



British Liberalism and Conservatism as Ideological Mirrors: The Case of Richard Cobden and Free Trade

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

How do rival ideologies shape each other? This paper examines the relationship between two such ideologies, British liberalism and conservatism, through the ideological travels of free trade in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I begin by drawing inspiration from Michael Freeden's morphological study of ideologies and revise his understanding of the mirror-image dynamics between liberalism and conservatism. According to this view, conservatism attains full-fledged ideological identity when redescribing and reappropriating some central concepts of rival ideologies, such as liberalism. Following the political fortunes of free trade, I revise that view and show that both traditions were reshaped in the encounter, not just conservatism. This matters for three reasons. First, it sheds light on how concepts can migrate between rival ideologies and acquire new meanings in the process. Second, it complicates our account on how liberalism and conservatism have been entangled with each other, challenging the assumption that both traditions can be studied in isolation from one another. Third, it helps explain why the academic literature has often struggled to place Richard Cobden (1804–1865), one of the best-known liberal figures in Victorian Britain, and why his legacy has sometimes been claimed by political traditions he would not have identified as his own.

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In the 1840s, free trade was a liberal cause, although, by the twentieth century, it had gradually shifted to the conservative camp. This complex process decisively reshaped both liberalism and conservatism in ways that are still debated today. This paper examines the fluid relationship between liberalism and conservatism through the case of free trade in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain to show that their histories are intertwined.

Michael Freeden, one of the leading theorists of political ideology, argues that conservatism partly takes shape as a reaction to some central concepts of its ideological rivals, such as liberalism. As liberalism develops its conceptual repertoire, conservatism partly defines itself in response, reappropriating or redescribing certain concepts and producing what Freeden calls a ‘mirror image’. This paper argues that the relationship is more interactive than that. By tracing the ideological travels of free trade in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, I show that the mirror reflects both ways – that is, that liberalism and conservatism have continuously reshaped each other, each gaining renewed coherence by redescribing certain concepts like free trade.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, the debate over the ideas of freedom of commerce and protectionism divided the political scenario between liberals and conservatives, respectively. Free trade was a liberal cause and protectionism a conservative one. By the turn of the century, that alignment had reversed. Most New Liberals and socialists had moved towards economic intervention and regulation, while conservatives started to embrace individual liberties and laissez-faire economics. In this paper, I argue that this ideological redescription was a mutual repositioning.

My argument, then, is not simply that free trade moved from one ideological camp to another but that these movements helped reconfigure and resettle both liberal and conservative languages as rival counterpart ideologies. Drawing from Freeden’s metaphor of the mirror, the reflective quality of ideologies would grant renewed coherence to the so-called reflection (conservatism) and the ideology being reflected (liberalism). This is not to say that both ideologies were purely reactive, since not all ideological change was driven by opposition to its rival.

This interpretation has broader implications that go beyond the Freedenite framework. If liberal and conservative ideologies took shape by mirroring what they perceived as their rival, we cannot write their histories separately. The case of Richard Cobden (1804–1865) illustrates some of the issues that arise from this disconnect. Although he was one of the most popular liberal figures in Victorian Britain and a leading advocate of free trade, Cobden is often absent from histories of political liberalism and has sometimes been resignified as a precursor of free-market conservatism.

THE STUDY OF IDEOLOGIES AND THE MIRROR-IMAGE DYNAMICS BETWEEN LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM

Since the 1990s, the study of ideologies has emerged as a distinct and productive area of research in political thinking, moving away from traditions that treated ideologies primarily as forms of distortion, propaganda or false consciousness. Michael Freeden, a leading political theorist, has been central to this development. His morphological

approach, elaborated most fully in *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (1996) and developed in subsequent work, offers a framework for examining the internal structure of political ideologies and the existing links between ideologies. It focuses on the structural characteristics of ideologies to map how they are organised, how their constituent concepts relate to each other in political rhetoric and how they change over time.

Crucially, this approach treats all political thinking as ideological. Ideologies are not, as Marxist traditions have tended to assume, pathologies to be exposed. Ideological thinking is instead how all political actors make sense of the world and argue about competing visions of society (Freeden 2001, 11). According to this view, ideologies are not deceptive or morally flawed ways of thinking about politics, as opposed to non-ideological and sophisticated forms of arguing about politics (Freeden 2001, 5–7). Therefore, all ideologies, including conservatism and liberalism, would be equally legitimate objects of analysis, each with its own peculiarities and historical trajectories.

Freeden describes this structural analysis as ‘morphological’, since it maps the architecture of ideologies without judging the merit of their ideas. This reorientation has opened new avenues for scholars in political theory, intellectual history, political philosophy and the history of political thought. As such, it provides a demystifying, non-pejorative and non-essentialist approach to grasp the internal conceptual repertoire of ideologies. It constitutes a demystifying approach because, in Freeden’s view, ideologies are not inherently mysterious or sinister phenomena intended to mask ulterior motives or intentions or to deliberately manipulate individuals’ political views and actions.

Relatedly, Freeden’s approach is non-pejorative, as it does not assume that political ideologies are false, dogmatic, oppressive or irrational *per se* (Freeden 2013, 116). In other words, labelling something ‘ideological’ is not a criticism but rather a neutral description of how political thinking works. In this light, no ideology is treated as more rational, more complete or more legitimate than another. The analyst should then understand political ideologies as free from prejudice as possible, instead of condemning them. According to this view, fascism, for instance, should not be excluded from rigorous analysis simply because we judge it morally wrong.

Finally, the approach is non-essentialist because it does not assume that the concepts that make up ideologies have fixed and timeless meanings. Ideologies are not stable entities but instead are dynamic and contested configurations of concepts, redefined through political arguments. What counts as liberal or conservative, for instance, is historically variable, together with the meanings of the concepts that shape these traditions.

While taking them seriously as coherent ways of making sense of political life, Freeden also stresses the flexibility of ideologies as discursive formations, both within them and between them. Internally, ideologies are not monolithic blocks, but arrangements of concepts, ‘conceptual configurations’ or ‘patterns of political thinking’ (Freeden 1996, 3–5; Freeden 2013, 116). However, not all concepts carry the same weight within an ideology. Some are ‘core’ concepts – that is, the concepts that are present in all instances of an ideology and are indispensable to it. For instance, liberty is a core concept to liberalism in a way that, say, tradition is not (Freeden 1996, 60–66).

Surrounding the core are ‘adjacent’ concepts, which determine what the core actually means in any given historical context. Although not present in every instance of an ideology, they anchor the core to more concrete political positions (Freeden 1996, 68–91).

The concept of liberty, combined with adjacent concepts like well-being and social solidarity, for instance, has pulled liberalism in the direction of welfare state policies. Even more contingent and context-specific than adjacent are ‘peripheral’ concepts, whose meanings respond directly to particular events and circumstances ([Freeden 1996, 77–82](#)). Empirical analysis helps us identify, for each ideology, which concepts have core, adjacent and peripheral status, respectively.

Flexibility is also a feature of the relationship *between* ideologies. The boundaries between ideologies are highly contingent and porous, since concepts can travel across political traditions, get reinterpreted and belong to more than one ideological family at the same time. Moreover, ideologies are ‘competitive’, which means that they can reappropriate and redefine concepts in ways that favour their own political agenda ([Freeden 2013, 117](#)). Freeden’s theory thus stands as an invitation to further investigate the mutual links between ideologies, as the boundaries between them should be ‘queried, probed and challenged’ through morphological analyses ([Freeden 2013, 129](#)).

Particularly interesting is the relation between rival ideologies like liberalism and conservatism. In this regard, Freeden argues that this relationship is a fluid process which unfolds historically ([Freeden 1996, 335–337](#)). In his view, the existing conceptual boundary-crossings between liberalism and conservatism are of a special kind. Whereas other ideologies are determined by concepts, conservatism is unique in that one of its core ideas is a mirror-image quality as regards concepts from competing ideologies like liberalism. Conservatism thus takes shape in reaction to liberal forces, as its countermovement, by appropriating and offering alternative meanings (or ‘decontestations’) of liberal political concepts ([Freeden 1996, 335–337](#); see examples in [Adler-Bartels 2023](#); [Revillet 2023](#); [Trimçev 2023](#)). Conservatism, Freeden argues, reacts to liberal stances and develops antithetical versions of progressive concepts such as ‘reason, equality or individuality’ ([Freeden 1996, 336](#)). In other words, conservatism redescribes some of the concepts previously central to liberalism. This feature is illustrated, for instance, by Enlightenment conservative thinkers like Joseph de Maistre (1753–1821), who reacted against abstract humanism by reclaiming the particularities of nationhood. This was both a rejection of liberal universalism and a conservative redescription of it, replacing the abstract individual with the concrete national community ([Freeden 1996, 338](#)).

Crucially, the concepts that conservatism absorbs from liberalism would be assigned only ‘adjacent status’, which means that its own conceptual core is not displaced. In fact, as it encounters liberalism, conservatism’s internal pattern would be strengthened, thanks to this reappropriating movement. Freeden offers an evocative metaphor that helps us grasp conservatism’s dynamic: the mirror. In Freeden’s view, conservatism’s conceptual scaffolding is in part a reflection of liberalism. Thus, conservatism is prompted to define itself against liberalism, producing a rival ‘mirror image’ – that is, a structurally dependent counterpart. To put it differently, conservatism is an ideology defined *after* liberalism forces it to take a stance as a rival position ([Freeden 1996, 335–337](#)).

One may argue that the mirror-image mechanism makes conservatism a lesser ideology. After all, a reflection in a mirror is illusory, not real in the same way as the object being reflected. However, Freeden’s answer is that the mirror-image mechanism is not a flaw or a weakness; instead, it provides conservatism with a unique firmness which should not be mistaken by ‘opportunism’ or ‘intellectual lightweightness’

(Freeden 1996, 345). Precisely because conservatism can adapt its conceptual repertoire to liberal challenges, it absorbs and redirects progressive concepts without losing its own orientation.

A concrete example helps to illustrate how this mechanism works. While Victorian liberals pressed for electoral reform and the extension of political rights, conservatives did not simply reject these ideas outright. Instead, as Freeden mentions, they reappropriated and redescribed them. Faced with growing inequality and the social disruptions caused by industrialisation, Benjamin Disraeli did not oppose reform as such; instead, he recast it within a conservative framework, most notably during his periods in office in 1868 and 1874–1880. His conservatism stressed the duties of the propertied classes towards the poor and the paternalistic role of traditional institutions. By adopting a certain kind of social reformism, Disraeli effectively integrated liberal concerns like the extension of suffrage beyond the middle class, albeit recast within a language of national unity, hierarchy and preservation (O'Sullivan 2013, 300–301; Roberts 2007). In fact, the Second Reform Act of 1867 was passed by the Derby–Disraeli government. In this regard, the conservative mirror was able to reflect back a rival vision of society. In Freeden's terms, the 'conservative swivel mirror [...] can be angled to pick up different reflections' (Freeden 1996, 343). The mirror-image technique is therefore a crucial device whereby stability is secured, giving conservatism an ideological suppleness.

Freeden's metaphor of the mirror rests in two related interpretive points, which I discuss and revise in this paper. In the first place, liberalism and conservatism do not have equal impetus. Rather, conservatism might be seen to follow or lag behind liberalism in order to set up its adjacent concepts. According to this view, conservatism needs to be interpellated and lacks initiative. Liberalism sets the ideological agenda, while conservatism responds to it. Chronologically speaking, the morphology of conservatism in its fullest form appears only at a later moment, in the wake of liberalism.

The mirror metaphor also carries a second implication. In Freeden's account, liberalism develops its positions independently and conservatism then defines itself in response. This means that conservatism's identity is structurally dependent on liberalism in a way that liberalism's is not. In other words, there is a structural asymmetry, since conservatism needs to see itself in liberalism's mirror in order to exist. In these encounters, liberalism remains structurally unaffected, while conservatism is strengthened. It may be thus argued that liberalism is a necessary condition for the existence of conservatism.

In this paper, I seek to push Freeden's argument further. Instead of seeing conservatism's self-awareness as attained only when interpellated by its main ideological opponent, I argue that the mirror-imaging mechanism can be viewed as a two-way reflective move, relevant for both liberalism and conservatism. In this view, the mirror reflects both ways, and both ideologies mutually reshape in the encounter. Therefore, they would gain renewed coherence precisely by differentiating themselves from the other. The case of free trade, as I show below, illustrates this dynamic.

If we agree on this point, then Freeden's assumption that liberalism always comes first deserves scrutiny. Although analytically suggestive, pinning down a chronological order of appearance risks oversimplifying what was in fact a complex and simultaneous development. Liberalism and conservatism were more internally diverse and intellectually promiscuous than is suggested by the grand ideological rivalry implied in the mirror metaphor.

THE WANDERINGS OF THE CONCEPT OF FREE TRADE IN NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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I illustrate these claims by examining the wanderings of the concept of free trade between progressive and conservative ideologies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. As we shall see, it makes sense to take free trade and protectionism as structuring partisan lines, since the migrations between ideological camps were defining moves.

Until around 1846, British conservatives understood economic protectionism and tariffs as central, since they thought, almost unanimously, that these promoted social cohesion and bolstered domestic commerce and growth against a threatening foreign competition. Shielding domestic producers from international competition was, in their view, a way of strengthening the nation in an increasingly antagonistic international environment. As the ‘party of land’, they also thought that protecting the economy was key to promoting the interests of the landed classes against the perceived threats of drastic liberal policies ([Eastwood 2004, 71](#); see also [Freeden 1996, 360](#)).¹ Protection, most conservatives argued, was the only economic policy securing the preservation of a constitutional order, and therefore those opposing it were described as anti-patriotic. Ana Gambles has shown that protectionism was regarded by conservatives as a constitutionalist force, which interestingly conflates economic, political and constitutional debates ([Gambles 1998, 931](#)). Especially after the 1832 Reform Act, she argues, protection acquired a more explicitly constitutional meaning, as Conservatives defended it for ensuring that landed interests were not outweighed by urban commercial interests. For conservatives, liberal cosmopolitanism and the idea of a global humanity united by common commercial interests, where different societies could harmoniously flourish, was simply ‘denationalising’, destructive, divisive and against the interests of an ideally self-sufficient country ([Gambles 1998, 940](#); [Winch 1995](#)).²

Indeed, the debate was generally articulated between liberal free trade and conservative tariffs. Protection was, according to the liberals, tied in with misery and famine ([Howe 2016](#)). Liberals argued that tariffs had a negative impact on wages, lowered people’s purchasing power, restricted trade and were damaging to the working classes ([Trentmann 1998, 224](#)). Free trade, on the contrary, made progress possible at all levels of society, was held to promise cheaper food for consumers and therefore gave commerce a political and moral accent. This is why, as Trentmann suggests, ‘free trade was associated with a historical vision of national identity and societal self-development, and a moral ideal of the consumer, rather than with free market capitalism’ ([Trentmann 1998, 217](#)). As one of the most popular advocates of free trade, Richard Cobden’s views can be placed in the liberal camp.³ Cobden’s aims were progressive in emphasising the need to end concentrations of power of any kind, whether in economics (against tariffs and monopolies and in favour of a redistribution of land ownership) or in politics (arguing for an extension of the franchise). Cobdenism was perceived then as a progressive ideology concerned with social welfare, anti-imperialism and peace rather than simply as a doctrine of laissez-faire ([Palen 2024, 4–6](#)).

Further nuance is required when approaching 1846, the year the Corn Laws were repealed, for it was Robert Peel’s Conservative government that eventually passed

this legislation in parliament. How did conservatives reverse their stance and vote in favour of a free trade policy? The Conservative party came to be divided over this issue, with a non-Peelite section (representing mostly agricultural districts) embracing protection and another section, the Peelites (representing mostly urban districts), endorsing a kind of tariff reform and the introduction of free trade within certain limits ([Schonhardt-Bailey 2003, 581–605](#)). Although the cause for free trade was seen as eminently Liberal, by this time, a section of the conservatives was sympathetic to the idea ([Eastwood 2004](#); [Howe 1997, 1–38](#)), while the other saw repeal as a surrender to extra-parliamentary pressures. Peel's praise of Cobden, expressed in a speech only three days after the repeal of the Corn Laws, is symbolic. He associated prosperity with freer markets in an attempt to 'bury the Tory protectionist agenda' ([Eastwood 2004, 89](#)). In that regard, it signalled that free trade had become a language that some Conservatives could now adopt to articulate their own concern with progress and prosperity.

Free trade was therefore a bone of contention, highly influential in the realignment of ideologies and political parties. Interestingly, the ambivalence of free trade and its potential for ideological decontestation was decisive. Widely identified as a liberal cause until the Corn Laws repeal, free trade then gradually began to win sympathies among conservatives, which in turn led, as I discuss below, to a reversed ideological scenario: liberals and progressive political forces abandoned commercial liberty in favour of a regulated economy, while conservatives preached the benefits of free trade.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, many New Liberals and socialists gradually saw economic intervention and state-controlled policies as justified on moral grounds ([Freeden 1986b](#); [Freeden 2005](#)). After Joseph Chamberlain's tariff reform in 1907, free trade gradually lost its influence as a guarantee for social justice and the interests of the working and middle classes, and a new discourse of regulation emerged ([Trentmann 1997, 70–98](#)). The acuteness of the economic depression of the 1870s (rising domestic unemployment and prices) put into question the effects of free trade in improving people's living conditions, and free trade increasingly ceased to be a sufficient answer to social justice. Across Europe, free trade treaties signed between Britain and other European countries in the 1860s were abandoned, and economic nationalism gradually emerged to counteract unregulated economies.

The reassessment of free trade from the progressive forces implied that there was a shift 'from unregulated trade to new collectivist schemes of regulation' ([Trentmann 1997, 73–74](#)). National interests, liberals thought, needed a kind of protection not guaranteed by free trade ([Howe 2008, ix–xiv](#)). In this context, some New Liberals (and socialists) ended up defending a protectionist economy to battle profound inequalities. For instance, L. T. Hobhouse emphatically declared in 1911 that free trade 'laid the foundations of prosperity [but] it did not erect the building' – that is, 'it has not solved the problems of unemployment, of underpayment, of overcrowding' ([Hobhouse \[1911\] 1994, 153](#); on Hobhouse, see [Freeden 1986a, 132–137](#)). Still, Hobhouse emphasised how liberalism needed to be shaken by conservative ideas to experience its 'revival', since it was the 'new development of Conservative policy [that] first compelled the average Liberal to consider his position' ([Hobhouse \[1911\] 1994, 151](#)). As conservatives moved towards economic liberty, liberals could more plausibly present themselves as the defenders of regulation. Turn-of-the-century conservatives resettled ideologically by emphasising individual liberties against governmental intervention and embracing laissez-faire economics. State intervention, formerly

regarded favourably by conservatives, was now deemed as pernicious ([Freedon 1996, 351–362](#)).

As the previous examples illustrate, the mirror-image mechanism can thus be seen to work in both directions. Free trade was rhetorically redescribed, updating the meanings of *both* liberalism and conservatism as rival and mutually exclusive ideologies. The significance of this process lay not simply in borrowing across ideological lines but in its capacity to internally reorganise political languages. Ideologically swaying between opposing political stances, free trade became a site of semantic competition. This interplay was one of the redefining ingredients of conservatism no less than liberalism. Cross-fertilisation and fluidity seem not to be marginal features but instead key elements in both political discourses.

Contemporaries also registered the migrations of free trade, perceiving conservatives and liberals to be competing over an ideological territory. An early twentieth-century economist and commentator, Hermann Levy, explained this reconfiguration in his book *Economic Liberalism* (1913). Levy wrote as a partisan of older economic liberalism and hostile to New Liberal collectivism. As such, he recognised ‘Tory Free Traders’ as the new custodians of a language that liberals were seen to have abandoned. ‘Present-day Conservatives’, he maintained, ‘hold firmly to the industrial ideals created more than two hundred years ago by economic liberalism’ ([Levy 1913, 134](#)). In other words, conservatives had scooped out free trade, together with some of the ideals previously associated with economic liberalism, to the point where it was possible to talk about ‘Tory Free Traders’ ([Levy 1913, 123](#)). Levy also described the reappropriation of a discarded political position when he suggests that ‘the Tory ideal has taken the place of the older liberalism of the Manchester Radicals’ ([Levy 1913, 123](#)).

In turn, he presented the ‘dangerous’ ideological reconfiguration of the Liberal party as a movement towards progressivism – that is, as ‘taking sides with the Socialists’. Therefore, the argument follows, the ‘Anti-Socialists’ or conservatives were compelled to react against, as they ‘believe[d] in building up the State through the individual’ ([Levy 1913, 123, 1](#)). Levy portrayed liberals’ withdrawal from this ideological space as a betrayal of ‘the basic ideas from which Economic Liberalism had its birth in the seventeenth century,’ and thus rejected ‘the “socialism” of the Liberals and Radicals’ ([Levy 1913, vii–viii](#)).

Levy’s views help us see the reciprocal mirror-image dynamic at work. Conservatives were no longer merely reacting to liberalism. They were now presenting themselves as the defenders of principles that liberals, in his view, had ‘recklessly’ abandoned. This move, as David Eastwood argues, was somewhat slowed down by the liberal advocacy of free trade, yet, in the twentieth century, when liberalism moved further to the collectivist side, ‘conservatism could trumpet its market credentials largely unchallenged until the 1990s’, thus completing a transition from ‘the party of land’ to the ‘party of capital’ ([Eastwood 2004, 72](#)).

The emergence of neo-liberalism, economic libertarianism or neo-conservatism in the latter half of the twentieth century, where ideas of decentralisation, free-market capitalism and unregulated economies are prominent, may be seen as further developments of this right-wing reappropriation of free trade. Rather than a simple revival of older liberal doctrines, these currents turned market freedom into a powerful critique of collectivism and the welfare state.⁴ In this sense, the ideological journey of free trade had come full circle: a concept that had once been central to Victorian radicals had been reappropriated by twentieth century conservatisms. The free trade/laissez-faire position was then denounced by progressive political movements

as threatening social and political rights globally ([Trentmann 1998, 236](#)). Freeden and Stears agree that these were ‘direct attempts to colonize the space’ previously occupied by liberalism ([Freeden and Stears 2013, 341](#)).

This succession of ideological shifts and reappropriations illustrates Freeden’s mirror-image dynamic but also complicates it. The mirror metaphor captures a key mechanism, but it needs to account for the intensity of public debates, the ideological overlaps and the struggles that are part of this reshaping, as exemplified by the fortunes of free trade. My suggestion is that the reshaping works in a mutual way by resettling ideological descriptions of *both* liberals and conservatives against what they perceived as opposite positions. In the British context, the endorsement of free trade by conservatives implies a degree of denial among liberals, and vice versa: both ideologies mutually fluctuate using free trade as a catalyst.

A CONTESTED LEGACY: RICHARD COBDEN’S ECLECTIC LIBERALISM

In hindsight, free trade’s ideological travels call for mutually aware histories of liberal and conservative traditions. If we agree that liberal and conservative ideologies are deeply negotiable and take shape by mirroring what they perceive as their rival, their histories need to be written together.

This has implications for how we understand liberal figures like Richard Cobden. In this section, I focus on the most prominent advocate of free trade and reassess how his legacy has been portrayed in the literature. Cobden’s popularity and relevance at the time, both at home and abroad, contrasts with the current generalised lack of knowledge about his life and ideas. I argue that the back-and-forth conceptual travels of free trade between liberalism and conservatism have fed the political resignification of Cobden’s legacy.

Described by his contemporaries as a national hero or the ‘apostle of free trade’ ([McGilchrist 1865](#)), Richard Cobden was a textile industrialist and merchant, unknown to the public until the mid-1830s. His popularity among the middle and working classes rose after he co-founded the anti-Corn Law League in 1839. The League successfully campaigned to unilaterally remove import duties, which led to a decrease in the price of grain and helped guarantee people’s access to food. Levying taxes on grain was primarily a policy designed to financially alleviate the working and middle classes. As Anthony Howe argues, free trade probably was ‘the most commonly held of all Victorian values’ ([Howe 1998, 301](#)). In many ways, the cause was personified by Richard Cobden and John Bright,⁵ who were hugely popular after having toured England as part of their campaign ([Pickering and Tyrell 2000, 41–66](#)). Cobden can indeed be placed within a growing culture of celebrity in the Victorian period ([Morgan 2006, 39–55](#); Morgan 2012, 127–146). Together with the wide availability of his printed image, supporters could buy different objects with his image to help promote or commemorate repeal: posters, plates, engravings, handkerchiefs or ceramic figurines.⁶ As Simon Morgan has shown, a varied range of propaganda created an emotional connection between him and the working and middle classes. Above all, political thinking navigated new channels as new processes of ideological identification with the liberal political cause emerged.

Despite his humble origins, Cobden actually fostered a career as a Member of Parliament thanks to his political activism and popularity.⁷ He represented a new type of politician: although he had not received a formal education (unlike other MPs),

he was a prominent public speaker, drawing huge crowds at political meetings.⁸ His popularity was so overwhelming that, in the 1847 general election, Cobden won two seats in Parliament, for Stockport and West Riding, without having campaigned in either of them. He chose to sit for the latter, although ‘embarrassed and annoyed’ that he was elected without consultation while travelling across Europe (Cobden to John Bright, 18 September 1847, in [Morley \[1881\] 1908](#), I: 497). His successful campaign leading to repeal played a key role in both presenting liberalism as a feasible political choice and strengthening the link between popular and high politics. The success of free trade policies helped overturn liberalism’s reputation as dangerous and revolutionary and promoted its political legitimacy. The struggle for free trade was also instrumental in framing the interests of those who were not (yet) considered full political agents: women, children and the disenfranchised classes. In this regard, Frank Trentmann has argued that, thanks to this debate, ‘the consumer became tied to the citizen, providing liberal politics with a new base of support in an age of mass democratic politics’ ([Trentmann 2012, 70](#)). By focusing on society’s needs, Cobden helped popularise liberalism, or, to put it differently, brought liberalism closer to popular and radical politics.

Much as the free trade campaign made Cobden a well-known politician and agitator in Victorian times, it seems unjustified to disregard other aspects of his thought. He had a holistic vision of society in which social progress depended on the interactions between economic, political, moral, educational and historical factors. A free market could not function on its own without a balanced governmental design of agricultural and industrial policies and the redistribution of land ownership – all of this underpinned by a solid programme of national public education.⁹ In domestic politics, he campaigned for the extension of the franchise and a more democratic political representation, religious freedom and against the so-called ‘taxes on knowledge’ ([Quinault 2006, 59–67](#)). As a convinced cosmopolitan and internationalist, differences among countries were circumstantial and not due to fundamental inequalities among cultures. He believed in humanity as a global community and was generally in favour of retrenchment and non-intervention in international conflicts ([Cain 1979, 229–247](#)). A staunch pacifist, he thought that international economies would flourish when creating commercial ties among countries, which, above all, would contribute to maintaining universal peace ([Palen 2024](#)).

His profile as a merchant, politician and activist would not be complete without mentioning his career as a self-made diplomat (who decisively negotiated the Anglo-French commercial treaty in 1860) and his experience as a traveller ([Howe 1998, 73–86](#)). The diaries that he kept during two of his most significant trips, across Europe (1846–1847) and some Eastern Mediterranean countries (1836–1837), help us grasp the complexity of his views ([Cawley 1952](#); [Davis 2007](#); [Taylor 1994](#)). Interestingly, these trips took place immediately before and after the struggle for repeal. The first trip reflected the ambitions of an aspiring politician in order to gain knowledge and experience, while the second journey as a celebrated figure was aimed at convincing European leaders and intellectuals about the benefits of free trade. In both diaries, his standpoint is eclectic, ambitious and global. Overall, the diaries illustrate how he saw education and culture to have an influence on the moral and the historical character of societies, while the productive forces like agriculture, communications, industry or trade all depended on each other ([Taylor 1994, 1–40](#)). In short, beyond ideas of free trade, the diaries feature how different aspects of society hold together in a coherent way.

Cobden's popularity and relevance at the time, both at home and abroad, contrast with the current state of the academic literature. His contribution has sometimes been difficult to pin down given free trade's decontestations, and his figure is largely absent from major studies on the history of political liberalism (Bellamy 2000; Francis and Morrow 1994; Freeden 1996; Freeden and Stears 2013; Gaus and Kukathas 2004; Gray 2000; Haddock 2005; Johnston 2010; Manent 1995; Morrow 1998; Ryan 1993; Steger 2008). Cobden had almost disappeared from public memory since 1945 (Howe 2006, 1) and, when his legacy has been politically resignified, it has most often been by libertarian and neoliberal think-tanks keen to claim him as a precursor of free-market conservatism (Trentmann 2006, 264–288; Trentmann 2012, 349; see, for instance, Ashford and Davies 2012).

While some relatively recent studies view free trade as an essential part of a liberal tradition, a portion of the literature on liberalism has had a hard time explaining how this 'champion of free trade' harmonises with a progressive genealogy. A small body of scholarship has indeed recovered the breadth of his liberalism (Howe 1997; Howe 2007–2015; Howe and Morgan 2006; Palen 2024; Trentmann 2012; Zevin 2021), while, in other instances, his ideological significance has been obscured by reducing his role to free-trade agitator (Sally 1998, 26; Viner 1991, 217). This is, in part, a consequence of the complex history of free trade's travels. Cobden's elusive place in the literature is therefore not a merely historiographical problem but rather a symptom of how liberal and conservative histories have been written apart.

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the ideological redescriptions of conservatism and liberalism and the challenge these pose for contemporary commentators and students of ideologies. The challenge lies both in identifying these reconfigurations and in grounding them in specific historical contexts.

Michael Freeden's morphological analysis offers one of the most fruitful approaches for thinking about how concepts travel across ideological boundaries. Yet, when it comes to understanding the interactions between conservatism and liberalism, Freeden's mirror-image quality of conservatism assumes that liberalism comes first and that conservatism reacts to and depends on liberalism.

By exploring the ideological migrations of free trade in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, I have shown that the process is reciprocal. Moreover, the shifting ideological pedigree of free trade casts light on conceptual instabilities and migrations, both within ideologies and among them. While the metaphor of the mirror remains a useful analogy to imagine ideological realignments, the example of free trade points to ideologies that are contingent and never quite settled. In other words, the mirror reflects both ways.

Richard Cobden's uneasy fit in the literature is illustrative and provides a cue to jointly revise histories of liberalism and conservatism in the future. In a portion of the literature, Cobden is neglected, while others have perpetuated his image of a staunch, fanatic supporter of free trade and an unregulated economy. Cobden's eclectic ideas, however, defy categorisation, and his legacy deserves a more careful reading than it has usually received.

- 1 I do not assume that party affiliation neatly matches conservatism as a political ideology. However, in a broad sense, political debates, including those within and between political parties, provided a visible arena in which ideological languages were articulated.
- 2 Gambles argues that conservatives rejected liberal policies ‘as ripostes to free trade economics’, a point implicitly reinforcing Freedon’s view of conservatism as a reactive counter-movement to liberalism ([Gambles 1998, 928](#)).
- 3 Cobden’s ideas were also regarded at the time to be in line with Adam Smith’s ideas. In his widely attended public appearances, Cobden frequently quoted Adam Smith, which in turn was mostly perceived as dangerous and subversive by conservatives and reinforced the link between free trade and radical politics.
- 4 The best overview on how they relate within the conservative family is [Gamble \(2013, 405–421\)](#); More specifically on neoliberalism and classical liberals, Eric Helleiner suggests that neoliberalism ‘resurrects the key principles of nineteenth-century classical economic liberalism’ ([Helleiner 2003, 686](#)). Rudolf Walthers argues that neoliberals ‘invoked the concept and tradition of Liberalism while at the same time denying any identification with nineteenth[-]century Manchesterism’ ([Walthers 1984, 198](#)). Neoliberals, according to Manfred Steger and Ravi Roy, brought back some of the ‘truths’ of classical liberals, ‘albeit dressed in new garments’ ([Steger and Roy 2010, 5](#)). On the proximity between neoliberalism and (neo)conservatism as variations on the market-globalist theme – see [Hunter and Milofsky 2007, 51–70](#); [Lepistö 2021, 33–49](#); [Steger 2008, 231](#); [Tribe 2015, 68–97](#); [Turner 2007, 79](#).
- 5 And, to a lesser extent, by Charles Pelham Villiers and George Wilson.
- 6 The Anti-Corn Law Bazaar took place in 1845 (see [Morgan 2012](#)).
- 7 Cobden remained in Parliament for several years, first as a member for Stockport (1841–1847), later as a member for West Riding of Yorkshire (1847–1857) and finally for Rochdale (1859–1865).
- 8 As part of the anti-Corn Law campaign, Cobden used venues like the Manchester Free Trade Hall, which could accommodate up to 10,000 people ([Jephson 1892, 250–252](#)).
- 9 Government interference was also necessary to redistribute land ownership. Cobden wrote to Henry Coppock: ‘government interference is as necessary for education as its non-interference is essential to trade’ (15 June 1847, in [Howe and Morgan 2007, I: 485](#); on education, see [Farrar 1987](#)).

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