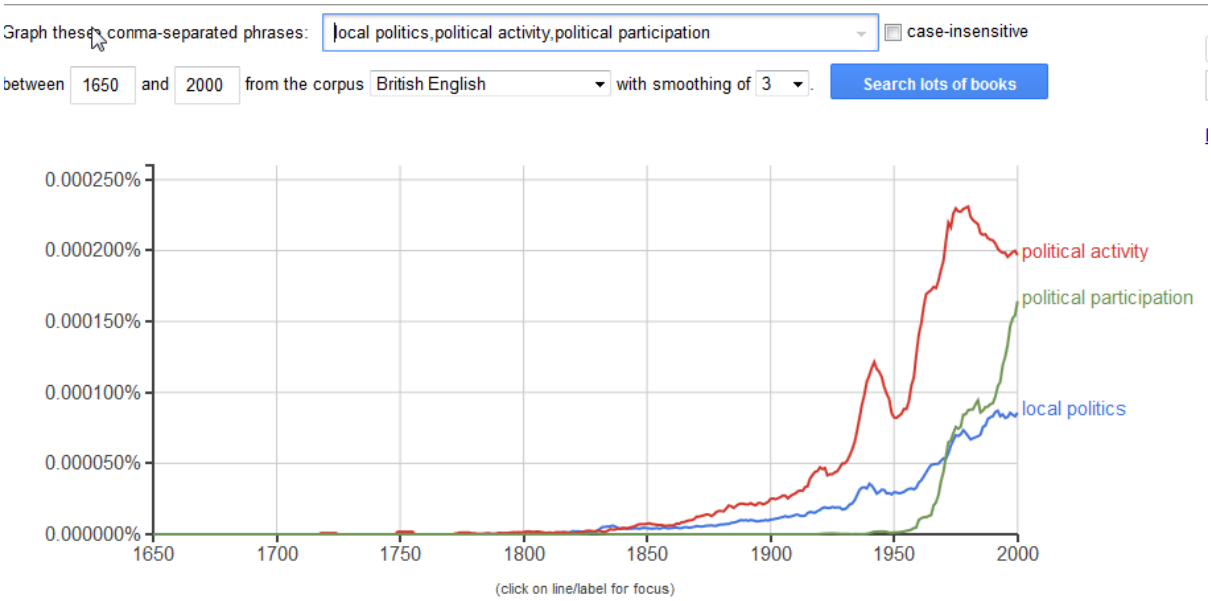
What is politics? Reflections on the British case



As the graphs suggest, concepts of 'politics' and the 'political' have developed over time in English-language usage. One point of change was the 1830s/40s: from the point locutions such as 'local politics' and 'political action' grew steadily in use (though in interpreting the first, we must bear in mind that the 'local' took on new meaning in British use at that time: this was when the central/local dichotomy was established – references to county and to a lesser extent parish and town politics grew earlier, from 1800, though never attained the currency that 'local politics' would achieve). There were further points of change in the 1940s, with a growth of references to 'political participation' and 'political awareness' (possibly relating to new wartime and post war civic ideologies) and then from the 1960s, a set of new uses including 'electoral politics', 'popular politics', 'extra-parliamentary politics', 'alternative politics', 'the political nation' (omitted from the graph, because it rises to much greater heights), and more modishly 'the political'. Perhaps more surprisingly, the phrase 'politics out-of-doors', which sounds historic, seems rarely to have been used before the later

twentieth century (though it does appear occasionally in nineteenth-century printed sources, and was obviously intelligible. The phrase which did come into use from around 1750, from which the 'politics' phrase presumably derives, was 'the people out of doors'.) New uses from the 1960s (including the coining of the influential slogan, 'the personal is political') accompanied the efflorescence of new forms of public engagement with political questions, but also, in that context – or so the proliferation of new coinages suggests – some form of reconceptualisation of 'politics'. (Interestingly, in the case of the phrase 'politics from below' which caught on in British English use only from the 1980s, the US pattern was different: there use of the term first surged in the 1930s and 40s, then fell back, to rise again in the 50s and then in the 70s).

Twentieth, especially late-twentieth century linguistic changes framed new ways of writing history, and indeed of conceiving of historical topics. The people were conceptualised as 'political' actors, practising 'popular politics', 'alternative politics', 'politics out of doors' and so forth – prefiguring what their descendants would do 300 years later.

It can't be assumed that changes in English language-usage have been echoed across all other European languages: in French, for example, 'politique' continues to connote something different from the English politics; the phrase 'politique populaire' in the 1960s regained currency in French that it had previously had in the 1790s – but did not, as in the English case, reach great new heights. 'Politisation', by contrast, has caught on in much the same way and according to much the same chronology as its English counterpart. Anglophone historiographical fashions have, however, been widely influential: in Ottoman historiography, for example, the last decade or two has seen a flowering of work on 'popular politics' in the early modern and late Ottoman world.

The patterns of linguistic change noted make it unlikely that eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britons and Europeans would have used the vocabulary of 'politics' to characterise this set of activities in quite the same way that historians writing in the aftermath of twentieth-century linguistic innovations have done. The questions this suggests are:

- How did they use the terminology of politics?
- How did they talk about things we might call politics or political, but which they did not?
- Once we know the answers to these questions, does that have an important implications for our understanding of the past?

The following preliminary discussion relates to British usage only.

How did they use the terminology of politics?

My fairly superficial trawling to establish patterns of use suggests that:

- In the eighteenth and most of the early nineteenth-century, 'political' meant chiefly 'relating to the state/government'.
- 'Politics' meant 'state policy' or manoeuvrings associated with the wielding of governmental power. In the latter connection especially it often had a negative connotation (as in the national anthem: 'Confound their politics'.)
- 'Politicians' meant people who were interested in politics. So alehouse politicians were ordinary tavern goers who read newspapers and talked about state affairs and policies. Similarly 'Village Politics' (the title of a famous counterrevolutionary pamphlet by Hannah More) connoted the discussion of political matters – questions about government and its relationship to the people – by villagers.

Politics as a subject matter was potentially open to all to take an interest in; politics as an activity was effectively open only to statesmen. When Hewling Luson in 1786 wrote a pamphlet entitled *Inferior Politics*, he was self-consciously coining a new phrase in the context of an argument about their being certain aspects of government with which people inferior to statesmen could properly engage: he had in mind questions about policing, poverty, morals etc. His phrase did not catch on.

The efflorescence of what we might term 'popular political activity in later eighteenth century Britain was however associated with some more lasting linguistic innovations. One was the notion of the 'political club' or 'political association', as a site for the discussion of politics. Initial references to political clubs seem mainly to be to parliament itself: 'A political club' was the paper-thin pseudonym employed in numerous early press reports for parliament, at a time when press reporting of parliamentary proceedings was still in theory a breach of privilege – as it was until parliament inaugurated de facto toleration of reporting in 1773. But implicit in this formulation was the idea that there could in principle be other political clubs; the Robin Hood Society – a real debating society, as well as in some contexts another paper-thin pseudonym for parliament was one such. Political association likewise in early use seems to be a generic political science concept, about the processes by which polities are formed. But by the 1790s (and I suspect earlier) these terms were certainly being applied to clubs and associations in an ordinary sense, the focus of whose sociability was politics.

More conceptually innovative was the notion of 'political rights'. It seems to have been in the 1750s and more decisively in the 1760s that 'political' rights were distinguished from 'civil rights', under which label they had previously been comprehended. The point of the distinction was to emphasise that though British people might enjoy a range of rights under law (free speech, trial by jury etc), those who enjoyed these rights did not all have a formal right to a voice in government, as represented above all by the right to vote. In effect, to use Isaiah Berlin's distinction, the point being made was that the British people might in general enjoy negative liberties, but that positive liberties were much less widely available. It might seem to use a natural step to term the exercise of 'political rights' a form of 'political activity', but that linguistic step doesn't seem to have been taken at the time.

Insofar as there was increasingly organised and pressing public discussion of and mobilisation around things political, increasing use was made of the adjective political for example, Christopher Wyvill, who published six volumes of papers relating to his activity in

connection with parliamentary reform associations of the 1780s, gave the collection the title *Political Papers*. But he seems to have conceived of these papers as political not because they were a record of 'political activity', but because they were a record of engagement with the subject matters government and politics.

In effect – to summarise the above -- 'politics' and 'political' things remained strongly associated with on the one hand the state, a centralised set of institutions, and on the other hand the constitutional order, a more diffuse mass of conventions and practices, the nature of which was understood to be largely though not wholly determined at the level of the state. Politics remained in some important sense necessarily removed from the people, something they could engage with and try to control, and in relation to which they might have certain claims and entitlements, and about which they might certainly have opinions, but still not something embodied (other than metaphorically) in their own activities.

These patterns of use seem to have changed gradually in the course of the nineteenth century, and especially from the 1830s (which saw a series of important constitutional changes, rationalising and extending the right to vote, and reconstructing local government institutions; it was in this context that the phrase 'local government' assumed its modern meaning). It had always been possible – though not common – to think of there being a microcosmic 'politics' acted out in municipal corporations and other local governmental institutions. The development of the concept of 'local government' as a distinct layer in a larger system of government (as opposed to the older conception of certain governmental functions being carried out by 'inferior officers') opened the way to the conception of a 'local politics' running in parallel to national politics – possibly the more so inasmuch as reforms in urban government opened up all municipal corporations to competitive elections, whereas previously only a minority of municipal corporations had been elective; most had coopted new members -- though it bears emphasising that though voting involved the exercise of political rights, it doesn't itself seem to have been conceptualised at this time as a 'political activity'.

The conception of activity relating to politics as itself constituting 'political activity' became relatively common from around the middle of the nineteenth century (though there were some earlier uses prefiguring those to come, eg *The Pamphleteer* 1828, an account of Colombia by an Anglo-Colombian opined that 'It is a general error in South American legislation to multiply checks on the political activity of the people, without considering that after long habits of slavery the great difficulty to be contended with is, their unresisting apathy'.) The term seems to have caught on in American earlier than in British use. And strikingly, early British uses often related to the US. Following Tocqueville, who noted the constant fever of 'political activity' in the United States, the *British Quarterly Review* for 1853, for example, commented on 'the extreme anxiety on the part of individuals [in the US] to concern themselves with the general politics of the state' despite their possession of so much individual freedom that the need for them to exert themselves in such matters was unclear. 'Political activity' was in these cases conceived more as a generic culture feature than as a category within which particular exertions might be set and considered in their particularity. In this context, it was seen as classically embodied in ancient Greek polities, which provided a yardstick against which the propensities of others could be measured. By the late 1850s, while still often conceiving of 'political activity' as a possible generic feature of a political culture, British publications had begun to represent it as a desirable feature of any society, conducing to the conservation of freedom (thus *Foreign Quarterly Review* 1857) – at least if it took the right forms. Countries such as France, where political activity was associated with barricades and bloodshed (*Meliora, a quarterly review of political science*, 1859), or Italy, where it took the form of conspiracy (*North British Review*, 1853), were

objects of pity. At the same time, 'political activity' was sometimes discussed as a feature of the lives of individuals, but chiefly statesmen or parliamentary candidates, though there are exceptions: how the Chartist Henry Vincent had been stimulated to a life of 'political activity' was the subject of discussion in *The People's Journal* in 1847. Although it was, as I've suggested, not a big step to characterise people who engaged with political matters as manifesting 'political activity', it's interesting that the application of the term to individuals does seem to have been associated with a form of political-sociological conceptualisation in which 'political activity' stood in for older conceptions of 'virtuous' civic engagement.

Perhaps the chief point that had emerged from discussion so far it that the patterns of change that we've been considering seem to involve as much or more linguistic as conceptual change – taking 'concepts' to be things that can be expressed by more than one word or phrase, without significant changes in meaning. It's not obvious to me that developments in the vocabulary of politics and the political allowed people to say things that they couldn't equally well have expressed using more traditional terms. At the same time, I do have the impression that intense, often initially constitutional or issue-specific public engagement with affairs of state in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Britain, settling down into a more routine interaction between routine competitive political processes and issue-specific concerns, operated in effect to 'pull' the language of politics away from the central state into the public arena – a process which initial discussion suggests proceeded further at various points during the twentieth century.

A related line of enquiry concerns alternatives to 'politics'. So one might ask did 'politics' have particular connotations which meant that it was used differently from say 'affairs of state' or 'public matters'? At least potentially it seems to have carried a negative loading that they did not, so one might expect to find some differentiation of use.

Or, in relation to the adjective 'political', one might ask, what other spheres of life or modes of activity there were conceived to be? The political was presumably different from the natural; it might be a synonym for the 'civil', but might be differentiated from it (as political rights came to be at least sometimes differentiated from civil rights). The political might be contrasted with the social or the religious (the sorts of duties associated with each, for example, were different).

Developing conceptions of the 'social' will have changed the meaning of the political/social contrast through the first few decades of the nineteenth century (by the 1830s, there are numerous instances of people contrasting 'political' and 'social' revolutions, though the significance attached to the two adjectives was by no means consistent). Not all forms of public mobilisation were conceived of as political: certainly by the 1840s political, social and religious 'movements' were being differentiated – and their interrelationships probed and assessed. The term 'social movement' often denoted Fourierism, but not necessarily so. In Samuel Laing's *Observations on the social and political state of the European people in 1848 and 1849* (1850), mass mobilisation in Germany in 1848 was described as a great social movement, meaning apparently that the society as a whole, or a very considerable proportion of it, was mobilised. It's notable though that in Laing's 1842 *Notes of a Traveller,* he had termed the German Commercial League a social movement – here perhaps ambiguously connoting a movement that was both the product of and designed to effect social change. One might suggest that changes in the relation between state and society led not only to an expanded conception of the political, but to a sense that something else was going on that could not adequately be comprehended within older conceptions of politics, so that, rather than extending that notion, commentators tried to develop alternative categories.

How did they talk about things we might call politics or political, but which they did not?

Until the mid nineteenth-century development of the generic concept of 'political activity, activities that would later be categorised under that label were designated by an expanding variety of more specific, though overlapping terms. These included precise terms for institutional forms – voting, petitioning, public meeting – and more general terms that characterised phenomena relating to politics out of doors, such as public opinion, cause and (from around 1800) movement and from just a little later agitation (of these last two terms, movement was more diffuse and generic, suggesting not an organised campaign so much as a larger movement of feeling, or wave of political activity). In all these cases, a distinction was implicitly made between state institutions where decisions were made and an external base from which the public might try to influence those decisions.

At the same time, though, some terms used in the eighteenth century chiefly in relation to ministers and members of parliament – such as demagogue and campaign (in a political context) – in the nineteenth century began to migrate out of doors, in conformity with what I'm suggesting was a larger pattern whereby the boundaries between what was seen to happen within state institutions and what happened outside them was increasingly linguistically eroded.

'Reform' was I think an interesting, boundary crossing term, which in the British context – possibly uniquely -- was asked to do a great deal of work. Until the 1780s it was not much used in a political context, but more in the context of self-discipline or moral striving, though it had intelligible application to institutions, which could be argued to be in need of 'reformation' -- though the profile of the 'political reformer' was not well developed. In the early 1780s, 'reform' was adopted as the watchword of the 'parliamentary reform' campaign, and calls for the 'reform' of other public institutions – army, church, prisons – quickly followed. A political reformer was a boundary-crossing figure inasmuch as he brought

principled impulses, usually freighted with moral or religious values, into institutional contexts in which other considerations – ambition, pragmatism – also operated. 'Reformer' carried troubling connotations in the later eighteenth century: it connoted a scourge, some

sort of Cato-figure, perhaps a Luther. Would be reformers of parliament operating outside parliament retained an ambiguous relation to politics through to the era of the Chartists. But the 'reformer' was also to some extent domesticated by the activities of above all William Wilberforce, who far more notably than anyone else (though not without assistants, or imitators) developed a new model of how to be a public figure. In the eighteenth-century Wilberforce might possibly have been termed a species of patriot, though his strongly religious orientation would have made him an idiosyncratic example of the species. In the political lexicon of the nineteenth century, he was pre-eminently a reformer and a man who developed exemplary tactics for reform that bridged extra-parliamentary and parliamentary worlds.

Again, developments in the category of the social brought linguistic change here around the middle of the century. I'm not sure that Wilberforce was known in his lifetime as a 'social reformer' but later he might have been seen as an archetype of this species – who achieved linguistic prominence outstripping and continuing to outstrip that of the 'political reformer' in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Once we know the answers to these questions, does that have an important implications for our understanding of the past?

There's no hard and fast distinction between linguistic changes which reflect change in the world and those which open up new ideas about modes of being in the world. But insofar as we can draw that distinction at all, it seems to me that the changes I've discerned have mainly been of the former kind. They reflect people using words in more or less innovative ways in order to conceptualise things that were going on. Only in a few instances do changes in cognates of 'politics' look like bids to shape the world: one might say that of the launching of the term 'political rights'.

I think that launching the slogan 'parliamentary reform' was a bid to shape perceptions partly by linguistic means; similarly those who in the early nineteenth century tried to expand the work done by the concept of the social were I think trying to change perceptions. But that doesn't seem to be the case of most locutions involving cognates of 'politics' at this time – in contrast say to the 1960s, where arguably we see more of a mix of language change being meant to propel broader change, and language being dragged along by social change. The

development of the concept of ‘political activity’ in the mid nineteenth century, interesting in itself, looks more like a matter of finding a new phrase to express an older thought, at a time when the matter on which political sociology had to feed was changing, than a bid to change perceptions of the world.

I see changes in ways that people talked about ‘politics’ and ‘political’ matters in Britain as being clustered particular in two periods: the later eighteenth century and the 1830s and following decades. In the first of these periods, change reflected above all an intensification of demands on a relatively narrowly conceived ‘political’ sphere from without. In the second period, they reflected the further intensification but also the normalisation, even institutionalisation of that kind of activity – operating to blur older formulations of what were and were not the spheres of politics. But in the second period, developments in the concept of the ‘social’ also introduced new complications, opening up the possibility of distinguishing the ‘social’ from the ‘political’ and overall tending to operate to restrict the range of the political – even though that distinction was not drawn in any consistent way.