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Modern British Political History: Agendas for the Future

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> It seems to us that what marks the twentieth century out from any of its predecessors is the ubiquity and authority of the state and those social institutions which stand between the individual and the state. In a sense, therefore, we are concerned with political history in its original meaning — the history of the *polis*. We believe that to a considerable extent all our cultural and economic behaviour, all the manifestations of our social life, are shaped by these institutions; even what we commonly call the private sphere of our lives is significantly defined in relation to them.[1]

Setting out the agenda for *Twentieth Century British History* in the journal's first issue, the editors embraced an expansive and interdisciplinary definition of political history. They highlighted the complex interactions between the state, social institutions and everyday life, and cited with approval the cutting-edge interdisciplinary work published by *New Left Review* and Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.[2] As a subsequent editorial four years later recognised, however, the articles that the journal published, impressive as they were, tended to be rather narrower in scope and more conventional in method than suggested by this ambitious brief. 'It is clear that it is public policy, broadly defined, which has become our *métier*', the editors observed, adding that 'in so far as we meet a particular need it is in the area of public and social institutions, social policy and economic policy.'[3]

As one of the editors between 2015 and 2020, I was conscious of *TCBH*'s long-standing strengths in histories of the evolution and implementation of government policy, studies of Westminster party politics and the associated electoral battles, and analyses of British diplomacy and international relations. We continued to welcome many fine articles in these areas. I was equally aware that, influenced by the 'new political history' and the increasing scholarly attention to the constitutive power of language, we were increasingly attracting contributions that moved more directly into the terrain sketched out in the journal's opening editorial. Articles by Stephen Brooke, David Cowan and Josie McLellan, and the co-written piece by Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Tomlinson (the first and last of these discussed at greater length in this issue) were interested in the interactions of political discourse, social institutions and individual identities, and traced how politics intersected with the private and the everyday in innovative ways.[4]

How might we build on this recent work and further develop the agenda set out in that first editorial? As *TCBH* turns into *Modern British History*, and historians start exploring the 1990s and later, what directions might political history take in the coming years? This is very much a personal, rather than collective, perspective, but I'd like to suggest three avenues that might prove fruitful. First, we can do more to understand the implications of what is becoming an increasingly self-aware and self-conscious democracy, one that is constantly measured and scrutinised by pollsters, journalists and political scientists, and in which individuals are increasingly clear how they are attitudinally positioned in relation to other citizens. Historians, have, of course, made extensive use of opinion polling, especially in analysing elections, as well as the findings of research organisations such as Mass Observation, and some of the classic studies of social science; indeed, a recent *TCBH*

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[1] 'Editorial', *Twentieth Century British History*, 1/1 (1990), p. 3.

[2] Ibid.

[3] 'Editorial', Twentieth Century British History, 5/1 (1994), p. 1.

[4] Stephen Brooke, 'Space, Emotions and the Everyday: The Affective Ecology of 1980s London', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28/1, (2017), pp. 110–142; David Cowan, 'The "Progress of a Slogan": Youth, Culture, and the Shaping of Everyday Political Languages in Late 1940s Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 29/3 (2018), pp. 435–458; Josie McLellan, 'From the Political to the Personal: Work and Class in 1970s British Feminist Art', *Twentieth Century British History*, 31/2, (2020), pp. 252–274; Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling Stories about Post-war Britain: Popular Individualism and the "Crisis" of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28/2 (2017), pp 268–304.

roundtable discussed what Lise Butler called the 'social scientific turn' in modern British history.[5] Much of this work has built on the insights of Mike Savage's book *Identities and Social Change*, and has focused on the sociology of class, community and 'affluence', and associated concepts such as individualism and deference.[6] While this is clearly of central importance to political historians, I would suggest that there is scope for more attention both to the production and circulation of knowledge about specifically political attitudes (from Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's investigations of political culture, via Ronald Inglehart's research about post-material values, and the class dealignment debates of the 1970s and 1980s, right up to the recent identification of the 'left behind'), and how this knowledge filtered into the public sphere and shaped the behaviour and self-perceptions of politicians, activists and voters. More broadly, how has the intensification of opinion polling, and the reporting of surveys, altered the dynamics of politics? To take a contemporary example, it has been hard to escape how so many discussions of Brexit, including at the level of the everyday, are informed and shaped by perceptions not just about the state of popular opinion, but also which social groups are seen to support certain positions, and their reasons for so doing. Such democratic self-awareness cannot help but shape these debates and exchanges. This is by no means a new phenomenon, and would repay further historical study.

Second, we need to better understand modern Britain as a mediated democracy. I was fortunate enough to publish my first academic article in *TCBH*, on the *Daily Mail*'s crusade against lowering the voting age for women from 30 to 21, and my own research has been a small part of a vibrant and expanding field exploring how various media forms have shaped and reflected the UK's political environment.[7] Most of this work, including my own, has tended to focus on one media form, whether newspapers, radio, television, film or newsreels, and while this has been valuable - and arguably necessary in terms of developing appropriate methodologies to explore relatively new areas of research - it does not sufficiently reflect the fact that individuals exist in a multimedia environment where they encounter content delivered in many different modes and genres. The task of exploring the implications of this multimedia landscape will only become more pressing as historians start studying the age of media proliferation, globalisation and personalisation from the 1980s, with the rise of satellite and cable television, the internet, and social media. From the mid-1990s New Labour, with Peter Mandelson, Philip Gould and Alistair Campbell at the helm, raised the sophistication of political communication, and by the early twenty-first century there were already dense interconnections and interactions between political campaigns, print media, television broadcasts, internet sites, online blogs and social media platforms. Historians interested in public opinion and popular attitudes will have much to untangle here.

Third, we will need to develop histories that appreciate how mainstream parliamentary politics interacted with an increasingly crowded arena of non-governmental organisations, social movements, nationalist parties, local campaign groups and citizenship societies. In recent decades, the Conservative and Labour parties have lost much of the grip on political culture as the public has become more diverse, educated and mobile, and therefore less deferential and more volatile in its political behaviour. At the same time, the political terrain has expanded to incorporate a wider range of issues and concerns, such as the environment, the rights of minoritised groups and the expression of sexuality. Many of the biggest political developments in recent decades - the rise of the environmental agenda, the calls for Scottish independence, the departure from the EU, Black Lives Matter - have resulted at least partly from the actions of smaller parties or extra-parliamentary groups

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[5] Roundtable: Historians' Uses of Archived Material from Sociological Research; Lise Butler, 'The Social Scientific Turn in Modern British History', *Twentieth Century British History*, 33/3 (2022), pp 445-50.

[6] Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); for notable examples of historical work, see Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[7] Adrian Bingham, '"Stop the Flapper Vote Folly": Lord Rothermere, the *Daily Mail* and the equalisation of the franchise 1927-28', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13/1 (2002), pp. 17-37.

that the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal parties have struggled to contain or channel. As with research into the media, there are plenty of good histories of specific movements, campaigns and legislative battles, but there is more that can be done to integrate these and to conceptualise how the dynamics of the political environment have altered. As we near the centenary of British democracy in 1928, the continuities imposed by the retention of the first-past-post-the-post system, and broader institutional conservatism, can easily mask how different political life in the UK has become.

As the founders of *TCBH* soon learned, it is easier to set out an ambitious research agenda than to carry out the painstaking intellectual work to bring it to fruition. *Modern British History* will, I'm sure, continue to welcome research of all kinds, and will maintain its strengths in traditional areas as well as branching out into new ones. Nevertheless, the journal's rebranding offers a good moment to reflect on our discipline. Perhaps readers of the future will be able to see that at least some of the ideas set out in these pages have been taken forward.