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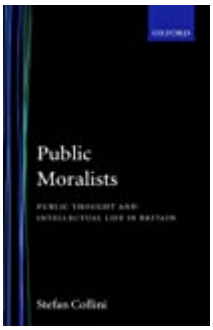

Stefan Collini. *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850-1930.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991. 383 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820173-1.

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A Study of Values

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[Note : This review is part of the H-Ideas Retrospective Reviews series. This series reviews books published during the twentieth century which have been deemed to be among the most important contributions to the field of intellectual history.]

James Fitzjames Stephen was elected to membership of the Athenaeum Club in 1873 under the provisions of the club's Rule II. This rather obscure reference, revealed to the reader early on in Stephen Collini's *Public Moralists*, serves in many ways as a shorthand description of the argument which the author proceeds to build throughout the remainder of the work. The Athenaeum Club was generally considered to represent the peak of London's clubland, especially for the subjects of Collini's interest–the public intellectual. While the Athenaeum also included, of course, the world of inherited wealth and status, it has special relevance for Collini's purposes because, under Rule II, the club additionally admitted men (and the world Collini is here concerned with was almost entirely masculine) "...of distinguished eminence in Science, Literature, or the Arts, or for Public Service" (p. 16). In other words intellectuals, a group accorded status based not on title or money, but on intellectual influence and achievement. "Public Service", and an enquiry into its manifestation, is in fact the central theme of *Public Moralists*, and it is in the title itself that we find the core of Collini's argument.

Collini sets as his task an examination of the "assumed knowledge" of elite Victorian and Edwardian England. Collini's focus is on England, rather than the more common "Britain" which marks much recent writing on identity in "British" history, largely because it was "England" that most of his subjects identified themselves with, and it was in this period that notions of English tradition were largely built. We see in the nineteenth century, for example, the replacement of "Anglo-Saxon" with the more nationalistic "Old English" to denote a literary link with the national past (359). Though Collini sometimes extends his focus to include the years up to 1930, the book is in the main a study of the nineteenth century. In attempting to "[reconstruct] the thought and sensibility of some of the leading members of the educated class of this period" (p. 1), it may seem that *Public Moralists* is sim-

ply another in a long line of works setting out the basic tenets of Victorian thought that have long since passed into the realm of archetype. Indeed, a cursory glance at the table of contents, in which John Stuart Mill is featured prominently, might support this claim.

However, Collini sees in Mill more than the public face of Utilitarianism. Mill is instead an archetype of a different sort, that of the public moralist, the specifically Victorian figure who attempted to "persuade their contemporaries to live up to their professed ideals" (p. 2). Unlike much earlier literature, Collini argues that the focus in this process should be on the individual and the public conversation he begins, guides, coerces, or directs. As such, *Public Moralists* is significant above all because it is not a study of "isms". Indeed, Collini takes great pains to stress that particular schools of thought, whether it be Utilitarianism for the early Victorian period or Socialism in the late-nineteenth century, result from a public conversation upon which some ideological agreement has been reached rather than upon ideological proselytization. As such, Collini attempts to reconstruct these conversations, hence his attention to the concept of "voice" (p. 3). Political theory gets scant attention, for "political theories are parasitic upon the lesser explicit habits of response and evaluation that are deeply embedded in the culture" (pp. 4-5).

In certain ways, then, *Public Moralists* can be viewed as part of the ever-growing field of identity studies. However, instead of focussing on contrasts, as does Linda Colley in *Britons*, or some variation on the theme of "invented traditions" popularized by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger [1], among many others, the "imagined community" with which Collini concerns himself existed within the minds of "the upper ten thousand". The intellectuals who claimed membership in this elite had mostly been well-educated, usually at Oxbridge, or had through their own initiative and strong "character", a central preoccupation of the Victorians, attained the status of learned amateur. Benjamin Kidd receives notice as an example of the latter (pp. 237-47).

Collini pursues his various themes in a prosopographical manner, here drawing upon Henry Maine and John Austin in discussing the evolution of the jurist as public moralist, there calling forth Henry Fawcett in order to examine masculinity and its significance to the Victorian mind. Given that Collini is more interested in the English intellectual as a public figure, participant in the various explicit and implicit controversies of the age, it is natural that the focus here is not so much upon the accepted "texts" of the period, but rather the full range of the intellectual's public engagement. We are thus treated to a detailed study of Mill's review output, his involvement in contemporary debates over Governor Eyre or the American Civil War, and his parliamentary career, beyond a mere summary of the wisdom of *On Liberty*. In short, we discover the Victorian intellectual as individual, not as founding father.

Collini discusses terms and ideals as much as identity itself, although the two of course are not mutually exclusive. "Altruism" is identified as a pervasive component of the Victorian intellectual climate, an ideal binding the dominant liberal directive of individualism to a broader notion of public service. Morality was central to Victorian thought, based upon an adherence to obligation. There was a "right" answer to problems, a failure with which to grapple was seen as base selfishness. The motive for this concept was harmony, both for the individual and for society. Collini argues that such thought was framed by anxiety about the decline of orthodox Christianity (p. 75), though one could further argue that it had as much to do with a more prosaic search for means to overcome a debilitating self-centredness. In other words, a struggle to imbue Lockean liberalism with a social conscious. Part of this process was attention to proper character, both for the individual and for the collective. Abhorrence of apathy, the valuation of work as compared to Georgian leisure, self-restraint, and the domination of the will over baser motivations marked the Victorian intellectual's mental terrain. This applied to the nation as well, helping to construct notions of English identity. "National character", according to Mill, was the force which bound together artificial entities such as laws, customs, and wars (108). The third in the triumvirate of Victorian ideals Collini describes is manliness. This notion has received growing attention since the early 1980s–see the work of J. A. Mangan or Michael Roper and John Tosh for instance [2]–though Collini again moves beyond the orthodox view. Instead of another survey of Charles Kingsley's career, or a chastisement of Victorian patriarchy as oppressive and hegemonic, Collini defines Victorian masculinity in a more sophisticated and inclusive manner, seeing it as largely physical, disdainful of childlike and effeminate traits, and scornful of "sentiment" (pp. 186-87). In short, proper attention to good character without getting carried away. Henry Fawcett is given as a telling example of an individual who exhibited proper masculine character. Masculinity was the language of self-reliance, of productive as opposed to enfeebling energy.

These traits and values found their expression above all in the growing professionalization of the intellectual. Again, this is a theme familiar to most students of the period, Harold Perkin's *The Rise of Professional Society* being only the best known work here. Collini incorporates this corpus of work into his thesis of the public moralist. Central to the process of professionalization was exclusion (p. 237); exclusion of the public by the specialist, exclusion of the amateur by the professional. Collini describes this process, which occurred mainly within the intellectual community, as opposed to society at large, as intellectual cannibalism, each succeeding generation denouncing its predecessor as "amateur" (p. 220). Hence, J. A. Froude stood as a professional historian in his own era, an amateur narrator in the next. One could argue that as the division between professional and amateur became solidified by the twentieth century, Collini's notion of the public moralist breaks down because a Millian figure could no longer rely on a shared assumed knowledge to appeal to a broader audience.

As much of the focus here is on the Victorian intellectual world, Collini is in general less successful when venturing across the century divide. As writers such as Paul Fussell [3] have shown us, many of the ideals and values Collini eloquently explicates were rejected after the horrors of the Great War, replaced by a more detached modernism. This is less problematic, though, when we keep in mind Collini's assertion that "fundamental assumptions and responses change with almost geological slowness compared to the flighty world of systematic theory" (p. 5). Thus, while post-war English intellectuals may have transferred their allegiance from liberalism to fellow-travelling, or pondered their democratic convictions in the face of continental totalitarianism, one significance of *Public Moralists* is that it reminds us that in investigating men's underlying values and concerns, we in fact see as much intellectual cohesion as fracture across the previous two centuries. Intellectual periodization is therefore perhaps as tenuous an endeavour as the political theorizing Collini sets about recasting. *Public Moralists* can also be viewed as a transitional piece in the historiography of English ideas. Collini consciously rejects older approaches to English intellectual history, either the work of the Warwick school and its intellectual associates, which saw the history of ideas in large part as the building of group consciousness with a nod towards romanticism, or the countervailing focus on political economy and the growth of liberalism, both of which were rather deterministic and teleological. Instead, he abandons strict narrative and the study of political schools of thought in favour of a broad-ranging examination of idea-formation, which has anticipated much current work on the development of identity and the importance of values and "assumed knowledge" in this disparate and ever-changing process.

Notes:

[1]. *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[2]. J. A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic*, (New York: Viking, 1986) and *Masculinity and Morality*; *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800*, Michael Roper and John Tosh eds, (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[3]. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford: OUP, 1975).

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