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Richard Cobden as a Middle-Class Hero: Public Speaking and Political Debate in Victorian Britain

Rosario López, University of Málaga

Abstract

This paper explores Richard Cobden's parliamentary career, political thinking, and activism as illustrating the role of debate and the value of dissent in nineteenth-century British political culture. Cobden was unusual among British politicians of the time; he was a self-made man, experienced traveller, and middle-class hero, yet managed to retain a seat in Parliament between 1841 and 1865 (with a two-year interval outside Parliament between 1857–59). One of my aims is to reassess Cobden's significance as a politician. I ask in what ways he was seen by contemporaries as an ambivalent figure who represented both radical, democratic activism as the leader of the anti-Corn Law League and a moderate cosmopolitanism as a professional politician, and the role that public speaking played in fostering his profile. My reading may challenge some contemporary interpretations, providing a balanced portrait of Cobden as an activist and politician genuinely concerned with the general welfare of all European countries rather than exclusively the interests of Great Britain (Gott, 1988: 90–101). Focusing on Cobden and the success of the anti-Corn Law League is also a way of exploring how material culture and public speaking were linked in Victorian Britain. Cobden's popularity can be explained as a result of his eminence as a public speaker, yet discussing his popularity cannot be reduced to his rhetorical abilities. Representations of Cobden's image and the different anti-Corn Law League symbols in a variety of objects constitute an opportunity to explore the role of non-verbal aspects in the political culture at the time. This paper takes on board Joseph Meisel's claim that historians have neglected nineteenth-century public speaking culture, while it suggests that, at least when considering Cobden as a study case, verbal and nonverbal communication converge (Meisel, 2001: 2).

Keywords: Richard Cobden; anti-Corn Law League; public speaking culture; Victorian Britain

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I. Introduction

Born in 1804, Cobden began his career as a calico manufacturer. He was also a Member of Parliament almost without interruption from 1841 until his death in 1865, and probably best known as the political agitator behind the introduction of free trade in England in 1846. Between 1838 and 1846 Cobden led what has been regarded as one of the first mass movements in Britain, the anti-Corn Law League. The object of this organisation, as its name would suggest, was to repeal the Corn Laws. During the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15), the British blockaded imports from the European continent, with the aim of economically isolating the Napoleonic Empire. Trade within the British Isles was thus protected against external market competition. With the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 there was no obvious reason to continue the blockade, yet the Corn Laws were introduced in order to protect English farmers from cheap foreign imports. These laws prohibited the entry of foreign corn unless the price was above 80 shillings per quarter (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2006: 9–11). In practice, this meant that the price of corn was extremely high and people suffered from starvation as a consequence. The anti-Corn Law League aimed at combating this inflation by removing restrictions on trade so that prices would fall and people would have easier access to corn. Since Cobden was addressing such a pressing issue for the working and middle classes, he quickly became well known as one of the main leaders of the anti-Corn Law League, and was sometimes depicted as a "middle-class hero" or the "apostle of free trade." In this paper I consider him as a paradigmatic example to explore how in the nineteenth century popular politics intersected with parliamentary politics. I ask what ways he was seen by contemporaries as an ambivalent figure who represented both radical, democratic activism as the leader of the anti-Corn Law League and a moderate cosmopolitanism as a diplomat and professional politician.

First, I consider Cobden as an example of the increasingly representative function of Parliament in the nineteenth century. As an institution, the House of Commons was gradually able to better accommodate popular demands. Although this process was still a slow-moving struggle, the two Reform Acts (1832 and 1867) increased the electorate and extended voting rights. The League was instrumental in this regard, by making popular demands heard in Parliament. Free traders devised a well thought out electoral registration campaign, which raised the number of electors in favour of free trade and removed those in favour of protectionism. On the one hand, when electoral registers were revised, the League would make objections against protectionists' voting qualifications, so that their franchise rights were revoked. On the other hand, they used the "40 shilling property qualification", by which the 1832 Reform

Act enfranchised those with a freehold property worth 40 shillings a year, to create new voters in favour of free trade (Schonhardt-Bailey, 2006: 11–13; McCord, 1958: 148–152). The League also launched a nationwide propaganda campaign that was crucial for its success and helped make free trade a widely debated topic. Publishing the *Anti-Corn Law Circular*, they employed a group of activists, including Cobden himself, who toured the country spreading free trade ideas. By 1843 the League distributed over 9 million tracts, delivered 650 lectures, manned 156 deputations, and placed 426 000 tracts as advertisements (Howe 2013).

In this context, Cobden remained in Parliament for a number of 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), defending free trade, the extension of suffrage, retrenchment, and non-intervention in war conflicts. Thus he brought social and political issues to the forefront, and gave voice to people who were not formally represented in Parliament. Two political allies were instrumental in guaranteeing his success, particularly in the 1841 elections: C. P. Villiers and Joseph Sturge. As Anthony Howe shows, thanks to Villiers, Cobden had direct access to aristocracy, while his relationship with Sturge helped him strengthen his links with the Nonconformist community. His profile as a candidate was therefore multifaceted, and crucially appealed to different audiences. Even if Cobden was reluctant to stand for Parliament in the 1841 elections due to financial reasons, he nonetheless felt almost obligated not only because of the lack of available candidates, but also because of the favourable prospects of his candidature (Cobden to C. P. Villiers, 10 June 1841, Howe, 2007b: 224–5; Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 16 June 1841, Howe, 2007b: 226; see also Howe, 2007a: xliii). The dissolution of Parliament in the summer of 1841 presented a new opportunity for the success of free trade (Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 16 June 1841, Howe, 2007b: 226). Cobden comfortably won the seat against Thomas Marsland (Tory), whom he described as "the wealthiest man of the Borough" (Cobden to C. P. Villiers, 2 July 1841; Howe, 2007b: 227).[1] In the 1847 general election, Cobden won two seats in Parliament, at Stockport and West Riding of Yorkshire, choosing reluctantly to sit for the latter. Although West Riding was one of the biggest constituencies, Cobden was "embarrassed and annoyed" that he was elected without consultation while being abroad touring Europe (Cobden to John Bright, 18 September 1847, quoted in Morley, 1908 [1881], I: 497). Yet he was elected without a contest, with Edmund Denison, Tory and protectionist, refusing to demand a poll (Thompson, 1959: 214–39). Once again unopposed, Cobden was returned for Rochdale in 1859, after being chosen as a candidate by the Rochdale Reform Association (Cobden to John Bright, 31 March 1858, Howe and Morgan, 2012: 370).

Having considered Cobden's parliamentary career, I then turn to examine how the parliamentary form of politics is present in popular debates with reference to Cobden. Cobden is an interesting study case to explore how the parliamentary form of politics is present in popular debates. When comparing parliamentary and extra-parliamentary debates, it can be argued that the latter were to some extent modelled after the former, both presenting positions *pro et contra* and opposite points of view. Extra-parliamentary speaking, however, was characterised by less structured debates, that is, procedural rules and convention were more flexible (Palonen, 2016: 138–51). The anti-Corn Law League and the struggle for repeal were in many ways guided by a parliamentary understanding of politics. With these two points in mind, I reassess Cobden's significance as a politician. I analyse how his rhetorical style helped him succeed as the leader of the anti-Corn Law League and later as Member of Parliament. I also examine the popular reception of Cobden by combining an interpretation of his character as a politician and his experiences as a traveller across Europe. The relationship, therefore, is twofold. Popular politics, as illustrated by the free trade struggle, found a place in Parliament thanks to Cobden.[2] Conversely, a parliamentary style of politics and debating cannot be seen as merely confined to Westminster, but rather permeated Victorian political culture partly thanks to Cobden and the anti-Corn Law League.

II. Cobden's Character as a Politician: Rhetoric and Morality

In this section I examine how contemporaries perceived Cobden as a politician and whether Cobden's self-awareness of his character and style of political oratory played any role in this regard. In particular, I ask in what sense his rhetorical skills shaped these perceptions by examining his understanding of free trade as an issue with moral resonance.

Several collections of remarkable speeches and studies on rhetoric and eloquence contain at least one of Cobden's speeches (Barrister 1868; Adams, 1900; Holyoake, 1897). However, some of these collections prominently feature professional politicians who were aristocrats and members of an educated elite, which results in Cobden being excluded from their selection (see for instance Goodrich, 1853; Francis, 1853; Harsha, 1857). Cobden was born at a farmhouse, the fourth of eleven children, attending a dame school until 1814, and thanks to the financial help of his uncle, a boarding school in Yorkshire until 1819. After quitting school at the age of fourteen, he was economically dependent on his uncle, Richard Ware Cole, who employed him at his London warehouse. Certainly, Cole did not encourage Cobden to pursue formal education, and thought that his "fondness for book-knowledge" was "an evil omen

for his future as a man of business" (Morley, 1908 [1881], I: 5). Cobden eventually set up his own calico business in 1828, before being employed as a commercial traveller in London (Morley, 1908 [1881], I: 1–9). His background therefore differed from most statesmen and Members of Parliament at the time who mostly came from the elite classes, had received formal education, frequently attended university, and had often been trained as public speakers at the Oxford and Cambridge Union Societies and other debating clubs (Meisel, 2001: 60–70). At this time, Unions were still elitist institutions, where Oxford and Cambridge undergraduates had the opportunity of practising and improving their rhetorical skills.[3] A significant number of Unions' members would later become Members of Parliament, to the extent that these debating societies have been described as a "nursery of statesmen" (Meisel, 2001: 12; on Cambridge and Oxford Union Societies, see Haapala, 2016). In this context, Cobden's social background, knowledge of oratory techniques, and experience in debating were unconventional (Meisel, 2001: 11–49).

Cobden was perceived as a prominent public speaker, and many contemporary commentators pointed out that Cobden's rhetorical style was one of the reasons for the success of the anti-Corn Law League. This is not to say that the success of the anti-Corn Law League can be explained exclusively by attending to Cobden's role. Also important were economic and social crises, like the Irish potato famine, and the social distress resulting from the application of the Corn Laws.[4] Moreover, even if the dominant interpretation at the time emphasised Cobden's skills, Andrew Bisset, who worked for the anti-Corn Law League, disagreed. He believed that it was not Cobden's oratory powers in Parliament that made the League successful, but the way the campaign was funded. Even if acknowledging that his speeches were "always charming, so simple, easy, and true", financial support was, Bisset thought, the decisive factor in his success (Bisset, 1884; on Bisset see Howe, 1998: 6).

When it comes to assessing Cobden's rhetoric, Robert Peel's description of it as "unadorned eloquence" seems to have been influential among later commentators, and it is recurrent in the literature, if only because it was remarkable that a conservative politician praised a radical Member of Parliament precisely when he was resigning from office ("Resignation Of The Ministry", *Hansard*, 29 June 1846, cc1040–59, also quoted in Barrister, 1868: 148). Cobden's simplicity and clarity were also considered signs of his effectiveness and persuasiveness, with Disraeli calling him "the most persuasive speaker I have ever listened to" (Disraeli, 1975: 108). Barrister, for instance, described his approach as "neither lofty nor rhetorical […], yet for plain business-like and withal concentrated forces has seldom been surpassed" (Barrister, 1868: 148). Cobden's style was perceived as appealing to reason instead of emotions. Goldwin Smith's obituary of Cobden also emphasised "the perfect simplicity of [his] view" and compared him with Adam Smith and other "great economists."[5]

Together with the "general soundness of his argument" (Welby, 1903: xvi), and "almost irresistible persuasiveness" (Adams, 1884: 101), contemporaries emphasised "the morality of his statesmanship" (Welby, 1903, I: xvi), and his "transparent honesty" (Adams, 1884: 101).[6] Cobden was presented as acting out of "pure and disinterested motives" ("Resignation Of The Ministry", *Hansard*, 29 June 1846, cc1040–59) and, advocating "a measure of enlightened reform and philanthropy" (Hawthorne, 1900: 186).[7] Julian Hawthorne described him as "a man whom English people loved […] both on accounts of his labours and for the welfare of humanity" (Hawthorne, 1900: 186). He was therefore regarded as the champion of a fair cause, seeking a sense of dignity and humanity. And as the leader of a powerful popular movement, his tone was certainly moralising. He presented himself as the advocate against the most pressing problems in society and he accused Parliament of unethically disregarding them. Criticising Parliament for ignoring one of the most important social struggles at the time, the liberalisation of trade, he maintained:

> [w]hen I see a disposition among you to trade in humanity, I will not question your motives, … but this I will tell you, that if you would give force and grace to your professions of humanity, it must not be confined to the Negro at the antipodes, nor to the building of churches, nor to the extension of Church establishments, nor to occasional visits to factories to talk sentiment over factory children – you must untax the people's bread (Supply – Distress Of The Country, 24 September 1841. *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, c796).

Cobden talked with certain moral superiority determined by the fact that he thought was truly representing people's problems. It is not a coincidence that Cobden refers to slavery in this speech. He intentionally framed the issue of the repeal of the Corn Laws as similar to the slavery question, aiming at "[infusing] a moral or even religious tone." That way, Cobden wrote to his brother Frederick Cobden, "if agitated in the same manner that the question of slavery has been, it will be irresistible" (Cobden to F. Cobden, 5 October 1838, Howe, 2007b: 145).

Free trade was therefore a question of human dignity, and his speeches made extensive use of this idea. He repeatedly emphasised that there was "something so obviously honest and just" in what they advocated, that people, if they were to "act like men having justice and humanity," would be supportive (Cobden, 1908, I: 41, 48). Free trade was a moral issue, Cobden thought, because if adopted it would tend to unite communities benefiting the interests of everyone, instead of enriching some at the expense of others.

> Free Trade! What is it? Why, breaking down the barriers that separate nations; those barriers, behind which nestle the feelings of pride, revenge, hatred, and jealousy,

> which every now and then burst their bounds, and deluge whole countries with blood; those feelings which nourish the poison of war and conquest, which assert that without conquest we can have no trade, which foster that lust for conquest and dominion which sends forth your warrior chiefs to scatter devastation through other lands…. […] (Cobden, 1908, I: 40).

As the fragment above makes clear, free trade was a peace mechanism, and when absent, it led to conflict, wars, and in turn justified colonialism and imperialism. Cobden strategically refuted opponents' arguments by (re)defining free trade, a way to convince the audience that helped him present particular his ideological beliefs as reasonable and acceptable (on the rhetorical use of definitions see Ilie, 2009: 35–51).[8] He maintained that foreign trade well understood, was not the outcome of imperialist policies, but rather the antidote. Thus territorial expansion for economic reasons would be entirely unjustified, in Cobden's view, as an unnecessary evil. Free trade alone provided a win-win situation.

In a speech in Manchester, only a few months before the repeal, Cobden was even more eloquent as to the moral bearing of the free trade question when he stated that "the physical gain will be the smallest gain to humanity from the success of this principle." Free trade, he believed, will "act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe, drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race, and creed, and language, and uniting us in the bonds of eternal peace" (Cobden, 1908, I: 187).

It comes as no surprise that contemporaries believed that Cobden was acting for altruistic reasons. What seems interesting is that the moral message was conveyed not only expressly, but also tacitly, thanks to his background, charisma, and rhetorical skills. Cobden was himself a member of the middle class and not an aristocrat, and thus his humble origins were always perceived as a positive trait of his character. Honesty and simplicity were thought to go hand in hand. Smith's obituary, for instance, remarked that "he spoke of his origin […] with perfect simplicity, neither hiding nor vaunting his humble birth" (Smith, 1865). His voice was described as "clear, varied in its tones, sweet, and penetrating," which helped convey his message (Morley, 1908 [1881], I: 208). Unlike more skilled speakers, John Morley argued, Cobden did not have "the compass, or the depth, or the many resources," but it was the "glow of a thoroughly convinced reason, of intellectual ingenuity, of argumentative keenness" that tipped the scales (Morley, 1908 [1881], I: 208). Even this apparent inadequacy was presented as a positive feature, not only as a way of making him more relatable, but also as proof of his uniqueness as a political leader, of the singularity of his achievements. Indeed, to emphasise the positive features of the speaker's character to appeal to the public was by no means an innovative strategy to gain support. As Finlayson and Martin show, the "rhetoric of

identification", that is, "the demonstration that a political figure understands and appreciates the life and experience of those to whom they are speaking", plays a central role in political life (Finlayson and Martin, 2014: 7). In sum, Cobden was perceived by contemporaries and presented himself as figure of moral height, and this perception was shaped both by the style of oratory and the content of his speeches.

III. The League, Political Representation, and Public Speaking

This view of Cobden as a middle-class, honest, and persuasive public speaker became increasingly prominent at the time and it captures what Victorians perceived as an age of transition both in political rhetoric and political representation. After the 1832 Reform Act, there was a slight shift in the composition of the House of Commons membership and a slow transition into accommodating popular views and demands. As Kenyon argues, "the barriers which kept the public from a decisive share in politics were broken down, and the sovereignty transferred, in fact as well as in theory, from parliament to the people" (Kenyon, 1889: 15, quoted in Meisel, 2001: 62). Meisel points out that this transition was overplayed in the nineteenth century and contemporaries wrongly believed that the parliamentary composition changed dramatically after 1832. While Meisel argues that this change was slower than people thought at the time, Cobden nevertheless represented in the late 1830s and 1840s a new style of politician, finding support to a great extent among disenfranchised people outside of Parliament who lacked an aristocratic background. He effectively brought into Parliament a number of issues that would have otherwise remained unheard. Moreover, his seat in Parliament itself was a symbol of the triumph of the middle classes over landed-class interests.

As the nineteenth century progressed, MPs and professional politicians came increasingly from the middle and labouring classes. This situation also had an impact on the style of public speaking. As Charles Kendall Adams remarked, "[Cobden's] methods of address were new in the house" (Adams, 1884: 102). Some welcomed this openness, while others like Benjamin Disraeli blamed Bright and Cobden for the decline of the classical tradition of parliamentary oratory. Disraeli lamented that instead of quoting Latin sources, "Cobden & Bright, & all those sort of people, are always quoting Dickens & Punch etc." (Disraeli, 1975: 97–8). Thomas Carlyle equally deplored that Cobden was "an eloquent speaker," meaning that politics was degraded by embracing populism. Carlyle would advise against becoming a "public orator" or a "stump orator", because, he believed, "there [was] not in Nature a more dis-

tracted phantasm than your commonplace eloquent speaker, as he is found in platforms, in parliaments, on Kentucky stumps, at tavern-dinners, in windy, empty, insincere times like ours" (Carlyle, 1850: 149). Certainly, Cobden was part of a new tradition of politicians: his educational background was fundamentally different from other members of Parliament. As such, he challenged a traditional view of parliamentary eloquence as "the art of an aristocratic society, practiced under aristocratic conditions, in an aristocratic age", to put it in Lord Curzon's words (Curzon, 1913: 8). Instead of drawing from classical literature, Cobden's speeches characteristically lacked direct quotations and references to classic sources, like Horace or Cicero, and they were also generally shorter than the average.[9]

The peculiarities of Cobden as a politician can be better understood when placing him in a wider political context, which means discussing the relevance of the anti-Corn Law League. In other words, I consider the significance of the League, and Cobden as one of its leaders, as a link to explore the relationship between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics, and as such as a way of studying the struggle for political representation at the time. In Victorian Britain, the anti-Corn Law League was a turning point for several reasons.

First, unlike Chartism, the League was a particularly peaceful reforming campaign.[10] More importantly, Chartism was defeated, which contrasts with the success of the free trade struggle. As a result, subsequent organisations, like the National League, imitated the League in its organisational techniques (Meisel, 2001: 236–41). This success meant that free trade was considered a legitimate demand, but it also gave liberalism, broadly understood, a seal of approval. As free trade became a central component of liberalism as a political ideology, liberalism became a feasible alternative, backed up by the success of free trade policies.[11]

Second, as a philanthropist and altruistic figure aiming at improving the life conditions of the lower and middle classes, Cobden's moral crusade was central to his rhetoric. As examined above, he perceived free trade and commerce as the "grand panacea", which would bring about material and moral progress and peace among nations.[12] The League was therefore the first successful popular movement that established new mechanisms to channel demands, with petitions and pressure groups being considered as a useful resource. Arguably, the League helped improve political representation at the time by making the most of a relatively new apparatus of peaceful public meetings that did not discriminate against disenfranchised people and focused instead on articulating political demands that would benefit society as a whole. While earlier popular movements expressing discontent ended up in turmoil, like the 1816 Spa Fields riots, or the 1819 Peterloo Massacre in Manchester, the League focused on building a middle-class public profile to obtain the moral authority necessary to achieve economic reform.

Third, the League intensified social debate in at least two ways. First, it successfully employed the so-called platform technique to gain support for its cause. Professional politicians, MPs, and cabinet members actively engaged in extra-parliamentary speaking. As result, holding mass demonstrations and speaking in public became a common practise among different organisations because of the League's successful model. Public speaking did not necessarily require a closed space, and therefore politics increasingly involved larger quantities of people, both enfranchised and disenfranchised. Additionally, politics increasingly became a quasi-theatrical activity, a kind of social occupation, and a source of entertainment. As Martin Hewitt has rightly remarked, much of the attraction of this mode of politics was "the sense of gladiatorial conflict that was produced by the clash of opposing parties" (Hewitt, 2002: 20). The simulation of this kind of parliamentary-like debates was the dominant trend during the nineteenth century, while by the end of the century adversarial debates gave way to single-party campaigns and demonstrations (Palonen, 2016: 138-144).

At the time, meetings of this kind were also free (unlike periodicals, for instance) and inclusive, which contributed to their success. This movement frequently included people who did not have the right to vote, as the Second Reform Act did not take place until 1867, and even then the franchise was still limited. For instance, as early as 1839 agricultural labourers began to take part in meetings and denounce the system of existing protection. The League maintained that these meetings were the "safety-valves of national distress," since they allowed labourers to state "their grievances in a peaceful and constitutional form" (Jephson, 1892: 264). While this trend of popular agitation was pioneered by the anti-slavery movement, it is undeniable that the success of the anti-Corn Law League marked a turning point (on this topic see Hewitt, 1982: 378–443 and Bolt, 1992). Cobden, the middle-class hero, acted as a link between popular and high politics, and helped foster political culture beyond Parliament. As already noted, a number of associations tried to follow the League's example, and more notably, Gladstone would later follow this strategy of platform speaking, particularly during the struggle for the Second Reform Bill in 1866–67, the 1868 general elections, and the two Midlothian campaigns in the late 1870s (on this topic see Meisel, 2001: 241–4; and Biagini, 2004: 405–16).

If on the one hand politicians seemed to increasingly address the lower and middle classes, on the other hand the topics addressed and the character of the politicians involved were discussed in grassroots organisations and popular associations. Therefore, the League intensified social debate since they effectively regarded the people as political interlocutors. For instance, together with the increase in the number of periodicals discussing reform proposals, a number of debating societies in Birmingham thoroughly discussed John Bright's and the

League's proposals (Iwama, 2016: 57–70). Among other things, this points to the fact that political debate stopped being an elite activity and became a central aspect of society. The League served as a political club that would move petitions into Parliament, but it was also in some ways a parliamentary-like institution. Politicians sought more than ever before to shape public opinion, and as *The Times* maintained in 1873, Britain was becoming "a nation of public speakers" (Matthew, 1987: 38).

IV. Parliamentary Politics Within and Outside Parliament

In this context it is interesting to analyse how political theories were articulated both within and outside Parliament. In Parliament, speeches were more formal and structured, which allowed for a more detailed debate, but outside Parliament they were passionate, engaging a variety of audiences, and responding to a number of contingent situations (Meisel, 2001: 253). Meisel rightly points out that platform speeches were delivered under unregulated conditions, like the different locations where speeches were given, the size and character of the audience, or the kind of message to be conveyed, among others. These aspects had consequences in the way ideas were articulated. Additionally, this extra-parliamentary speaking was aimed at convincing people, but also at educating them in economic policies and principles. This kind of education frequently took the form of debate. As Robert Oliver notes in *Public Speaking and the Reshaping of Great Britain*, during the Victorian period, public speakers changed from "orators" to "discussants" so that "public speaking tended to assume the qualities of coordinate discussion" (Oliver, 1987: 16). Politicians like Cobden developed forms of address that were directly aimed at shaping the political opinions of a growing public, but also allowing a responsive communication.

These features can be illustrated by referring to particular instances. In a speech at the London Covent Garden Theatre (1843), Cobden began by discussing the issue of free trade as presented in newspapers, thus explaining the debate in terms familiar to the general public (Cobden, 1908, I: 33). Figures and empirical support were commonly used, although Cobden kept them to a minimum and acknowledged that he did not want to "[trouble] such meetings as this with reading statistical documents – they are generally most inappropriate" (Cobden, 1908, I: 33). References to Adam Smith and Ricardo were also recurrent in Cobden's speeches, sometimes tacitly, simply by spreading their ideas on free trade, but also, less frequently, by directly quoting them as authoritative references. In this sense, Cobden demonstrated his argument through the use of "the most distinguished writers who have ever treated upon this subject," such as "Adam Smith, Burke, Franklin [and] Hume" (Cobden, 1908, I: 92).

The League's preference for adversarial debate is apparent in one of the meetings that preceded the 1843 by-election in the City of London. The election, which was a triumph for the free trade candidate, was held after a debate between Pattison, a free trader, and Thomas Baring, a protectionist.[13] After speeches by the candidates, Cobden addressed the audience by first exposing Baring's ideas and later refuting them: "One of your candidates, Mr Baring […] actually says that free trade means the abolition of all custom-house duties. We have said, thousands of times, that our object is not to take away the Queen's officers from the custom-house, but to take those officers away who sit at the receipt of custom to take tithe and toll for the benefit of peculiar classes" (Cobden, 1908, I: 41). He went on to discuss in detail Baring's arguments in favour of monopolies, and later defended himself against the accusation that the League was in favour of abolishing property rights. Cobden particularly emphasised the fact that he was paying attention to his adversary's arguments, for instance when he claimed to be "[condescending] to meet the arguments of our opponents" (Cobden, 1908, I: 41). Certainly, his speech employed a seemingly neutral tone, so that the audience was led to believe that they were being presented with objective facts rather than opinions. Thus Cobden maintained: "Our meetings, gentlemen, are always canvassing meetings […]. The question we have to submit is not very well fitted for declamatory appeals" (Cobden, 1908, I: 41). Examining the subject by combining an apparently factual approach with an exposition of different points of view favoured a connection with the audience, which resulted in clear expressions of support, frequently in the form of cheers from the audience that interrupted the meetings.

Thus, the educational aspect was particularly present in the anti-Corn Law League, as it aimed not only at communicating the message through speeches, but also though recreation of debates. In the 1840s, Martin Hewitt remarks, "the platform remained deliberative, consecrated to discussion of measures rather than the hearing of men" (Hewitt, 2002: 20). Instead of mere addresses or "declamatory appeals," the League would frequently celebrate debate meetings with usual elements like chairmen, votes, opponents, motions, and amendments. As Henry Jephson pointed out, in these meetings "speakers on both sides were usually attentively listened to and given a hearing; there was no rioting or disturbance, and both parties accepted the result with comparative equanimity" (Jephson, 1892: 245–6). There were numerous examples of meetings across Britain where Cobden and Bright would face opponents and then have the audience vote on a motion about the topic, which in some cases did not end favourably for the League – i.e. the motion was not seconded. Touring the country in a series of meetings, they would use local venues for this purpose, although places like the Manchester Free Trade Hall, which could accommodate up to 10 000 people, were built particularly for this purpose (Jephson, 1892: 242, 250–2).

It is therefore possible to maintain that the League contributed to bringing the parliamentary culture of politics outside parliament. This is the case, first, thanks to the growth of debate and discussion beyond passive leadership, which in turn boosted political representation. Cobden is an example of how "speakers evolved into spokesmen" and debate occupied a central place in Victorian society. Second, the League helped foster parliamentary culture because many of the discussions that took place in this context presented the three main features that distinguish a parliamentary debate: a motion debated, the presentation of multiple points of view, and a *pro et contra* debate (Palonen, 2016: 16).

V. Cobden's Popularity at Home and Abroad

Cobden's involvement in the anti-Corn Law League resulted in a clear intensification of social and political debate, but it is also worth noting that as a result of this success, he was something of a new-born celebrity, or as Richard Spall has labelled him, the "anti-Corn Law rock star" (Spall, 2008: 442). Thus, popular politicians like Cobden were nodal points in an emerging political and democratic culture. Their images appeared in a range of media, while their reputations acquired national and even international reach (Morgan, 2006: 39–55; Morgan, 2012: 127–146). One could buy a medal commemorating repeal, a poster depicting a meeting of the League, a figurine representing Cobden, a portrait of Cobden, a variety of ceramic objects, like plates or jugs, or a handkerchief with Cobden's name embroidered on it (Morgan, 2012: 137–8).[14] In 1842 and 1845, two National Anti-Corn Law Bazaars were held in Manchester, where many of these items were sold. Interestingly, the price of these objects was low enough so that the working classes could afford them. These items of propaganda illustrate Cobden's popularity, but they are also a proof of an emotional attachment between the public and the cause he represented. Just as in the descriptions of Cobden's rhetorical style, his humble origins were overemphasised. The existence of this memorabilia corroborates the fact that he was popular in a new kind of way: he was "first among equals" (Morgan, 2012: 138). These propagandistic objects can be seen not just as symbols of political communication, but also as crucial in helping forge Cobden's popularity. And he seemed to have been aware of this identification mechanism when he said to George Wilson that "the faith must be incarnated, and hence I have been chosen, here, for the embodiment of the free trade doctrine" (Cobden to Frédéric Bastiat, 11 July 1846, Howe, 2007b: 448).

In view of this popularity, it is not surprising that he went on a European tour to meet national leaders, intellectuals, and politicians to try to convince

them to adopt free trade policies. The European tour is the longest and most significant of all his trips. He spent fourteen months abroad, between August 1846 and October 1847, and visited France, Spain, the Italian and German states, Prussia, and Russia (Taylor, 1994; see also López, 2015: 948–65). In this new facet of Cobden as a diplomat, politics was not an activity restricted to highly structured environments and institutions, but rather was ubiquitous. Cobden took this new form of political campaign beyond national borders, knowing that political struggles were won not only, or even mainly, through parliamentary politics. Or else, that adversarial debate, diplomatic dialogue, and popular agitation, were the paradigmatic features of politics more generally.

He went on to convince people about the benefits of free trade beyond Britain's borders, and the reason was clear: free trade was for him a policy of international application that would benefit everyone if adopted consistently. While Cobden's trips are often seen as footnotes in British political history, they could be seen as part of a broader recasting of political culture whereby liberalism gained traction. It might be objected that during the European Tour, Cobden was addressing only a small number of people since he was attending private dinners and meetings. But the audience that was actually present during those meetings was only part of the audience addressed through the press. The coverage in newspapers, both in the UK and in the countries that Cobden visited, made this tour a significant event. In the figure of Cobden, diplomacy merged with popular politics.

VI. Conclusion

As Hewitt maintains, the growing fascination with public speaking in Victorian Britain was so ubiquitous that it has paradoxically remained "invisible" (Hewitt, 2002: 1). The centrality of an oral tradition in British political culture has been pointed out in the literature, but it was arguably only in the Victorian era that it reached its peak with movements like the anti-Corn Law League. Taking Richard Cobden and the anti-Corn Law League as a case study, I have argued that they boosted political representation and shaped a political culture of debate more broadly, at both a national and international level. While popular demands like the liberalisation of trade were increasingly heard in Parliament and subsequently turned into actual policies, Cobden and the League also helped intensify a culture of debate, and a *pro et contra* parliamentary style of politics more widely. Cobden's rhetorical skills and his charismatic personality have been examined in this respect. He was an ambivalent politician, capable of appealing to diverse audiences. Middle-class workers empathised

with him thanks to his humble origins, while the philanthropic elements in his rhetoric helped make him seem an unthreatening figure to higher classes.

Moreover, this study gives a sense of the existing links between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics in Victorian Britain, or high and grassroots politics respectively. Free trade was an element common to both, and as such it deserves scholarly attention. As economic and political ideas were accessible to different audiences, and discussed publicly, that helped popularise the cause of free trade, and eventually redefined liberalism. It is important to note that in this paper public speaking outside Parliament has not been understood simply as a way of spreading abstract political theories, or transferring complex, well-defined ideologies to the wider public, but conversely, the popularisation of free trade contributed to reshaping the ideology in question. Thus the medium is the message, or at least a central aspect of it, in the study of political culture and political ideologies. In other words, public speaking outside Parliament is not simply an anecdotal aspect of the study of political thought. Liberalism found in this combination of debating culture and strong, charismatic leadership a new way of gaining support from the people. As I have attempted to show, the "age of the oratory and of the speech" (Meisel, 2001: 52) was also a time in which memorabilia, as one of the central aspects of popular politics, made it possible for people to further identify with a cause. It would be misleading to assume that these phenomena meant simply the popularisation and spread of liberalism, as if there were a number of well-defined core principles that were simplified in a diluted way to make them digestible to the people (see this point in Hewitt, 2002). As new political strategies developed, liberalism can be studied in the making. Popularising in this case meant re-creating and re-defining liberalism, and as such Cobden and the anti-Corn Law League represented a watershed in the history of Victorian liberalism.

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Endnotes

1 The candidates were Henry Marsland (Liberal), Thomas Marland (Tory), and Cobden.
2 John Bright and Charles Pelham Villiers, among others, also represented the cause in Parliament, but a discussion of their careers is beyond the scope of this article.
3 The Unions adopted an increasingly meritocratic and inclusive membership criterion throughout the nineteenth century.
4 A more in-depth analysis of the reasons for the success of the anti-Corn Law League is beyond the scope of this paper (see Clark, 1951: 1–13; Clark, 1953: 355–74; Howe, 1998: 1–38).
5 "His eloquence, simple, clear, earnest and genial, flowed from his character as a stream from its spring. He never composed his speeches, but trusted that words would not be wanting to a full mind and a glowing heart. The most peculiar of his intellectual gifts was the perfect simplicity of view, which is likewise characteristic of Adam Smith and of all great economists. He saw things exactly as they were. His modesty in his speeches, writings and conversation equaled his strength of conviction" (Smith, 1865).
6 See also: "His style of address was plain, simple, and direct, backed by an obvious honesty of purpose, and great keenness and persuasiveness of argument" (Hawthorne, 1900: 186).
7 "Of him, if of any public man, it might be said that he never did an act or uttered a word with a view to personal objects alone" (Smith, 1865).
8 I would like to thank an anonymous referee for bringing this point to my attention.
9 Cobden references generally limited to political economists like Adam Smith and David Ricardo.
10 Also, because of the temporal proximity with the French Revolution, Chartism was perceived as an insurgent, violent movement (Royle and Lockyer, 1980: 47).
11 This points to the ideological proximity between political and economic liberalism, an aspect that deserves further study in the literature.
12 In 1842 he suggested to Henry Ashworth that free trade and the peace movement "[…] are one & the same cause – it has often been to me a matter of the greatest surprise that the Friends have not taken up the question of Free trade as the means, & I believe the only human means, of effecting universal & permanent peace […] What do you think of changing your plan of a prize essay from the Corn law to 'Free trade as a <the best human> means for securing universal & permanent peace' ": (Cobden to Henry Ashworth, 12 April 1842, Howe, 2007b: 267).
13 For a complete account of the meeting, see *The Spectator*, 28 October 1843, 3.
14 For a detailed description of the items sold at the ACLL Bazaar, see the *National Anti-Corn Law League Bazaar Gazette*, May 1845, 2, 4.

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