately organised intellectual activity'.[47] Often they were established by working-class people in the hopes that such activity would lead to social promotion, though they were sometimes created by social 'superiors' of one kind or another (be they middle-class bosses or the 'working class élite').[48] As Crawford demonstrates, one such society in Leadhills was founded as the 'keystone

in a project of social engineering', whereby 'the promotion of education and reading' aimed to encourage 'self discipline, community purpose, regard for proper procedure and a high level of moral seriousness'. The aim here was to shape the behaviours and inclinations of readers such that they could become productive labourers for local capitalist enterprises (of which the Scots Mines Company was the largest).[49] Other institutions were less aligned with the maintenance of the social order, and therefore particularly concerning for liberal thinkers. By the 1840s, it was understood that 'socialist' libraries attracted more members than mechanics' institutes. These 'ambitious working class schemes' were often undertaken despite a distinct lack of capital, and, as Radcliffe argues, they revealed 'the powerful desire for an alternative to bourgeois-sponsored foundations'.[50] Such collectives provided opportunities for self-education among groups that typically received very little formal education. Their existence was part of the reason that, as Clarke observes, correspondents to the Chartist newspaper *The Northern Star* were able to 'introduce themselves as not only literate but as learned readers'.[51] "Socialist" reading was a matter of concern for those opposed to radical worker's movements, and it had not escaped the notice of the ruling classes that resistance movements were, in some cases, born in factories that acted as sites of self-education and radicalisation.[52] For some, at least, the vigour of these movements was in part a consequence of subversive reading habits. The logical solution was to reshape those habits.

Managing Reading and the Free Public Library Movement

In this climate, where mass reading was linked to fears of social upheaval, particular strategies for managing reading habits emerged. First, it is useful to focus on what is perhaps the most obvious strategy in this kind of enterprise: censorship. Stamp duty, first applied to newspapers in 1712, became one mechanism for indirectly censoring blasphemous and

seditious texts. Taxes were levied on penny newspapers and pamphlets such as *The Northern Star*, William Cobbett's *Political Register*, and *The Black Dwarf*, though pamphlets were exempt from 1834. The stamp on newspapers was reduced in 1836, and finally abolished in 1855. Abolition should not be read as a tacit acceptance of the content of the penny press; it was enacted after an 1851 Select Committee recommendation that 'market forces would be far more effective than the law in driving the pauper press out of existence'. [53] The belief was that, in the face of new competition from enterprises with the capital reserves to accelerate production and distribution, the unstamped press would fall out of circulation and the working classes would read privately, rather than in concert with their fellow man in the public house.[54] As a result, it was argued that this legal "penny press" would increase working-class appetites for schooling, and thereby ensure the incorporation of the working classes within the social order. Despite David Vincent's suggestion that 'the construction of the partnership between the schoolmasters and the capitalist proprietors and editors, bound together by mass literacy, made possible a striking absence of direct political censorship', the State did continue to engage in the direct censorship of some blasphemous and seditious materials under the provisions of the Obscene Publications Act 1857.[55] And, although the British government 'did not exercise direct control' over library stocks, there was 'some local and informal censorship'.[56] For example, from its establishment in 1842, Charles Mudie's Select Library 'exercised caution in circulating any novel deemed of questionable morality or poor taste'.[57] It banned works by George Moore, who was known for his depiction of non-marital and non-normative sexual relationships. This private censorship had a broader effect, since Mudie's Select Library informed the practices of other libraries, and, in turn, both writers and publishers tailored their work to a market circumscribed by the preferences and prejudices of libraries.[58]

There were nuanced arguments against local censorship, which some feared would inadvertently support the causes of Chartists and political agitators. Thomas Coates, Secretary

of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, put this argument forth in 1841, as part of an inquiry as to why "socialist" institutions were faring better than mechanics' institutes. He noted that, alongside theology, political science had been proscribed in mechanics' institutes for some twenty years. In his view, this was no longer an adequate policy by the 1840s, as it sent the message that:

> you are curious to learn something respecting the economy of civil society, and to be assured of what we assert, that what now forms its cement is its best security; we withhold from you all information on these subjects; but at the Socialist hall opposite they will strive to prove to you how unnatural is that economy, and worthless that security.[59]

The term 'strive' is significant: in Coates' view, the doctrine that was (allegedly) taught at "socialist" institutions was a distortion of reality (and this echoed Meteyard's claim that the opposition between capital and labour was a 'false notion'). It was the contrived work of ideologues, while in truth the existing system was the best available. If allowed to read politics in mechanics' institutes, Coates argued that a reader could gain a 'clear comprehension of his true interests in society', which would in turn 'induce him to perform with more heartiness his appointed duties'.[60] His duties need not change, only his thinking. Indeed, had mechanics' institutes permitted political works all along, the 'passions and prejudices' in which people 'err most frequently, egregiously, and … most fatally' might have 'long since become matters of history', since the institutes served as the 'only place where the workman's mind has undergone any training to fit it for the peaceful examination of evidence, and the calm recognition of truth'.[61] Coates' argument against censorship accepted the premise that reading was a process of ideological transmission, but insisted that it had a crucial social dimension. Put another way, readers would be affected not just by the text, but by the company they kept, and the spaces in which they read and, essentially, interpreted their realities. Thus Coates suggested that

increasing the working-class membership of mechanics' institutes would play a larger social role in generating respect for liberal capitalism and its organisation of society.

The liberal critique of censorship signalled a changing discourse on readers and their interactions with texts. For these critics, censorship merely made people more vulnerable to false doctrines. "Ignorance" was no longer imagined as a guarantee of quiescence, but as an absence of the training required to resist radical thought. As publisher, editor and author Charles Knight put it in his introduction to Thomas Carter's *Memoirs of a Working Man* (1845):

> It is not to be inferred that a man who diligently performs all the duties of the humblest calling is necessarily ignorant; or that if he reach some of the acquirements which were once held to belong to the noble, the wealthy, and the professionally learned, he must be discontented with his station, and become incapable of performing the offices by which he claims a share of the labour-fund, which is the only inheritance of him and of his class.[62]

For Knight, there was no straightforward connection between reading and revolt. His introduction aims, quite self-consciously, to offer Carter's *Memoirs* as a riposte to claims that working-class reading inspired discontent and revolutionary sentiment. He suggested that redistributing knowledge could serve as a preferable alternative to redistributing wealth. In his words, 'knowledge is the common property of the human family – the only property that can be equally divided without injury to the general stock.'[63] He believed that 'the learned and aristocratic' had, for too long, 'insisted upon maintaining the habit of talking to thinking human beings, in the language of the nursery', including by flooding the print market with condescending religious tracts.[64] Interestingly, then, Knight critiqued the crudity of treating working-class readers as people who would not necessarily think about what they read. In fact, he suggested that it was precisely the ability to think that meant a well-read worker need not become a radical. Like Coates, Knight believed that by educating the working classes

(including in the political economy of liberal capitalism), one could assure them of the necessity of the existing social order, thereby producing the 'ideal' form of consent.[65] As a corollary, the rise of mass reading presented an opportunity for the sophisticated use of ideology as a support for social stability. Mass reading could, in principle, become part of the reproduction of social order, if texts were to diffuse ideas that supported stability and the establishment of "informed" consensus.

The extension of reading as a practice, including the reading of creative works, was a matter of interest to the political class. The Whig politician Sir James Mackintosh noted in 1835 that 'novels must have had more influence on the public, than all other sorts of books combined', and contended that '[n]othing popular can be frivolous; whatever influences multitudes, must be of proportionable importance'.[66] The implementation of a national education system was stalled by questions of its financial, religious and social implications. The case for free public libraries also faced challenges. Some detractors objected to the tax proposed to raise funds for public libraries.[67] For others, free public libraries 'raised fears of workers being educated beyond their station and being equipped to absorb dangerous ideas'.[68] However, supporters suggested that free public libraries would allow the State to gain greater control of the ideological material that circulated in Britain. By harnessing the ideological power of literature through the establishment of free public libraries, liberal figures hoped to promote social harmony and manufacture political consent. The case set out in the *Report of the Select Committee on Free Public Libraries* mobilized the wider understanding of texts as repositories of ideas and values that we have identified in this article. This allowed the contributors to mount a convincing case that increasing the accessibility of books would not create dissent, but rather manufacture consent and thereby strengthen British hegemony.

On the one hand, the case for free public libraries was driven by the fact that the working classes were already reading. Censorship strategies made some impact on what was read, as

did the publishing activities and distribution networks of private and ecclesiastical enterprises, but anxieties remained about the reading taking place in "socialist" libraries, reading rooms, and public houses. The absence of State libraries in Britain was, by this point, striking. Figures presented by Edward Edwards to the Select Committee for Public Libraries in 1849 suggested that, out of the 330 towns and cities in Europe and the United States that housed 'principal' libraries (defined as those holding 10,000 volumes or more), only nine were located in Britain.[69] Edwards rightly suspected that these data only represented a fraction of privately-maintained libraries available to the public, the bulk of which were, from the State's perspective, largely invisible. It was felt that 'a kind of literary darkness […] prevailed over the vast extent of the newly-formed portion of the metropolis', with the British novelist Wilkie Collins coining the phrase 'The Unknown Public' in 1858 to describe three million working-class readers who were 'right out of the pale of literary civilisation', 'waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad'.[70] At least for some, the public library movement sought to bring those readers into the 'light', both in the sense of making them visible, and in the sense of enlightening them of the merit of particular ideas and values by influencing their reading habits. In this view, public libraries would supersede non-State equivalents (such as the "socialist" libraries) and act as ideological supports for the liberal capitalist system.

The *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries* (1849) articulated the argument in favour of free public libraries. Across over 300 pages, it presented mass reading as a phenomenon that could be managed, and even operationalised, for the purpose of maintaining the social hierarchies that characterized British society. Here, anxieties around the mass reading public became consequential, as they served as evidence of the subversive danger that Britain faced. In one example, William Ewart's Committee asked Charles Corkran, a missionary at the London Domestic Mission, whether 'inferior' novels 'might possibly pervert the mind', 'containing loose ideas on the subject of society, not proven … by fact' and 'wild … theories

upon the subject of labour'.[71] In principle, Corkran concurred, noting that there were cheap publications which reflected on labour 'as between masters and men', and which he deemed to be politically 'one-sided'.[72] Implicit in Corkran's response is the notion that such ideas could be transmitted to, and received by, passive and unthinking readerships, who might come to view labour and capital as in conflict, rather than symbiotic harmony. Importantly, despite a belief that reading could be a subversive, even seditious, practice, the Committee concluded that the provision of libraries, by contrast with the provision of publicly-funded education, was 'one of the few cases in which Education may be promoted without involving the agitation of theological questions or incurring the danger of political animosity'.[73] A specific understanding of libraries and reading reconciled these seemingly oppositional views.

The *Report* reasoned that reading had the power to be a positive force, as well as an alternative to such 'base' pursuits such as drinking in the public house. In parliament, Ewart endorsed libraries as 'instrument[s] of public improvement',[74] specifically targeted at the working classes.[75] "Improvement" was represented in a reciprocal relationship with reading: "improvement" could stimulate reading, and reading could "improve" the working classes. On the former point, lecturer George Dawson and town clerk John Fitchett Marsh attested that the 'habits' of working-class people in Birmingham and Warrington had improved in recent years, and that this in turn fed a demand for reading.[76] On the latter, six interviewees for the *Report* highlighted instances of reading "improving" the working classes (at times in response to leading questions). One was William Lovett, one of the founders of the London Working Men's Association, and co-author of the People's Charter (1838). Informed by the politics of Chartism, Owenite socialism, and (middle-class) improvement culture, Lovett believed in improving and enfranchising the working classes; in 1841, he founded the National Association for Promoting the Political and Social Improvement of the People, which aimed 'to secure for [the working classes] equal political rights' and to 'prepar[e] them, as far as possible,

intellectually and socially for the proper use of that power when they may have it'.[77] Lovett told the Committee that, in London, 'brutal sports and pastimes' were increasingly confined to the 'lowest class' and less common among the working classes generally, as was 'coarse and brutal language'; when asked if the working classes had become 'a more reading and thinking class than they formerly were', he answered that they had, and attributed the change to the rise of cheap periodicals.[78] Reverend Mackenzie affirmed the Committee's suggestion that the establishment of reading-rooms would afford the working classes 'the means of intellectual improvement in the evenings, without resorting to public houses and other places which deteriorate their morals';[79] and if, as former secretary of the Manchester Athenaeum John Baxter Langley suggested, the extension of reading had 'very much improved' the 'general habits' of the working classes,[80] it stood to reason that further reading would encourage people to spend time in the library instead of the public house, the latter being blamed for crime and instability. Dawson directly addressed the political potential of improvement through reading. He held that the working classes had been greatly improved 'in a moral and also in a literary point of view' over the previous decades, and linked an increase in reading to a decrease of 'that turbulent spirit which I consider to be owing to ignorance'.[81] Like Coates and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Dawson viewed reading as a potential defence against opposing ideological influences, claiming that libraries could help to contain unrest because patrons would be less easily 'made tools of by political agitators'.[82] For Dawson, this pacification through knowledge had already begun: cheap 'useful' publications had supplied people with beneficial ideas. As he put it: 'there has been a change in the source and current of the thoughts of the people'.[83] This was, in one view, what was at stake in the question of the mass reading public: the ideological diet of the nation.

The value of creative works as ideological tools was by no means taken for granted in discussions about free public libraries. As Black notes, from the outset, and in alignment with

utilitarian ideas, the 'dominant aim … of the public library movement was to dispense only "useful" culture, which meant a heavy emphasis on non-fiction reading'.[84] Some contributors to the parliamentary debates made rather clear-cut distinctions between non-fiction as "useful" and creative works as mere 'amusements'.[85] The interviews in the *Report* evidenced more nuanced views. It was expected that younger and inexperienced readers would pursue 'light' reading, but that there was a general 'willingness on the part of the working classes to study works that are rather of a deeper character', which would be more likely to improve readers' moral and political character.[86] And there was an important argument that readily available fiction might encourage readers to move on to "deeper" works. According to Langley, lending records showed that library users would begin with 'narratives and tales', before moving on to novels, followed by biographies, histories, and, finally, philosophy.[87] Similarly, Dawson testified that working men's libraries were stocking fewer novels and more historical and philosophical works.[88] Alongside this understanding of creative works as a "bridge" to "deeper" reading was an argument that creative works could model superior moral values. In accordance with Murray's *Morality of Fiction* (1804), Mackintosh argued that there was a class of creative work suitable for the purposes of moral instruction, which could represent 'a degree of ideal excellence, superior to any virtue which is observed in real life'.[89] The best of such creative works could perhaps be counted among the 'superior' class of literature, to borrow the language that recurs throughout the interviews.[90] This understanding of creative works was critical, since the presence of fiction and 'imaginative literature' was necessary for the early public libraries to 'retain any credibility as popular institutions'.[91] The inclusion of imaginative literature within public libraries was therefore seen as a concession with a valuable outcome.

Importantly, in the British case, the contents of libraries were not to be directly controlled, regulated, or censored.[92] The initial Public Libraries Act (1850) was modest in scope, and forbade libraries from actually purchasing books, in part because this lessened the tax burden,

and in part because it prevented accusations of censorship.[93] Avoiding such charges was important because some working-class readers had already abandoned patronized libraries where they found the political motives of dominant parties suspect; there was a view, articulated by the proponent of working-class education Thomas Hodgkin in 1823, that 'it would be better for men to be deprived of education than to receive their education from their masters; for education in that sense is no better than the training of the cattle that are broken to the yoke'.[94] It was in this context that the Committee recommended that public libraries rely on donations.[95] While this reliance on donations risked the inclusion of "inferior" literature within library stocks, it was expected that the majority of donations 'would surely come from "establishment" sources', who, 'benevolent and enlightened', would donate in order to craft a 'pleasing' legacy.[96] It was assumed that that the class of the donor influenced the class of the donation: libraries would not provide 'anything approaching what one might call "dangerous" reading', since donations could be expected to reflect establishment values.[97] Unsurprisingly, given the overall popularity of fiction, the donations received included many novels.[98] This was permissible under the logic that novels, and particularly those of the so-called "superior" class might have the dual effect of providing positive moral instruction and weaning the working classes off "bad" fiction. On the latter point, the interview with John Imray concluded that readers of the *Penny Magazine* and *Chamber's Journal* preferred them to 'immoral' works 'so much so, that I do not think they would ever return to the lower class of books'.[99] In her article for the *Ragged School Union Magazine*, Meteyard credited "superior" novels with the same power, and envisaged that, if made accessible, they would 'sweep away these base accompaniments of a low physical and moral condition', namely the likes of *Jack Sheppard* and other morally deleterious works.[100] Texts, then, were vested with the power of catalysing discontent or inspiring consent. Again, this was a largely idealist understanding: the material conditions of readers lives were not treated as significant causes for discontent, nor as obstacles

for manufacturing consent. And if "superior" fiction cleansed the taste for "inferior" fiction, then free public libraries could simultaneously promote preferable ideas and values, and counter socially-disruptive ones.

The theory was that libraries could take on a "corrective" role and mitigate the social and political tensions of 19th-century British society. Free public libraries would do so by guiding the reading practices, and by extension the thought and behavior, of a growing and increasingly oppositional society. For instance, in rural contexts, it was suggested that 'much of the future character of our agricultural population, social, moral, and religious may depend on the extension and due formation of Village Libraries.' Such libraries would 'replac[e]' 'the frivolous or unprincipled books which now circulate' with 'sound, healthy, and genuinely English literature'.[101] The benefits of free public libraries were couched in the language of self-improvement: 'people may be taught many lessons which concern their material (as well as their moral and religious) welfare'.[102] But the "welfare" of the people was intimately connected to the stability of the social order. This was particularly clear in the Committee's discussions about Ireland, where the people had repeatedly rebelled against English rule (most recently in the 1848 Young Irelander Rebellion).[103] Eugene Curry asserted that the lower classes of Ireland would flock to public libraries, and that 'many evils would be corrected by a greater diffusion of sound knowledge, and the knowledge of good books'.[104] As it was put by the Committee in the *Report* itself:

> Libraries are not only needed for the increasing intelligence of the Irish people.
> The social habits which such institutions would engender, the approximation
> of persons of different parties and of different creeds which they would
> promote, are stated by Irish witnesses to be of great importance to the manners,
> habits, and repose of the nation.[105]

Here, Curry situates the importance of "good books" within the library's larger role as a site

for social interaction. The physical space of the library would allow for the 'approximation' – literally bringing into proximity – of different groups, thereby foregrounding civic, extra-economic relationships over material ones. In this understanding, the library becomes capable of ensuring the "repose of the nation", which might be understood as tacit consent, the lack of rebellion.

The need to ensure the "repose of the nation" was not unique to Ireland. The Young Irelander Rebellion was just one of a host of rebellions and revolutions that occurred across Europe in 1848. While Chartists were, in general, of the opinion that reform rather than revolution was the path to liberation in Britain, 'fear of an English revolution was alive in the ranks of the upper and middle classes.'[106] This fear was further stoked by the fact that 'Irish nationalists and Chartists were fraternizing in 1848 with an enthusiasm not before demonstrated.'[107] This set of circumstances made the library's potential to "educate" the masses on the relation between capital and labour particularly appealing. Social "approximation" was part of this, as was the presumed ability of books, pamphlets, newspapers and periodicals to teach workers to support their own exploitation in the labour process. Thus, in Meteyard's view, it was the great end of literature 'not so much to lift a man out of his original condition, as to teach him to fulfil all its duties of labour and self-culture to the best purpose and the best end'.[108] Charles Dickens, opening the Manchester Library in 1852, expected to hear from the working man:

> how he knows that the books stored here for his behoof will cheer him through many of the struggles and toils of his life, will raise him in his self-respect, will teach him that capital and labour are not opposed, but are mutually dependent and supporting (hear, hear and applause), will enable him to tread down blinding prejudice, corrupt misrepresentation, and everything but the truth, into the dust (applause).[109]

In theory, the contradictions between capital and labour would be recast as a fiction, and the masses would be tamed. Reading was central to this endeavour — including the reading of fiction.

The *Report* thus offered a sophisticated conceptualisation of libraries as institutions that could secure harmony in a conflict-ridden society and which, in essence, could manufacture consent for the State and stifle its domestic challenges. The Committee made a convincing case that free public libraries would be effective 'instruments of social control' capable of 'incorporat[ing] a sober working-class élite into the value system of the ruling classes'.[110] This rested on a specific understanding of signification through texts: "good" books contain pacifying ideas and values that can be transmitted to readers relatively unproblematically. Further, these texts would be more powerful than the actual experiences of labouring life under industrial capitalism; days spent toiling in the mills would become tolerable and seem "just" when the worker consulted works of political economy or "superior" novels. Thus the radical Joseph Brotherton, himself a member of the Committee, called the library 'the cheapest police force possible'.[111] It would be capable of reforming seditious elements and 'incorporating them into the established political system.'[112] Simply, what we might view as a liberal theory of ideology, through which books acted as conduits for moral values, suggested that repositories of freely accessible books throughout the political territory would help to pacify the masses. It was expected that the decentralized library system would work towards settling the conflicts of industrial society, without challenging capitalist social relations.

Conclusion

Between 1750 and 1850, debates around mass reading shaped a vernacular theory of ideology. To the best of our knowledge, the term "ideology" was absent from these discussions.

Nevertheless, social actors constructed an understanding of how ideas circulate throughout society, which placed particular emphasis on the circulation of texts and the process of reading. The logic that emerged characterized mass literacy as an issue of political significance, which could, under the right circumstances, be harnessed in the interest of social stability. This was an understanding with serious theoretical limits, but it was also a generative social force, providing a compelling justification for the creation of free public libraries.

The theory at play in these debates was striking both for its idealism and its reductive treatment of ideological transmission. It is striking that the critiques discussed in this article conceived of reading as not only the solution to social unrest, but – by the same token – its cause. By vesting texts with such ideological power, a broad coalition of people located the social problems of the period in patterns of thinking, rather than (for example) the economic processes of exploitation. The result was an idealist understanding of consent and dissent: if the enlightened classes could change how the lower orders thought, they could create social harmony without altering the political economic system. Moral panic over literature displaced attention from the cruelties of industrial capitalist society, as did dreams of settling social tensions through reading. These ideas were themselves premised on a basic understanding that the ideological impact of texts was more or less predictable. Granted, some thought that readers could be "trained" to resist or question ideological content, and that the right social setting could calm any disruptive outcomes from reading. But there seems to have been virtually no consideration of the fact that, in the process of interpretation, readers might construct meanings that were "unexpected", for example by consulting texts in classical political economy and coming to the conclusion that the system they described was unjustifiable (as, indeed, Marx did in reading scholars such as Adam Smith and David Ricardo). The text was the primary actor in these imagined interactions; workers were expected to be shaped by their reading and thinking rather than their material lives.

In this context, then, a vernacular theory of ideology became part of the historical circumstances that permitted the creation of free public libraries in Britain. They were, quite consciously, envisaged as institutions that would shape social actors in specific ways, in spite of the fact that stocks were not directly controlled, and readers could freely choose from the catalogue available. We want to close this article by making a connection with one more canonical theory of ideology, that elaborated by Antonio Gramsci in his contributions to Marxist thought. Gramsci argued that ideology is a process of influence, enacted by specific social institutions that together form 'the material structure of ideology'. He wrote:

> The press is the most dynamic part of the ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything that directly or indirectly influences or could influence public opinion belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture, the layout of streets and their names.[113]

Some of these institutions are familiar foci for studies of ideology (perhaps chiefly the press and schools, both also included in Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses).[114] Libraries, though, have tended to receive less attention from theorists of ideology, and seem to be something of a curious inclusion, particularly given that modern libraries often hold texts that are felt to represent a range of ideological positions. This article suggests that, at least in the case of Victorian Britain, libraries were indeed conceived as ideological structures. This may contribute to an explanation as to why Gramsci felt, in the 1930s, that they should be considered alongside the press and schools. More broadly, it prompts us to ask whether vernacular theories of ideology have formed part of the bedrock of "expert" or "academic" theories of ideology that guide critique today.

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[1] See for example A. Black. *A new history of the public library: social and intellectual contexts, 1850-1914* (London: Leicester University Press, 1996); J. Pateman, 'Public libraries and social class', in D. Muddiman, S. Durrani, M. Dutch, R. Linley, J. Pateman, and J. Vincent (Eds) *Open To All?: The Public Library And Social Exclusion. Vol.3. Working Papers* (London: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, 2000), pp. 26-42; A. Black, S. Pepper, and K. Bagshaw, *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering: Early Public Libraries in Britain from Past to Present* (London: Routledge, 2009).

[2] J. Lawson and H. Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (Abingdon: Routledge, [1973] 2007), p. 221.

[3] J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution: Early industrial capitalism in three English towns* (London: Metheun & Co Ltd., 1974).

[4] J. Innes, 'Libraries in context: social, cultural and intellectual background', in G. Mandelbrote and K. A. Manley (Eds) *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume II* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 288.

[5] J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 3.

[6] J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England, 1750-1850* (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 249.

[7] R. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1957). 2nd ed. Chapter 2, quote from p. 66.

[8] J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 232.

[9] Rule, *ibid*.

[10] R. Altick, *The English Common Reader*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7, p. 72. See Chapter 3 for an overview of this period.

[11] Quoted in W. St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 109-110.

[12] It is possible that the essays were written by George Hadley, known for writing one of the earliest grammars of 'Hindustani'. St. Clair and others have reproduced a section of the text with slight differences, and attributed it to George Hadley, *A New and Complete History of the Town and County of the Town of Kingston-Upon-Hull* (Kingston-Upon-Hull: T. Briggs, 1788), though we have been unable to find the quoted passage therein.

[13] Anon., "Number VIII", in H. Repton (Ed.) *Variety: A Collection of Essays Written in the Year 1787* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, in the Strand, 1788), pp. 56-64 at p. 62.

[14] Anon., *ibid.*, pp. 59-60. For the avoidance of doubt, we reject this argument.

[15] Anon., *ibid.*, pp. 58-59.

[16] Anon., *ibid.*, p. 61.

[17] Anon., *ibid*.

[18] J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 92-98.

[19] H. Murray, *Morality of Fiction* (Edinburgh: Printed by Mundell and Son, for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, London and A. Constable and Co. and J. Anderson, Edinburgh, 1805), p. 12.

[20] Murray, *ibid.*, p. 15.

[21] Murray, *ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

[22] J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 235.

[23] Lancaster, cited in Rule, *ibid*.

[24] Quoted in P. Silver and H. Silver, *The Education of the Poor: The History of the National School 1824-1974* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), p. 9.

[25] Silver and Silver, *ibid*, p.15. With reference to the Kennington National Schools, Silver and Silver suggest that National Schools may not have adhered strictly to the National Society's insistence that only tracts sold by SPCK be permitted for educational use in its schools.

[26] J. Lawson and H. Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 241-245.

[27] P. Silver and H. Silver, *The Education of the Poor*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 24, p. 7.

[28] D. Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 69.

[29] See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1980), pp. 385-440 and T. W. Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture 1780-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 187-240. Note that Thompson and Laqueur fundamentally disagree about the nature of the social formation of Sunday schools: Thompson argues that they were a middle-class enterprise aimed at creating the labour needed for the factory economy, whereas Lacquer suggests that, at least in the nineteenth century, they were a working-class initiative that produced values which aligned with the interests of industrial capitalism and the ruling class.

[30] R. Johnson, 'Educating the Educators: 'Experts' and the State 1833-9', in *Social Control in Nineteenth Century Britain* edited by A. P. Donajgrodski (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), pp. 77-107 (p.87).

[31] Gilbert, cited by J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 235

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[32] J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 6, p. 239.

[33] Rule, *ibid*, p. 231.

[34] P. Gardiner, 'Literacy, Learning and Education', in C. Williams (Ed.), *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 353-368 (p. 355).

[35] R. Altick, *The English Common Reader*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7, p.108.

[36] Altick, *ibid.*, p.107-109.

[37] E. Meteyard, 'Cheap Literature', *Ragged School Union Magazine* (September 1850), pp. 219-222, at p. 221.

[38] Meteyard, *ibid*., p. 220.

[39] H. Bleackley, *Jack Sheppard* (London: Butterworth & Co. Ltd., 1933), p. 108.

[40] See M. T. Baines, *Report from the Select Committee on Criminal and Destitute Juveniles; together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, appendix and index* 7.515 (1852), pp. 409-424. The *Sixth Report* itself drew on Honoré Antoine Frégier, *Des classes dangereuses de la population dans les grandes villes et des moyens de les renders meillures* (London: H. Ballière, 1840) as support for the relationship between highwaymen narratives and criminality in the new large towns.

[41] For example, see M. T. Baines, *op. cit.,* Ref. 40, p. 414.

[42] E. Meteyard, 'Cheap Literature', *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 220.

[43] Meteyard, *ibid.*, p. 221. Somewhat ironically, Meteyard inverts Marx's famous formulation of ideology as the "*camera obscura"* in which "men [sic] and their relations appear upside-down": see K. Marx and F. Engels, *The German Ideology: including Theses on Feuerbach and introduction to The critique of political economy* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, [1846] 1998), p. 42; original emphasis.

[44] E. Meteyard, 'Cheap Literature', *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 221.

[45] E. Jacobs, "Circulating Libraries," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature, Volume 1,* ed. David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 6. Specifically, Hookham's Circulating Library charged two guineas per year, as of 1814.

[46] J. Innes, J. Innes, 'Libraries in context', *op. cit.*, Ref. 4, pp. 289-290; D. E. Gerard, 'Subscription Libraries', in M. A. Drake (Ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of Library and Information Science (Volume 4: Pub-Zoo)* 2nd ed. (New York and Basel: Marcel Dekker, 2003), pp. 2755-2764.

[47] J. C. Crawford, 'The Ideology of Mutual Improvement in Scottish Working Class Libraries', *Library History*, 12 (1996), p. 53; see also C. Radcliffe, 'Mutual improvement societies and the forging of working-class political consciousness', *International Journal of Lifelong* Education, 16 (1997), pp. 141-155, at pp. 142-144, and C. Radcliffe, 'Mutual Improvement Societies in the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1835-1900', *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 18 (1986), pp. 1-16 at p. 1.

[48] C. Radcliffe, 'Mutual Improvement Societies in the West Riding of Yorkshire', *op. cit.*, Ref. 47, pp. 4-6; Radcliffe, 'Mutual improvement societies and the forging of working-class political consciousness', *op. cit.*, Ref. 47, p. 146; J. C. Crawford, 'The Ideology of Mutual Improvement in Scottish Working Class Libraries', *op. cit.*, Ref. 47.

[49] Crawford, *ibid.*, pp. 50-54.

[50] C. Radcliffe, 'Mutual improvement societies and the forging of working-class political consciousness', *op. cit.*, Ref. 47, p. 149.

[51] V. Clarke, 'Identifying the Readers and Correspondents of the *Northern Star*, 1837-1847', in I. Cawood and L. Peters (Eds) *Print, Politics, and the Provincial Press in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), p. 185.

[52] E. J. Hobsbawm and J. Wallach Scott, 'Political Shoemakers', *Past & Present*, 89 (1980), pp. 86-114; J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, *op. cit*., Ref. 18, p. 72.

[53] D. Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 28, p. 234.

[54] Vincent, *ibid.*, p.235.

[55] Vincent, *ibid.*, p. 236. For an excellent account of the Obscene Publications Act 1857, see M. J. D Roberts, 'Morals, Art, and the Law: The Passing of the Obscene Publications Act, 1857', *Victorian Studies* 28.4 (Summer, 1985), pp. 609-629. We are grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer for drawing our attention of the Obscene Publications Act as a form of direct political censorship.

[56] K. A. Manley, 'Infidel Books and "Factories of the Enlightenment": Censorship and Surveillance in Subscription and Circulating Libraries in an Age of Revolutions, 1790–1850', *Book History*, 19 (2016), pp.169-196 at p. 170.

[57] T. Bassett, 'Circulating Morals: George Moore's Attack on Late-Victorian Literary Censorship', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 40 (2005), pp. 73-89 at p. 73.

[58] Bassett, *ibid.*, p. 78.

[59] The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK), *Report of the State of Literary, Scientific, and Mechanics' Institutions in England* (London: The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, 1841), p. 30.

[60] SDUK, *ibid.*, p. 27.

[61] SDUK, *ibid.*, p. 28.

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[62] C. Knight, 'Introduction', in Thomas Carter (Au.) *Memoirs of a Working Man* (London: Charles Knight & Co., Ludgate Street, 1845), viii-ix.

[63] Knight, *ibid*, ix.

[64] Quoted in R. Altick, *The English Common Reader*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 7, p. 105.

[65] On Charles Knight's advocacy of an education in political economy for the working classes, see C. Knight, *Knowledge is Power* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1866).

[66] J. Mackintosh, 'Essay on the Moral Effects of Fiction, Especially in Novels', *Monthly Magazine, or, British Register,* 20 (1835), pp. 474-479 at p. 476.

[67] T. Kelly and E. Kelly, *Books for the People: An Illustrated History of the British Public Library* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1977), p. 80

[68] A. Black, S. Pepper, and K. Bagshaw, *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, p. 28.

[69] [Multiple authors], *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries; Together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix. Ordered by the House of Commons to be Printed, 23 July 1849* (London: House of Commons, 1849)*,* pp. 257-274. The towns and cities in Great Britain and Ireland featuring 'principal' libraries in 1849 were Armagh, Cambridge, Dublin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, London, Manchester, Oxford, and St. Andrews.

[70] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, iv; Collins, quoted in M. Lyons, 'New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers', in G. Cavallo and R. Chartier (Eds), *A History of Reading in the West* (London: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 313-344, at pp. 314-315.

[71] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 172. This echoed Murray's earlier contention that fiction could inculcate in readers 'ill-founded and dangerous principles': H. Murray, *Morality of Fiction*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 19, p. 8.

[72] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 172.

[73] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, x.

[74] 103 Parl. Deb. (3d ser.) (1849) col.752.

[75] Tellingly, the Index to the *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries* includes the following entry: "Improvement. See *Working Classes.*" *Report (Index)* 32: see [Multiple authors], *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 69.

[76] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 83; p. 110.

[77] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p.176. On the National Association, see, for instance, D. Stack, 'William Lovett and the National Association for the Political and Social Improvement of the People', *The Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), pp. 1027-1050

[78] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p.178. Here, Lovett referred to newspapers, the *Family Herald*, *Chamber's Journal, the London Journal,* and *Eliza Cook's Journal*.

[79] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 135.

[80] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 155.

[81] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 83.

[82] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 88.

[83] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 83.

[84] A. Black, 'The People's University', in A. Black and P. Hoare (Eds), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland: Volume III 1850-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 24-39, at p. 35.

[85] 111. Parl. Deb. (3d ser.) (1850) cols. 1174-1179.

[86] [Multiple authors], *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries*, *op. cit.* Ref. 69., p. 80; 110; 208-209.

[87] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 153.

[88] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, p. 80.

[89] J. Mackintosh, 'Essay on the Moral Effects of Fiction, Especially in Novels', *op. cit.*, Ref. 66, p. 474.

[90] For example, [Multiple Authors], *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 69, p. 114; p. 172; p. 209.

[91] A. Black, 'The People's University', *op. cit.*, Ref. 84, p. 35.

[92] See K. A. Manley, 'Infidel Books and "Factories of the Enlightenment"', *op. cit.*, Ref. 56.

[93] Note that from 1855, libraries were allowed to purchase books. (C. Baggs, 'Radical reading? Working-class libraries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries', in A. Black and P. Hoare (Eds), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland: Volume III 1850-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 169-179; Alistair Black, Simon Pepper, and Kaye Bagshaw, *Books, Buildings and Social Engineering*, *op. cit.*, Ref. 1, pp. 28-29).

[94] Baggs, *ibid.*, pp. 171-172; B. Simon, *The Two Nations and the Educational Structure 1780–1870* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, Ltd, 1974), p. 215.

[95] Edwards, Weld, and Brotherton each suggested that public libraries would receive such donations, and Stevens testified that such a practice was common in the United States.

[96] A. Black, 'The People's University', *op. cit.*, Ref. 84, p. 36; [Multiple Authors], *Report from the Select*

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Committee on Public Libraries, *op. cit.*, Ref. 69, xi.

[97] Black, *ibid.*, p. 36.

[98] R. Snape, 'Libraries for Leisure Time' in A. Black and P. Hoare (Eds) *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland: Volume III 1850-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp.40-55 and p. 42.

[99] [Multiple authors], *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries*, *op cit.* Ref. 69., p. 208.

[100] E. Meteyard, 'Cheap Literature', *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 222.

[101] [Multiple authors], *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries*, *op cit.* Ref. 69, xi.

[102] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, xi.

[103] It should be noted in this respect that the Committee's work was conducted only fifty years after Éirí Amach 1798 ("The Rising of 1798", also known as "The Irish Rebellion of 1798"), which included some 50 000 Irish revolutionaries supported by French troops and resulted in the Acts of Union 1800. The possibility of Irish revolution, then, must still have been keenly felt by the Westminster government. And, as Lyons notes, the 1848 revolutions were "partly blamed on the spread of subversive and socialist literature, which reached the urban worker and a new audience in the countryside" (M. Lyons, 'New Readers in the Nineteenth Century', *op. cit.*, Ref. 70, pp. 314-315).

[104] [Multiple authors], *Report from the Select Committee on Public Libraries*, *op cit.* Ref. 69, p. 167.

[105] [Multiple authors], *ibid.*, viii.

[106] H. Weisser, 'Chartism in 1848: Reflections on a Non-Revolution', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 13.1 (Spring 1981), p. 16.

[107] Weisser, *ibid.*, p. 18.

[108] E. Meteyard, 'Cheap Literature', *op. cit.*, Ref. 37, p. 222.

[109] Dickens, cited in M. Lyons, 'New Readers in the Nineteenth Century', *op. cit.*, Ref. 70, p. 332.

[110] Lyons, *ibid.*, p. 332.

[111] Brotherton, quoted in A. Black, 'The People's University', *op. cit.*, Ref. 84, p.36.

[112] Black, 'The People's University', *op. cit.*, Ref. 84, p. 36.

[113] A. Gramsci, 'Notebook 3', in *Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks: Volume II*, translated and edited by Joseph Buttigieg. (New York: Columbia University Press, [1930] 1996), pp. 52-53.

[114] L. Althusser. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. Translated by G. M. Goshgarian. (London: Verso, 2014).