

FREE TRADE
NATION

COMMERCE, CONSUMPTION, AND
CIVIL SOCIETY IN MODERN
BRITAIN

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Prologue

At 8.45 on Saturday morning 14 March 1903, the hull of the incoming liner *Norman* suddenly emerged out of the haze outside Southampton's Ocean Quay. On shore, groups had gathered around a colourfully decorated reception stand to welcome home 'Britain's Empire Statesman'. Slowly, the *Norman* was hauled alongside and great cheers erupted from the shore and neighbouring ships as Joseph Chamberlain and his wife came into full view. After travelling more than 16,000 miles, the colonial secretary had finally returned from his tour of South Africa. The sun broke through the clouds. 'The whole moving scene was upon us in a moment, for all the world', *The Times* correspondent wrote, 'as if a curtain had been raised.'¹

What did the world behind this curtain hold for Britain and its Empire? Much recent writing has rediscovered the decade before the First World War as a golden age of globalization, an era marked by the gold standard and expanding transnational networks of cultural and commercial exchange. For contemporaries the picture was far less clear. Unlike the hull of the *Norman*, Britain never fully escaped the surrounding haze in the early twentieth century. The Boer War in South Africa, which Chamberlain's secret diplomacy had helped trigger, had shaken confidence in the future of the Empire. Well might the formal address welcoming the statesman praise his successes in 'welding together in one indissoluble whole of Great Britain and her colonies', and in speeding 'the steps of civilization' and advancing 'our commerce'. Yet, in fact, commerce, colonies, and civilization all faced a doubtful future.

Unemployment had been rising since the turn of the century, exceeding 8 per cent amongst industrial workers in 1904-5. As wages fell, prices were steadily rising, by over 4 per cent between 1900 and 1904. With her exports suffering from competition from newly industrializing great powers, Britain increasingly relied on earnings from services like shipping and overseas investment. These 'invisible exports' filled the gap in Britain's balance of payments; imports exceeded regular exports by over £100 million pounds. Anticipating more recent debates, contemporaries asked what the impact of global capital exports would be on employment. Capital was more mobile than labour and might migrate behind tariff barriers with a great sucking sound. This might produce earnings for financiers, but also

cost jobs at home. Or, to put this anxiety in Edwardian terms: was Britain becoming a nation of rentiers rather than makers?

The international climate was no brighter. Free Trade Britain faced a host of mercantilist challenges. Since the 1870s there had been a global drift towards ever higher trade barriers, economic imperialism, and tariff wars. Moderate tariffs were raised to offer more effective protection in the 1890s and 1900s, in France (1892), Italy (1895), Germany (1902), repeatedly in Russia, as well as in Argentina and, indeed, in the white settler colonies of the British Empire. On the European continent, the 1890s saw a series of tariff wars. Overseas, the United States was expanding its sphere of influence in the Caribbean and the Philippines. In 1902 nominal tariff rates on manufactures stood at a phenomenal 131 per cent in Russia, 73 per cent in the United States, 34 per cent in France, and 25 per cent in Germany.² In February 1903, Russia and Austria-Hungary proposed what were clearly *tarifs de combat*, higher tariffs to allow for bargaining and retaliation. Britain, the most powerful empire in living history, was a powerless bystander in this new game. Adherence to unilateral free trade and a rigid version of the most-favoured-nation clause required Britain to treat countries strictly equally, without favours or discrimination, offering an open market to even the most aggressive protectionist competitor. There was a growing sentiment within the commercial community as well as sections of the Foreign Office that Britain was entering a new era of international rivalry with one arm tied behind its back. Moreover, Britain was shrinking—net emigration had been 71,888 in 1900, rising to 147,036 in 1903, far higher than that from its major European rival, Germany.

Within the Empire, the white-settler dominions were aiming at greater freedom in international affairs. Canada had become embroiled in a tariff war with Germany, which, not unreasonably, saw the Canadian granting of a preference to Britain as a breach of its trade treaty. For an imperial statesman like Chamberlain, for whom the Dominions were just as much a part of the Empire as Yorkshire, this was a frightening development. Germany's withdrawal of most-favoured-nation treatment from Canada appeared a denial of imperial sovereignty, an act of commercial warfare against Britain. Chamberlain had hoped to use a small duty on corn, which the Conservative government had introduced in 1900 to raise additional revenue to fight the Boer War, as an instrument to bind the units of the Empire closer together through a network of preferences. The Liberal leader of the opposition, Campbell-Bannerman, had feared that Chamberlain's

return from South Africa would be like Caesar's from Egypt. But Britain was not Rome. Chamberlain's Free Trade colleagues in the Conservative government had used his absence from cabinet to threaten resignation, and, on his return, outmanoeuvred him. By April 1903 the corn duty was repealed.

Yet if Chamberlain had returned from South Africa thinner and exhausted, he was also emboldened in his imperial vision and optimistic about the domestic conditions favouring a political change of course. On 15 May 1903, he proclaimed the need for imperial Tariff Reform—a declaration of war on the liberal system of Free Trade that had defined British politics for half a century. His supporters likened the momentous speech to Luther nailing his ninety-five theses to the church door at Wittenberg. Chamberlain demanded a 2s. duty on foreign corn with preferential treatment for the members of the British Empire. By September Chamberlain had resigned from the cabinet and launched the Tariff Reform crusade. Quickly his programme developed into a broad tariff package that held out an additional prospect of social reform. A general tariff would protect home industries, offer preferential duties to the colonies on agricultural imports, allow for tariff bargaining, and raise revenue for old age pensions.

Free Traders were terrified—and with good reason. Not only was the social and economic health of the nation uncertain, public support for Free Trade was also in doubt. A Liberal party agent from Manchester of all places, the heartland of Cobden and Free Trade, reported an 'unprecedented state of apathy and inertia, amounting to paralysis' in many constituencies. It was difficult to get speakers. Audiences were 'extremely thin and indifferent'. Partly, the agent suggested along conventional liberal lines, this resulted from 'war fever' brought on by the Boer War: 'War invariably materialises and brutalises a people.' And brute instincts made them susceptible to the culture of imperial protectionism. But, he emphasized, Free Trade was a victim of its own success: 'the condition of the labouring and wage-earning classes had been so much improved, that a well-fed and easy-going and satisfied feeling had come over the people, lulling them into a state of political slumber'. Other Free Traders feared that the middle classes had become corrupted by imperialism, ready to drift into Chamberlain's arms.³

Whatever the reason, in the autumn and winter of 1903-4, Free Traders within the state as well as in the Liberal opposition realized that the momentum was with the protectionists. Chamberlain was winning by-elections, first at Ludlow, then at Lewisham. Free Trade was being

overpowered by the protectionist campaign, the Liberal whip Herbert Gladstone diagnosed.⁴ Lewisham, significantly, was one of the many growing suburbs in south London that attracted the middle and lower middle classes. Many voters here worked as clerks or in the service sector, a world far removed from industrial regions, like Birmingham, that produced for the home market and were more expected to support tariffs. The electorate had more than doubled in this suburban constituency since the franchise reform of 1884. The liberal *Daily News*, tellingly if grudgingly, explained the defeat at Lewisham precisely as the result of this new popular element, consisting mainly of the 'black-coated proletariat', having undermined Free Trade.⁵ New, more democratic mass politics meant an unknown future for older liberal policies. As with clerks, so with manufacturing interests and highly paid artisans. Radical industrialists, like John Brunner of Brunner, Mond & Co. recognized the growing discontent amongst the manufacturing classes. Tariff Reform made progress in the East End of London, then experiencing a slowdown in the docks and foundries. Retaliation, in particular—the prospect of hitting back at foreign protectionist countries and forcing them to lower their own trade barriers—tapped the popular mood. But even in mercantile and financial circles, there was growing disquiet about the wisdom of following dogmatically the path of pure, unilateral Free Trade. Leading financiers like Natty Rothschild and Ernest Cassel were taken by Chamberlain's proposals. To Viscount Goschen, a well-connected former Chancellor of the Exchequer, the City seemed 'shaky' and 'deeply infected' with Chamberlainism, and displaying a fair bit of anti-German sentiment.⁶ Foreign powers, like Imperial Germany, were bracing themselves for a protectionist victory. At the Treasury, Edward Hamilton, the opera-loving top civil servant and evangelist of Gladstonian finance, felt Chamberlain's was the winning side. Chamberlain's crusade, he feared, was making progress even among the 'consuming classes'.⁷

While the storm of the fiscal controversy swept across the country, the Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour nonetheless managed to hang on to power. By November 1905, just over two-and-a-half years after Chamberlain pinned his flag to the mast of Tariff Reform, however, even Balfour's rare combination of philosophical skill and political acumen had run its course. On 1 December 1905 Edward VII accepted his resignation. The Liberals returned to power and called for a general election. By now the fortunes of Tariff Reform and Free Trade had dramatically reversed. The

1906 election was a landslide victory for Free Trade. It produced the largest swing at the polls since 1832. The Liberals returned 377 MPs, more than doubling their numbers. The Conservatives were decimated, reduced to a pitiful 157 seats; Balfour, the outgoing Prime Minister, was swept from his old seat at Manchester East. The young Labour party managed 53, the Irish nationalists 83 seats. Turnout had been a huge 83 per cent, at an election in which Free Trade versus Tariff Reform was the dominant issue. Free Trade won back voters in rural counties as well as in urban industrial areas.

In July 1906, Joseph Chamberlain suffered a stroke. But neither the decisive result of the 1906 election, nor his disability, put an end to the fiscal controversy. The battle between Free Trade and Tariff Reform was the most hotly contested issue of the Edwardian era. In the general elections of January 1910 and December 1910 fought over the Liberals' People's Budget and the constitutional position of the House of Lords, the question of Free Trade was a critical ingredient. Protectionists had promised social reform in exchange for tariffs. Liberals now held out an alternative compact of Free Trade and national insurance, made possible by redistributing income. Free Trade and the People's Budget were allied against peers and protectionists. The 1910 elections returned a more even balance between the two main parties—both with just over 270 seats, with the Liberals continuing in government thanks to additional support from Labour and Irish Nationalists. But they once again also brought to light the decisive popular support Free Trade managed to generate.

Foreigners who visited Britain regularly at the time were stunned by the extraordinary success of Free Trade culture. Italo Svevo, the Italian novelist who pioneered the use of psychoanalysis in the *Confessions of Zeno*, lived in Charlton, south London, for several months at a time in 1903, 1908, and again in 1910, working as a representative of an Italian paint manufacturer. At first the promise of 'seeing unemployment reduced and getting revenge (retaliation) against foreign countries that closed their borders to English products was received with enthusiasm', he recalled. Tariffs appeared bound to win. Then the Free Trade revival began: 'novels and short stories were neglected' as people turned to political economy. On his return in 1910, Free Trade had become unquestionable, a popular belief and common sense wisdom. 'People are still doing their sums', Svevo now found, 'but you couldn't repeat the idea [of a tariff] there without being booted.' 'I... do not believe that free trade can ever be abolished in England. Years ago I thought otherwise.'⁸

It is the cultural and political resources that made Britain a Free Trade nation that are the themes of the following chapters. The unique survival of Free Trade as a policy in Britain was made possible by a social and ideological mobilization of unprecedented proportions. In the years 1903–10 Free Trade unleashed a fresh energy that simultaneously expanded political communication and enriched the meanings of freedom of trade. Free Trade became a master language for citizens and consumers, as well as addressing questions of wealth and commerce. Democracy, peace, and justice all depended on it.

I

Free Trade Stories

'Tis a fight 'gainst cold greed and self interest,
 On our VOTE 'twill depend bond or free!
 But we'll still trust the old well-tried BANNER
 FREE TRADE for the ISLE of the SEA.
 We dread those dark days of PROTECTION,
 When want gaunt and fierce stalked the land,
 When grim death claimed its toll of the children,
 Nor Woman nor Man could withstand.
 When no work could be found for the worker,
 When oppression they had to endure,
 When the workhouse could scarce give its shelter
 To the hungry, the starving, or poor.

Free Trade Campaign Song, 1904¹

He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him.

Proverbs 11: 26, quoted by Charles Fenwick, Liberal MP, at the annual picnic of Northumberland miners, 1903²

The consumer ... is the whole nation.

Treasury memorandum, 1903³

In 1909 Free Traders took to the stage. With a touch of dramatic inspiration, the Free Trade Union adapted Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* for the epic battle against tariffs.⁴ *A Message from the Forties*, 'most successfully performed both in London and the provinces',⁵ casts Scrooge as a mouthpiece of protectionist ignorance and selfishness, his nephew as the informed and civic-minded Free Trader. When Scrooge praises the Tariff Reform plan for broadening the bases of taxation, the nephew reminds him that 'taxes are paid by people, not by the articles'. Scrooge falls asleep and is visited by the ghost of Richard Cobden. Clinking his chains, the

Mrs Mond had written the play at the invitation of the Women's Free Trade Union, a campaigning body which coordinated plays, speeches, public meetings, canvassing, and leafleting, in Welsh and English. A merchant's daughter, she was married to the leading chemical industrialist and liberal Alfred Mond, the managing director of Brunner Mond & Co., and future founder of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). The Mondes were not just rich: they were super-rich. Alfred's father, Ludwig, the son of a German Jewish merchant, had moved to Britain in the 1860s and established the chemical industry on a large scale. By the time of his death in 1909 he had assembled a stunning art collection, including Raphael's *Crucifixion* and Bellini's *Pietà*, which he left to the National Gallery in London. He also left £5,000 a year to his daughter-in-law.⁶

Nor did Mrs Mond's audience live in conditions of hunger, let alone starvation. Edwardian Britain was not an egalitarian society, but neither was it a particularly poor one. Today's readers may understandably be shocked by pictures of a society bereft of many of our own comforts, conveniences, and social services. For contemporaries, however, Britain stood out as the society with the highest standard of living in Europe at the time; only people in the United States and Australia were better off. Britain had long escaped the cycles of famine and mass starvation that continued to plague Italy, Spain, and Russia in the early twentieth century. The standard of living had improved vastly since the 1870s, thanks especially to the dramatic fall in the cost of food made possible by the technological advances in shipping and the integration of a global food system. A generation after the 1846 repeal of the Corn Laws, Londoners would still pay over 8d. for their four-pound loaf. By the late 1880s they paid a mere 5½d.⁷ The decline in prices of many basic articles disproportionately benefited the working classes. In 1904 an inquiry by the Board of Trade found that in the last quarter-century the average cost of articles of clothing had fallen by 5 per cent, of articles preferred by workers, by 15 per cent.⁸ Contemporaries argued over the extent to which the corn duty introduced during the Boer War had driven up prices, but in most large towns other than London the price of bread in the spring of 1903 was exactly the same as a year earlier.⁹

Of course, hardship and poverty were far from eliminated. The spread of social surveys and inquiries into nutritional deficiencies at the time gave poverty a new visibility, a problem that could be measured, tabulated, and governed.¹⁰ Industrial labourers still spent an average of 50 per cent of their budget on food.¹¹ They highlighted the significant proportion of

ghost explains that these 'are the chains that were forged by the Bread Tax, link by link and yard by yard girded around the people of England, and which I, after years of toil, yea, even persecution, struck from off the fettered limbs of the poor'. Scrooge has forgotten these lessons of history. His selfishness threatens to plunge the country back into those 'dark days of the past'. The stage goes dark. A magic lantern now projects the course of history since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, throwing up images from Robert Peel to later Free Trade chancellors of the exchequer, and from the starving families in the 1852 Stockport riots to contemporary riots by the unemployed in Berlin. Cobden's ghost reminds Scrooge that one is never too old to learn from history: Free Trade brings 'peace and good-will among men, purity in public life'. Scrooge awakes, cured of his protectionist folly. As the play comes to a close, children appear and sing the liberal campaign tune 'Stamp, Stamp, Stamp upon Protection'. Scrooge shouts after them, wishing them a merry Christmas and to 'go home to your untaxed dinners, and thank God England is still Free Trade'.

A Message from the Forties was one of a whole host of stories about the 'Hungry Forties' created in the Free Trade campaign, in newspapers and public meetings, in popular books and in oral testimony by octogenarians. Free Traders and protectionists wove accounts of past, present, and future which gave Britons' immediate decision over trade policy an epochal significance. As the fiscal controversy unfolded, Protectionists increasingly looked to the future, while Free Traders invoked the past. The choice over trade policy became situated in rival versions of modernity and national history.

These stories were more than just vehicles for attracting supporters. They also shaped the main ideas and identities that would dominate the political debate. Social movements need stories, as well as funds and committees. In what was the richest society in Europe at the time, Free Traders turned to stories of hunger and starvation, bread and sugar. They created a populist saga of emancipation in which the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 set the people free. Food and freedom were one. These stories were linked to a larger vision of civil society and democracy. Free Trade created a virtuous atmosphere for public life. Consumers would become citizens.

The Hungry Forties

There were perhaps few people in Britain further removed from poverty than Violet Florence Mond, the author of *The Message of the Hungry Forties*.

there had been a hunger march by the unemployed.¹⁵ Now Liberals seized on hunger not to challenge but to buttress the ruling power of Free Trade. Images and memories of hunger and suffering proliferated and became the main narrative thread in the battle over Free Trade. They were represented in posters, cartoons, and lantern slide shows in town halls and schools, invoked by old labourers and radicals at public meetings, dramatized in the radical press and liberal popular editions of 'the hungry forties'.

For Liberals to point to the sheer size of real, existing poverty was a strategy not without risks. The resilience of poverty, Tariff Reformers were quick to argue, was an indictment of Free Trade. But the Liberal fixation with hunger had strategic as well as cultural attractions. The potentially most popular and dangerous ingredient of Chamberlain's protectionist cocktail, Liberals recognized, was its call for retaliation. Tariffs would give Britain a weapon to hit back at protectionist countries which did not play 'fairly' and took advantage of Britain's open market by dumping cheap exports on a defenceless society. From south Wales, the Liberal Lewis 'Loulou' Harcourt warned that dumping was causing a great deal of disquiet amongst the iron men: 'I think you should steer as clear of this subject as you can manage.'¹⁶ Tariff bargaining was also the one potential bridge between Chamberlain's more ambitious protectionism and the more moderate revision of Free Trade favoured by Balfour, the Unionist Prime Minister, and his Conservative supporters. The imperial appeal of Tariff Reform might be limited—'the Britisher takes his Colonialism with qualifications, and is a little tired of having our "over-sea kinsmen" trotted out to overawe him', Campbell-Bannerman noted. But retaliation was a real danger, as the Liberal leader clearly saw. It:

- (a) cultivates the ingrained fallacy that imports are an evil;
- (b) captures the Chamber of Commerce sort of man by appealing to his self interest;
- (c) plays up to our pugnacity;
- (d) has the air of an innocent compromise, and is a relief to the Free Trader who cannot swallow Joe's plan, but does not wish to break with the Protectionists altogether.¹⁷

There was a small but senior group of Unionist Free Traders with about fifty MPs who held the balance in Parliament. Liberals at this stage did not feel they could dispense with them altogether. A focus on the food tax and

the very poor and elderly untouched by the general increase in national wealth; 10 per cent of the population lived in 'primary' poverty, another 18 per cent in 'secondary' poverty according to Seebohm Rowntree in his contemporary survey of York. And academics since have debated whether real wages slightly fell after 1899 or continued to rise very slowly.¹² Clearly, not all groups in society followed the same trends—female workers in the clothing industry were losers in the Edwardian period, while men in iron and steel on average gained. But there can be no debate about the overall improvement of material life in the late Victorian period. The British people in 1900 enjoyed a standard of living and rich diet, with more meat and sugar, that would have astonished their parents and grandparents.

If there was a European society, then, which should have cared less about the threat of starvation and the price of bread it was Britain. On the eve of the Tariff Reform debate, the Board of Trade concluded in a confidential memorandum on bread supply in time of war that 'the ability of the working classes to sustain a large rise in the price of necessities [like bread] has been greatly under-rated'. It found 'sufficient disproof' of the allegation that a large proportion of the working classes were either on the margin of subsistence or would be reduced to starvation, even by a 'large increase' in the price of basic foodstuffs.¹³ In the second half of the nineteenth century, Britons had become less and less dependent on bread for their basic diet.¹⁴ Tellingly, even relatively poorer societies at the time focused their political energy on higher-quality, more expensive foodstuffs, like the thousands of Germans who agitated against high meat prices. And yet, Edwardian Britain saw the mobilization on a grand, unprecedented scale of a popular battle against hunger and in defence of the 'cheap loaf'.

Already in 1902 about 20,000 people had protested in Hyde Park against the 'bread tax'. The following years brought together a chorus of liberal and radical voices stretching from members of the upper class to workers' movements and women cooperators—from Violet Mond with the £5,000 a year she received from her father-in-law alone to the typical skilled working-class family getting by on £200 a year. In December 1903, Campbell-Bannerman, the Liberal leader, warned crowds in Newport that there were twelve million people in Britain existing on the verge of starvation—a number that would escalate if Free Trade were abandoned. In recent years, hunger had developed into a new political weapon of the oppressed, the hunger strike used by colonial nationalists and anarchists confronting imperial power in various parts of the world. In Britain in 1901,

an impending threat of starvation neatly simplified the political landscape. It promised to turn the debate into a black-and-white choice: either Free Trade pure or comprehensive Tariff Reform threatening the food of the people.

The next decade saw a seemingly never-ending flood of memories of the 'hungry forties' and images of famine. Liberals at party headquarters and in their constituencies actively solicited hunger memories. Some Free Traders turned to the past as a conscious attempt to stir 'our contemporary public, grown fat and perhaps forgetful on cheap food'. In the early Victorian period, a genre of hunger literature had invoked fears of cannibalism and the racial degeneration of Britons to the level of the Irish. Edwardians revived the harrowing images of suffering, loss of human fellowship, and death in the poetry of Ebenezer Elliott, the early Victorian 'Corn Law Rhymers': 'I bought his coffin with my bed... I pawned my mother's ring for bread', a widow declares in one of his poems.¹⁸ At the Northumberland Miners' Picnic in July 1903, the editor of the radical newspaper *Reynolds's* drew a 'graphic picture' of the distress under protection from contemporary accounts. That summer, in a meeting in South Dorset, the senior Liberal William Harcourt found in his audience an old man who recalled how he had got three times as many loaves after repeal as before for the same amount of money. Harcourt urged fellow Free Traders to focus single-mindedly on cheap food: otherwise the Free Trade message stood in danger of being lost in a cry about the foreigner.¹⁹ Free Traders started to publicize exchanges with old people who expressed fears that Chamberlain's policies would bring back 'the old days of perpetual hunger and suffering of the poor'.²⁰ Liberal women, like Mrs. E. O. Fordham in schoolrooms in Royston, gave lantern slide lectures on the times under protection when agricultural labourers were 'on the verge of starvation'. Conservative Free Fooders, like George Hamilton, who had resigned from the Cabinet in 1903 after eight years at the India Office, urged audiences to read Disraeli's *Sybil* to remember the horrors of 'the hungry forties'. 'A Truthful Picture of the Hungry Forties' occupied a prominent place in Chiozza Money's '100 Points for Free Trade', the most widely used guide for speakers.²¹

The use of history by Free Traders was not something new. In 1853, Alexander Somerville wrote a mystical-historical paean to the Anti-Corn Law league. In it he traced the 'biographic history of the pioneers of freedom of opinion, commercial enterprise & civilisation in Britain' from the earliest forms of exchange between 'Wassa', 'a naked savage' and

'Waub', a cannibal, all the way to mid-Victorian Liberals.²² The Cobden Club, founded in 1866, a year after Cobden's death, had mobilized the past before, too, circulating a worker's memory of the high price of bread under protection in the general election of 1885, and 8,000 copies of Augustus Mongredien's *History of the Free Trade Movement* two years later.²³

The Edwardian campaign produced a politics of memory of altogether new historic proportions. Its single most influential vehicle was *The Hungry Forties*, a collection of labourers' memories of past suffering, a project initiated and edited by Cobden's daughter, Jane Cobden Unwin. Published in 1904, *The Hungry Forties* assembled letters from old witnesses, who had responded to advertisements for recollections of hunger under protection in a variety of newspapers, ranging from *Reynolds's* to *The Christian World*. Testimonies and conversations were printed as spoken, giving them an air of authenticity and historical immediacy by following regional speech patterns, such as 'taters' instead of 'potatoes'. They 'have not been edited', Cobden Unwin stressed. They brought to life past sufferings 'almost incredible to us in these days of comfort and good eating', women liberal campaigners noted.²⁴

The narrative of the 'hungry forties' turned personal suffering into national trauma, and provided Free Traders with a popular movement history. Collectively the accounts painted a picture of a people in semi-starvation, pushed outside the bounds of civilized life, driven to theft, and living in permanent fear of death because of protection. 'Life was a fearful thing in those days', a farmer's wife recalled from East Anglia. At night men would go and steal turnips for their children. Others remembered how men often went to work 'without a bit of bread... obliged to relieve the gnawings of hunger by eating some of the pig pease and horse beans he was threshing'. Diet reflected the barbarizing effects of tariffs on society. 'White bread, a symbol of civilized life for a century, was 'great luxury'. Mark Moore, 'a man apparently of eighty years of age' described rye bread so doughy and poor that 'when the people put their bread into a basin of milk it would sink to the bottom like lead'. Children were 'half-starved', reduced to eating swedes for breakfast. '[T]ea-drinking was out of the question', sugar a luxury. Except for some pork on Sundays, meat was beyond the means of the people.²⁵

The 'hungry forties' established a unifying collective storyline out of what were rather diverse, even contradictory individual recollections. Some, like

revolutionary wars until Repeal, Britain had lived in a 'state of semi-siege'. But Free Trade had not only freed 'the people' from decades of starvation. It brought to an end centuries of subordination. The Reformation had started a downward spiral of coercion leading all the way to the poor law, robbing the 'common people' of their freedom and 'their democratic organisations'. Free Trade was a triumph of biblical proportions, Villiers told readers: it delivered the people from 'an Egyptian bondage'.³¹

This story of the people's emancipation carried echoes of earlier radical narratives in which the poor overcame dispossession. It further elaborated the role of 'the people' in the progress of liberty, a central thread in popular Gladstonian liberalism.³² Earlier points of conflict and violence between middle-class Free Traders and working-class radicals were air-brushed from this popular liberal saga. Many Chartists and early trade unionists had viewed foreign trade as a source of evil leading to starvation in the midst of plenty.³³ Such alternative radical trajectories disappeared in the 'Hungry Forties'. Historical memory is as much about selective amnesia as about remembrance.

The influence of *The Hungry Forties* on political discourse was enormous. *The Hungry Forties* was issued in a 'people's edition' in 1905 and reprinted in 1906 for 6d; for the 1910 elections an abridged edition was sold for a mere 1d. By 1912 the 1d. edition had sold 110,000 copies, the bound version another 100,000. The 'liberality' of the publisher Fisher Unwin helped its mass circulation—the publisher and the Cobden Club gave away 150,000 copies in 1912–13.³⁴ Excerpts from the book were widely used in public speeches and lectures, sometimes in combination with lantern slides based on F. C. Gould's cartoon 'The Good Old Days'. At Reigate's Central Hall in October 1905, Mrs Freeman Thomas spoke, drawing directly on 'examples of poverty and suffering which were selected from Mrs. Cobden Unwin's book [and] strongly emphasised the arguments against Protection': the lecture was 'warmly applauded'.³⁵ Public lectures on 'Richard Cobden and his Times' and on the 'hungry forties' were a staple of the liberal lecture circuit, especially those organized by the Women's Liberal Association.³⁶ The Free Trade Union and the North of England Free Trade Association distributed leaflets showing the level of starvation, unemployment, and child labour in 'England under Protection'. They made selective use of Victorian histories of England, by the women's rights' supporter and popularizer of political economy Harriet Martineau and by the historian Spencer Walpole, and cited from speeches by the

the 88-year-old Lucy Buckland of Essex, did pinpoint the establishment of Free Trade as the time when 'the price of all things came down'.²⁶ Yet many memories dealt with the decade *after* the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, such as Edward Cook's recollection of a starvation diet of cabbage stalks. Other witnesses were not born until the mid-1840s or recalled how '[p]hysically and intellectually we dwelt next door to destitution' in the 1850s. The memorialization of hunger thus moved beyond the precise chronological marker of the repeal of the Corn Laws to make high prices and suffering more broadly synonymous with protection. The political opportunities from this stretching of the past were not lost on Free Traders. A party agent urged speakers to make the most of lantern slides showing 'the starvation prices of the old protectionist days. ... When I get to the time of the Crimean war [1853–6], I generally find that someone in the room remembers what they had to pay for the four pound loaf in those days.'²⁷

As a history of the conditions of the British people *The Hungry Forties* was a dubious enterprise. The cost of living had in fact declined between 1842 and 1846, before the repeal of the Corn Laws. The book primarily gathered memories from rural England, with hardly any from the south of England, Wales, and Scotland; Ireland, where there was famine, interestingly did not feature prominently either in the book or in the Edwardian Free Trade campaign more generally. Of course, some people went hungry, but overall, the 1840s were no worse than the previous decades or for that matter the 1850s–60s. In England, 1838–41 had been bad years, but they were a small dip in the overall improvement of consumption levels in the decades after 1821.²⁸ At the time, the leading Evangelical Free Trader Thomas Chalmers had in fact contrasted the Irish famine of 1845–7 with the 'jollity and abundance' in England where people enjoyed 'all sorts of luxurious and even riotous indulgence'.²⁹ In vain did Edwardian Tariff Reformers like the economic historian William Cunningham point out that the price of bread remained high after Repeal, during the Crimean war and into the early 1870s, and that the dramatic drop in prices thereafter had to do with the revolution in global shipping and transport, not with fiscal policy.³⁰

Whatever its failings as history, *The Hungry Forties* constructed a successful popular narrative of the past, in which Free Trade had liberated the British people from oppression and enslavement. In the concluding chapter the labourite F. J. Shaw, writing under the pseudonym Brougham Villiers, provided a master interpretation of radical progress. From the French

it needed to return to its former method of imperial union which had laid the foundations of its greatness.⁴⁰

In popular politics and discourse, however, Tariff Reform largely evacuated the past for the future. It was a future dystopia, a glimpse into an approaching abyss that inspired protectionist images and speeches. By projecting current problems into the future, they were made to look like systemic problems: today the loss of one industry, tomorrow an entire empire. Typical posters, for example, showed a sleeping British worker, behind whose back an immigrant was sneaking into the country, warning: 'It is not what you have now, but the question is: How long shall we keep it, and how much shall we keep of it.'⁴¹

The Tariff Reform campaign aligned protection with visions of the future. Protectionist modernity was represented by the motor car, symbol of a new era of speed and sensibility. Far from experiencing a 'sublime immobility', as some postmodernists have suggested, contemporaries reported on the intensely physical and sensory relationship with the new moving machine.⁴² Tariff Reformers used the modern car to mock the supposedly universal and timeless principles of Free Trade. New means of transport reflected the shift from the outdated political economy of Free Trade to cutting-edge protectionism. In one colourful Tariff Reform poster, Britannia's '1846 Free Trade coach' was overtaken by the automobile 'Protection', in which Uncle Sam, a German officer, and other foreigners were driving happily on the road to prosperity (Colour Plate I). 'It's rather lonely in here all by myself,' Britannia complains, 'but the others are bound to join me soon', a line mocking Cobden's prophecy in 1846 that all European countries would follow Britain within five years of the adoption of Free Trade. In the general election of December 1910, Conservatives, dressed as footmen, carried a sedan chair through the streets of Manchester with the message 'In Cobden's Days we went to the poll like this. Now we have to alter the pace.'⁴³ The first massive use of motor cars by Conservatives in the Edwardian elections, then, was not simply a way of getting voters to the poll, but part of a symbolic performance, representing modernity more generally.

Free Traders won the politics of time by successfully presenting the past as the predictor of the future. Memories of past hunger were reminders of collective suffering and heroic liberation, but they also suggested how fragile historical progress was. History might reverse itself at any moment. Pictures warned of Chamberlain sowing 'famine' or of a new Egyptian

Whig T. B. Macaulay and the Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell.³⁷ *The Daily News*, the leading liberal daily in terms of circulation, the radical *Reynolds's*, the *Westminster Gazette*, and liberal magazines and leaflets kept octogenarians' memories of hunger steadily in the public eye, aided by local newspapers and agents.³⁸

Free Traders never monopolized the past, but the intense and widely popularized version of a dark age of barbaric conditions under tariffs narrowed opportunities for Tariff Reformers considerably. A rare attempt to rival Free Traders' horrific images of the 'hungry forties' was J. W. Welsford's lantern slide lecture on the French Revolution, circulated by the Women's Unionist and Tariff Reform Association; Welsford died in 1909 after months of illness, unable to complete his study of *The Strength of England*, which told the history of England from Saxon times. His lecture on the 'Reign of Terror' illuminated the dangerous foreign origins of Free Trade with the help of 45 lantern slides bringing to light the rule of the Parisian mob in 1789, the execution of the King and the slaughter of workmen at Lyons in 1793. 'What I am going to show you to-night', audiences were told, 'is how Free Trade so weakened the French that Great Britain, in spite of her small population compared with that of France, was able to win at Trafalgar and Waterloo, and thus gain sea-power and world-empire.' Free Trade here emerged as the product of 'French Socialist madness', in contrast to the 'old British remedy of protecting the labour of the British poor... which made Britain great'. It led to 'predatory socialism', anarchy, and violence, in the process eroding national power.³⁹

W. J. Ashley, W. Cunningham, and W. A. S. Hewins were the respectable proponents of historical economics. Instead of the universal principles of the new science of economics, with its emphasis on individual motivation and demand and supply, these men understood the economy as the product of historical growth, inextricably intertwined with the evolution of political institutions, morals, and power. Rather than debating current prices, they turned to the rise and fall of nations for guidance. The decline of Holland in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular was a warning of what happened when strength was sacrificed for wealth. Just when Holland should have focused on production and protection it moved towards Free Trade. And was not British wealth itself the result of earlier state expansion and empire, rather than of market forces? The political lesson was simple: if Britain wanted to avoid decline

and starvation in early Victorian Britain alongside riots and suffering in present-day protectionist Germany.⁵⁰ At Great Grimsby, where Liberals defeated protectionists in the January 1910 election, the simple slogan was displayed 'Will you go back: Remember the Hungry Forties', next to a bust of Richard Cobden.⁵¹

This public retelling of a national hunger story arguably reinforced what recent psychologists have identified as 'recall bias'; that is, the retrospective distortion that takes place as people revise their recollections of the past in accordance with present concerns.⁵² It certainly was effective in containing the protectionist advance in what was potentially the most vulnerable segment of the electorate: labourers in agricultural districts. Agricultural labourers were a prime target of protectionists in late nineteenth-century Europe—a protected home market held out the promise of sustained employment and higher wages that could offset the higher cost of living that a tariff would bring. Protectionism in Germany was not a simple alliance between 'iron and rye', big industry and big landowners, but also had support from small farming communities.⁵³ In Britain, the collective memory of starvation, which was heavily biased towards memories from rural areas, inoculated labourers against protectionism. In a rural division like Suffolk North-East, for example, Conservatives were disheartened by the little progress they managed to make in the 1910 elections. A Conservative inquiry into the prospects of winning over agricultural labourers yielded an unambiguous response: 'We cannot get them to believe that Colonial Preference would ultimately benefit them.' The memory of their forefathers 'eating turnips' proved too strong. As one respondent summed up: rural labourers 'cannot and will not see Colonial Preference—[they] think "the Hungry Forties" will return'.⁵⁴

Civil Society

Free Trade created a unifying vision of the British past. For social movements fighting for inclusion and recognition, especially for the cooperatives and the radical and liberal women's movements, these stories took on a deeper significance: the 'hungry forties' became part of their understanding of their own heroic role in the unfolding of freedom. Their own growth and autonomy testified to the positive relationship between freedom of trade and civil society. Free Trade, they believed, had allowed social groups



Figure 1. Famine: the spectre of 'protection', bringing in its train slavery, war, conscription, and muddle. A radical cartoon from 1904.

plague with skeletons in the desert.⁴⁴ *Reynolds's News* turned *famine*, a grim snowscape with Death, wolves, and crows by the animal painter John Charles Dollman displayed at the Royal Academy in spring 1904, into a political allegory of 'the spirit of Toryism', with Death/Protection leading 'slavery', 'war', and 'conscription' (see Figure 1 above).⁴⁵ The most affluent and liberal market society in Europe mobilized an iconography of famine conventionally associated with an earlier 'moral economy', such as images of bleeding famine draped in sackcloth that women fighting for a fair price of bread had used a century before.⁴⁶ Again and again, Liberals and Radicals warned that Tariff Reform would be 'turning back the hand on the dial of civilisation', as the leading free-thinking Liberal J. M. Robertson put it.⁴⁷ Accounts of when the people 'starved under Protection' made audiences 'very fearful that history will repeat itself'.⁴⁸ Jane Cobden Unwin saw her oral history as an 'effective antidote to the raging, tearing campaign' of protectionists 'who would... bring England back to the times of the Hungry Forties'.⁴⁹

It is on this sense of reversibility of history that speeches and political drama played, such as when *A Message from the Forties* placed riots

expressed unease about collaboration with liberal bodies, such as the Cobden Club or the Free Trade Union. 'The Cobden Club stood for vested capitalist interests as well as Mr. Chamberlain', one cooperator argued at the 1904 congress.⁵⁹ Instead of celebrating progress under Free Trade, they should focus on the millions still living in poverty, unemployment, and overcrowding. In the past, cooperators had spoken out against the 'evils of competition', and the 'immoralities of greed' associated with the Free Trade motto of 'buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest'.⁶⁰ At the 1904 Co-operative Congress, the Revd Probert of west London warned against being drawn into a liberal choice between 'free trade' versus 'protection'. 'Why', he asked, 'need [there] be any excitement immediately Free Trade was mentioned?' Were not the many cooperators who were trade unionists also pursuing 'in principle Protection'?

These voices, however, were quickly drowned out in a mass mobilization in defence of Free Trade. The parliamentary committee endorsed cooperation with the Cobden Club, and even with the Unionist Free Food League. Leading cooperators, like Henry Vivian and J. C. Grey, also sat on Free Trade bodies and acted as brokers of collaboration with Harold Cox, the dynamic if controversial secretary of the Cobden Club. Cox's own experiments with cooperative farming made him a more acceptable go-between than the regular Liberal politician; he 'has been useful in keeping us in touch with the bodies cooperative which will not look at... anything akin to Liberal organization', even Lord Welby, the chairman of the Cobden Club and one of Cox's critics, acknowledged.⁶¹ Regional sections co-organized demonstrations and conferences in autumn 1903, from Cardiff to Newcastle. These regional meetings were attended by over 3,000 delegates from cooperative societies, representing a total of over 1.6 million members. Individual societies made their halls available to Free Trade meetings, contributed to printing costs, and helped circulate literature, most importantly the 'Working Class Leaders' National Protest Against Preferential Tariffs', signed by representatives of leading trade unions and labour organizations.

For the cooperative movement, the battle between Free Trade and Protection quickly acquired the proportions of a life-and-death struggle for its very autonomy and existence. This vision drew on the popular liberal alliance that since the 1860s had come to replace the earlier (frequently violent) antagonism between radicals and liberals during the Chartist era. Few personified this rapprochement better than George Holyoake.

to breathe and grow without interference by the state or oppression by privileged interests.

Such has been the dramatic decline of the cooperatives in Britain and most other European societies over the past half-century, that it is worth recalling just how strong and sizeable this movement once was. At the turn of the twentieth century, over 1.7 million Britons belonged to 1,439 non-profit retail cooperative societies. By the time of the First World War membership exceeded three million.⁵⁵ Membership was especially concentrated in the industrial north-west and north-east, and overwhelmingly from the better-off sections of the working classes. A Women's Cooperative Guild was founded in 1883 and, by the time of the 1906 election, could lay claim to being the largest independent women's organization. The English Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) ranked amongst the largest companies in the world; bigger than Lever's soap empire or the chemical giant Brunner Mond in terms of capital.⁵⁶ Most members joined the cooperative movement with a greater interest in the 'divi' or dividend, a kind of early customer loyalty scheme pioneered by the cooperatives, than in direct political activism. And formally the movement was non-partisan until the First World War, when it moved into alliance with Labour. Yet such formal definitions of political engagement can be misleading, for the cooperatives provided a world of everyday politics that would feed directly into the Free Trade revival.

The 'free breakfast table' was central to the cooperatives. In 1902 the Co-operative Wholesale Society paid £1.2 million on food duties, 16 per cent of its total turnover; almost £500,000 was paid on sugar duties alone.⁵⁷ It was not necessarily clear, however, how much energy members would devote to a political battle against the taxation of foodstuffs beyond formal declarations at annual conventions. When the Women's Cooperative Guild urged action against the proposed sugar duty in 1901, the parliamentary committee of the Co-operative Congress advised against it. An appeal to member societies to campaign against duties on corn and sugar in 1902 produced a depressing result—not even 50 of 1,500 societies even bothered to reply. 'It is evident', the committee concluded, 'that the majority of the societies took no action whatever in the matter.'⁵⁸

Chamberlain's Tariff Reform challenge provoked a very different response. The feverish activism it generated tells us as much about the cooperatives' ideal of civil society under Free Trade as about their suspicion, even hatred, of the charismatic Chamberlain. At first, some cooperators

wrote, that made possible the autonomy of social institutions, leading to the recognition that workers had 'rights which should be respected ... [and] interests which should be consulted'.⁶⁷

Free Trade, in short, had not only brought wealth: it had enlarged 'the domain of freedom', in the image frequently used by Lloyd George in the Edwardian campaign.⁶⁸ It became central to the identity and memory of the cooperative movement. The repeal of the Corn Laws represented the beginning of 'the progress of the people' when cooperatives, trade unions, and friendly societies began to cultivate social independence, solidarity, and trust. The 'hungry forties' turned into the success story of the cooperative movement.⁶⁹

Free Trade and civil society went hand in hand, in this view, because Free Trade secured distance between state and social groups or interests. Free Trade was linked to attacks on landed aristocrats and the capitalist 'trust monger'. The state was not expected to express or advance the ethos or welfare of the community. This was the job of self-governing social institutions. Holyoake put this view neatly in a formula widely repeated in the cooperative movement. Cooperation 'took no man's fortune, it sought no plunder ... it gave no trouble to statesmen ... it subverted no order ... it asked no favour, it kept no terms with the idle, and it would break no faith with the industrious. It meant self-help, self-dependence.⁷⁰ Instead of social war, it promoted toleration and trust. The growth of thrift organizations and working-class saving was seen as testifying to the success of Free Trade in helping the working classes help themselves.⁷¹

At a time when women (and a third of men) still lacked the national vote, Free Trade forged a link to democratic culture for those groups formally excluded from political life. At the Free Trade Hall in Manchester in November 1903, in what was claimed to be the 'biggest and best demonstration' ever held under its banner, Mrs Bury, the vice-president of the Women's Cooperative Guild and a tireless speaker for the Women's Free Trade Union, reminded a crowded audience that 'Cooperation and Free Trade started together, and they had jogged along successfully.⁷² Thanks to the non-interference of the state, social groups were able to develop their own institutions and acquire the democratic talents that prepared them for eventual citizenship.

The cooperator Rosalind Nash captured this democratic self-understanding in her defence of Free Trade from the perspective of the cooperative housewife. After stressing the tight budget of the poor and praising

Here was a man who recalled his memories of the First Reform Act of 1832 and the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 on platforms up and down the country until his death in 1906. Born in 1817, the son of a printer and horn-button maker, he was converted to atheism and Owenite socialism in the 1840s and became a leading Victorian exponent of freedom of thought, without interference from state or church. A prophet of self-help, Holyoake emerged as the most influential mouthpiece of cooperation and co-partnership. He was the quintessential radical liberal of his time, supporting electoral reform at home and republican nationalists like Garibaldi abroad; he collected pressed flowers from a garden where Garibaldi used to sit.⁶² Free Trade helped integrate radicals like Holyoake into popular liberalism. Tellingly, it was the Cobden Club that first elected him as an honorary member in 1884, a year when the National Liberal Club still chose to reject him, much to the distress of his supporter John Morley, the biographer of Cobden and Gladstone; he was finally elected in 1893.⁶³

Already in 1897, at the annual meeting of the Cobden Club, Holyoake hammered home that '[s]o far as his intercourse with the working classes was concerned', Free Trade was vulnerable. It needed to recruit new members and remind people, 'particularly the younger generation', of the dangers of protection.⁶⁴ When Chamberlain launched the tariff campaign in 1903, therefore, Holyoake, now President of the Democratic League, was a natural first point of call for Liberals keen to rally popular support. H. W. Massingham, a correspondent for the *Daily News* and the future editor of the liberal weekly *The Nation*, planned a volume on *Labour and Protection* and asked Holyoake for an account of 'the condition of the workmen in England before Free Trade and the changes you have observed since'. Rather than follow the brief and focus on 'the increase in the purchasing power of their wages', however, Holyoake produced a set piece of radical collective memory, which was also serialized in the radical press.⁶⁵

Holyoake's 'Days of Protection' offered a compressed history of civil society in which voluntary associations and freedom became directly linked to Repeal. Before Free Trade, workers were slaves, exploited by capitalism, with neither space for self-organization nor the opportunity to develop their self and autonomy. The rich flowering of clubs and associations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—by 1815 over 8 per cent of the entire population belonged to friendly societies, including several female friendly societies⁶⁶—was altogether erased in this story of Free Trade as the birthplace of democracy and social freedom. It was Free Trade, Holyoake

of the community as a whole, for example through a graduated income tax, land reform, or the public takeover of industries. In fact, for many new liberals the state ceased to have a separate existence: it was merely the political association of society and an instrument of the community.⁷⁴

Much has been made of the 'new liberal' contribution to social reform in the Edwardian period. Yet in the campaign for Free Trade—far more popular and extensive than agitation for particular social reforms—older radical and liberal visions continued to be dominant. True, in the battle over the people's budget in 1910, social reform was grafted onto Free Trade. Colourful posters showed Asquith holding out cheap sugar for children with one hand, and pensions to an elderly couple with the other.⁷⁵ But the main body of Free Trade did not stand on the foundations of the new liberalism. Instead of an organic fusion of state and society, popular Free Trade before the First World War continued to draw on an ideal of social groups in separation from the state. Even in the politics of social insurance, voluntary associations remained more important than older, more state-centred accounts allowed.

We Plead for the Women and Children

Free Trade offered a virtual space of political inclusion—a kind of free civic training course that prepared the excluded for full citizenship, in the interim protecting the interests of housewives by ruling out protectionist taxes. Yet not all women who rallied to Free Trade were happy with the role of citizen-in-waiting. Middle-class women had been an effective support group in the early Victorian Anti-Corn Law Leagues, organizing fund-raising bazaars and tea parties, and going from house to house to solicit subscriptions, in a manner similar to missionary societies; 2,000 women met at the Hanover Square rooms in London in 1845. They did much to provide the Anti-Corn Law League with the moral, humanitarian clout of a 'women's mission', above party and commercial interests.⁷⁶ Women would play a more prominent and assertive role in the Edwardian campaign, drawing on working-class as well as middle- and upper-class support, giving speeches and lectures and helping with grassroots organizing, canvassing, and the distribution of literature.

Rejecting the image of women's apolitical 'moral purity' that spread after the First Reform Act (1832), women now turned to their role as housewives and tax-paying consumers to claim recognition as citizens.

the cooperative bakeries and flour mills as 'the most formidable defensive works of the Free Trade position', she turned to questions of democracy. 'Cooperation', she wrote,

is in fact democracy in action, and apart from its economic achievements it forms a training-ground in the democratic qualities which the ballot-box demands—disinterestedness, forbearance, confidence, the capacity for responsible action and judgment. Can anything be more valuable to a democratic State than a movement which guarantees to a great mass of the people some share, at any rate, in every economic advance, and which amply repays its successive gains by political and municipal service, and by an extension of its missionary work amongst the poor, not to speak of the larger and happier range of life, and the gain to character which it brings to the individual?⁷⁷

Cooperatives brought women together from the isolation of their homes into public life. They were 'nurseries of democracy', to borrow de Tocqueville's famous image from *Democracy in America*.

The role of the cooperatives in strengthening community and moralizing capitalism had been a prominent thread amongst advanced liberals from John Stuart Mill to idealists and 'new liberals' active in the late Victorian and Edwardian period, like D. G. Ritchie and L. T. Hobhouse, who briefly served as secretary of the Free Trade Union. Drawing on evolutionary theories of society as an organic body, these progressives targeted individualism and *laissez-faire* liberalism as selfish, brutal, and out of step with 'modern' science, morality, and politics. Instead of seeing individual and state as opposing forces, this organic vision of society stressed their natural interdependence. Cooperatives and trade unions were crucial vehicles in the creation of a stronger sense of community and social ethics in which citizens became ever more aware of their duties to each other. Some, like Ritchie, merely believed that competition between individuals would give way to competition between ideas. But others, following Hobhouse, saw a more general shift from competitive individualism to a communal spirit. Suspicion and class antagonism would give way to social harmony: mutual help would become the basis of the economy. Such a progressive interpretation of society's evolution from a selfish competitive muddle to a higher, organic community based on cooperation, trust, and morality had implications for politics—and policies. The state was more than a night-watchman establishing safety and order. It could (indeed should) intervene in the economy to eliminate waste and advance the welfare and moral good

Women were more affected than other groups by tariff proposals. They were the 'women with the basket', as the Women's Cooperative Guild referred to its working-class members, but the argument extended to women of all classes. The campaign strategy of the Women's Liberal Association was at all meetings to 'call attention to the injustice of taxing the food of unenfranchised women'.⁷⁷ For many Liberal women, support for Free Trade went with support for women's suffrage, indeed demanded it. The Liberal party would help itself by giving women the vote, Caroline Trevelyan argued: women understood best how protectionist duties affected them.⁷⁸ Women were 'the housekeepers of the nation'.⁷⁹ They were 'the chancellors of the exchequer', Mrs Mond reminded the Women's National Liberal Association at their annual convention in 1909.⁸⁰ '[T]here never was an election which appealed so much to women because they were the great buyers of the nation', Lady Norman told an audience at South Wolverhampton during the January 1910 general election. Men 'were called the breadwinners, but what they won was not bread. It was pieces of gold and silver which it was the woman's duty to turn into food, warmth, clothing, and all that made of the happiness of a home'.⁸¹

The home and family life emerged as a symbolic battleground between Free Trade and Tariff Reform. More than one party could play on fears of the collapse of the home, however. Tariff Reformers produced a whole string of cartoons, posters, and plays that dwelled on the 'poverty, hunger, and dirt' that remained after sixty years of Free Trade, showing an exhausted woman, alone in a barely furnished room, stitching her absent husband's shirt by candlelight (see Figure 2).⁸²

Plays by women Tariff Reformers dramatized the plight of 'Miss Homeless', 'Miss Artizan', and 'Mrs. Farmer' whose husbands faced unemployment and emigration, and how they roused Britannia from the evil influence of a Germanic 'Miss Foreigner' who confesses her 'lofe' for 'der goot frient of mine, Miss Free Trade... who gifz me all der trade, so I get rich'.⁸³ Not surprisingly, given the expressly masculine culture of popular conservatism,⁸⁴ emasculation, the loss of a man's ability to be a man and provide for his family, was a prominent theme in protectionist propaganda. Posters showed the British workman, with half-broken shoes and a ragged jacket, the victim of cheap foreign imports, feeling the draught of the 'open door' that brought despair to his wife and children sitting crying around an empty kitchen table (Colour Plate II).⁸⁵ Tariff Reform would return the

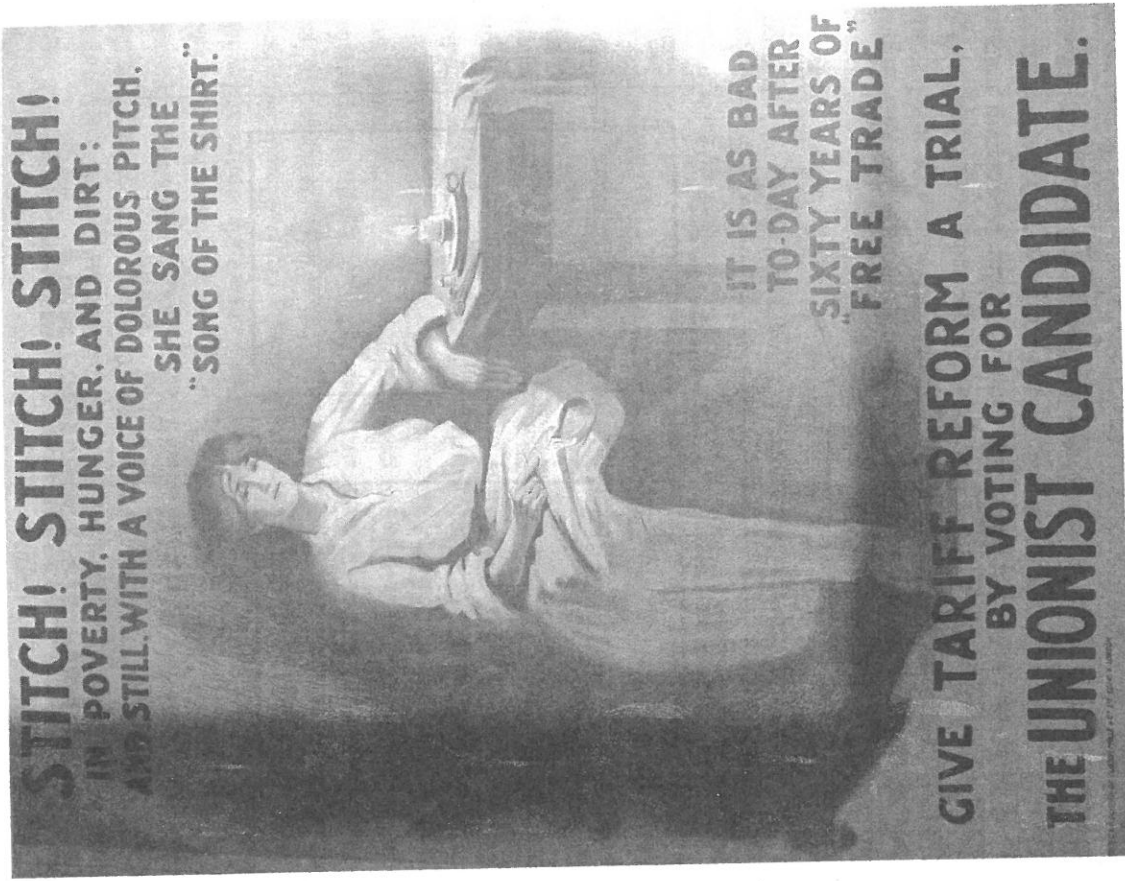
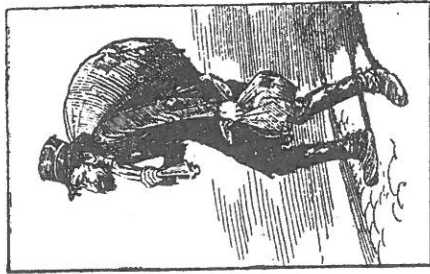
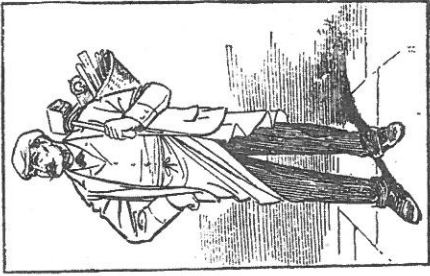


Figure 2. A Tariff Reform challenge to the myth of 'the hungry forties' and progress under Free Trade. A Conservative poster, c.1905.

TO THE WORKING MEN OF ENGLAND.



THE MAN WE IMPORT.



THE MAN WE EXPORT.

Figure 3. 'Free Trade undermines the nation's racial strength.' A protectionist cartoon, 1904.

slouching British worker to his upright position, complete with pipe, and cheerful wife and children seeing him off to work.⁸⁶ Protectionist warnings of the export of capital and labour, on the one hand, and the threat of an alien invasion of inferior human stock, on the other, inevitably put the male worker centre stage. The contrast between 'the man we import' and 'the man we export' exploited anti-Semitism while at the same time appealing to Britons' sense of dignity and charity (see Figure 3). 'You would always be ready to help a man in distress, whatever his nationality', read the accompanying text. But 'unfair foreign competition' led to unemployment, lower wages, and emigration.⁸⁷ Posters carried 'The Wife's Appeal' in bold red colours (Colour Plate III). Others urged voters to 'keep your manhood at home by supporting tariff reform', as John Bull helplessly watched ocean liners depart a Britain lying in 'Free Trade Ruin' for a modern and booming new world.

In the early Victorian period, roles had been reversed, and it had been the Anti-Corn Law League that had warned middle-class women about how tariffs tore apart their families. Tariffs 'make husbands anxious and careworn, [and] drive sons and brothers to Australia or Canada'. The condition of the domestic sphere had long served as a marker of civilization and Christian life. Stable family life was the bedrock of civil society, and references to the freedom of social life and organizations effortlessly connected with contrasting images of families driven to despair by tariffs. Could there be a worse threat to status and respectability than their daughters having to 'go out as governesses or dressmakers' or wives having to adopt 'those painful and pinching economies which so grievously interfere with the comfort of everyday domestic life'?⁸⁸

By the Edwardian period this earlier Free Trade concern for middle-class respectability was displaced by extreme and harrowing images of the poor living at the sharp end of civilization. 'Necessities', not comfort, moved to the centre, symbolized by the cheap loaf and the lump of sugar, and the security of these for the most vulnerable groups in society: poor women and children. Pale, emaciated mothers, with hollow cheeks, holding on to their babies and a crust of bread became a stock-in-trade of Free Trade representations of social injustice, sometimes contrasted directly with the rich capitalist trustmonger and the aristocrat, as in Robert Morley's depiction of the 'Hungry Forties' which won the first prize of the National Liberal Club (Colour Plate IV).⁸⁹ For Liberal activists, memories of the 'good old days of Protection' brought the suffering of mothers and children especially to life; 'as one read of the privations, we could hear the cries of the children for bread and the moans of the mothers at their inability to give it', Mrs Bury told a gathering of liberal women in 1904.⁹⁰

In the play 'Saturday Night', two families experienced 'a dream of tariff reform'—a 'clever and entertaining' play in one act which was 'much appreciated by the audience' after the regular series of speeches and songs. Gone was the comfortable artisan's home, with tea and cake on the table, and cheerful children buzzing about. Instead Jane, the mason's wife, was 'plainly dressed and careworn', with an empty purse, unable to buy new boots for her children. Tariffs posed a direct threat to marriage and family life. Her friends, George and Milly, a haberdasher and dressmaker, in love and prospering under Free Trade, turned sad and struggling under Tariff Reform. The increase in the price of food meant customers had less money

interviewed surviving Edwardians. These interviews give a sense of the impact Free Trade had on children, on their excitement at election times, their participation in political life, and the mark Free Trade left on their memories. Elizabeth Eade was about ten years of age at the time, the fourth of seven children in a poor family in Oxfordshire. 'I was a biggish school girl', she recalled seventy years later. She wanted to know what 'free trade and protection... was all about and some girl at school said she was rather down on the Tories because they could afford food, you see, good food. Well she said for us poor people, she said, it's too expensive, and if we have free trade we shall get our currants and sultanas cheaper.'⁹⁹ The two girls raced all the way to Hook Norton to get the election result, shouting as loud as they could.

To tax food would push the people out of civilization into barbarism and social anarchy. Free Traders were convinced that the corn duty had led to a rise in vagrancy and crimes against property—a rather simplistic and problematic correlation, and strongly rejected at the time by Tariff Reform experts, like the economist W. J. Ashley.¹⁰⁰ However exaggerated, what mattered was that Free Traders held a strong, even obsessive view that a duty, however moderate, would unravel the fabric of society. Protection undermined the very basis of family life, morality, and civil society. Biblical references and Christian prayers, especially 'Our Father' and 'The Sermon on the Mount', resonated with Anglicans and nonconformists alike. As a moral rather than a party political issue, Free Trade thus continued to tap into a hinterland of support. The Bishop of Lincoln readily joined the Free Trade Union even though it was all but Liberal in name. 'I am resolved not to join any society or union that avows political party aims,' he stressed, 'but I feel bound to declare myself on questions of moral and social importance ... [and it was] morally and socially wrong to tax the bread of the poor.'¹⁰¹

The Purity of Politics

Private interests, public benefits—from Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* in the early eighteenth century to the present day, one liberal tradition has argued that the invisible hand of the market will generate public benefits from private interests, whatever a person's motivation. The defence of Free Trade in the pre-war years was founded on a different world view, one in which individual and public morality reinforced each other. Free Trade, in

to spend on collars and lace in George's shop. Their marriage plans lay in ruins.⁹¹

All children would be the victims of Tariff Reform, the better-off as well as the very poor. One colourful Free Trade poster showed Conservatives waiting in ambush to attack neatly dressed Little Red Riding Hood and tax her shoes, clothes, and bread (Colour Plate V). But especially Conservatives wanted to tax one of the few pleasures the poor could afford, a leader in *Reynolds's* warned: 'the slum child is to have the treacle upon his bread taxed'.⁹² Liberals had abolished the sugar duty in 1875. By the time the Conservatives restored the sugar duty in 1901, Britons consumed an extraordinary 90 lb. per head per year—three times more than the French or Germans. The consuming interest included the sugar-consuming industries in the confectionery trade. Sugar had become a democratic necessity, from the cradle to the grave. It was an 'excellent nutritive article of diet' and a 'most valuable substitute' especially for families who could not afford milk.⁹³ It is the first joy of the infant and the last comfort of the aged, opponents of the sugar tax emphasized.⁹⁴ In 'The Morning After', a typical liberal leaflet, Mrs Bull turned to John Bull decrying the suffering of children at the rise in the prices of sweets. Other images put Conservatives' lack of care for orphans squarely next to their threat to raise the tax on sugar further.⁹⁵

At a time of lively concern about national fitness and undernourished children, Free Trade intersected with a more general liberal project seeking to reform and discipline the lives of families and children, by providing school meals and maternal care more generally. 'Poverty' had become ever more visible and intriguing as a project of identity for social reformers in the late Victorian period. It offered a new form of philanthropic hedonism, even an outlet for suppressed sexual desires. Charity was 'a kind of passion', the American novelist Henry James aptly put it.⁹⁶ Here was a society which saw the poor as an exotic tribe living at the margins of civilization or altogether beyond it. Countless stories and inquiries into slum life produced 'harrowing pictures of nearly nude folk, young and old', whose very poverty and shame kept them out of public life.⁹⁷ 'Who that has seen the starved children of East London, and think of the 100,000 of them who go hungry to morning school ... [could] juggle himself into thinking that taxing is legitimate trading', asked one Liberal.⁹⁸

These anxieties captured the imagination of children as well as adult investigators and reformers. In the early 1970s, an oral history project

Whatever the particular differences in electoral constitution and political system, there was soul-searching across Europe and America about the changing nature of politics in a modern age marked by ever more urban, industrializing, and mobile societies. Was the Anglo-Saxon liberal model of politics compatible with modern mass democracy? To some, the strengthening of party organization inevitably meant the domination of the elected over the electors—what the German sociologist Robert Michels called the ‘iron law of oligarchy’. To the leading British Liberal and historian James Bryce, parties were necessary evils that enabled the representation of new social groups and interests. Moisei Ostrogorski, a Russian who had observed political trends in Britain and the United States first hand in the 1880s and 1890s, produced what remains the most famous account of the ‘dwindling of individuality and the growth of formalism in political life’. People were released into a state of democracy, only to immediately become slaves, manipulated by the caucus, party bosses, wirepullers, and mass agitators. The middle class was:

too faint-hearted to face the masses and it preferred to circumvent them by devices of management. Withholding from them the plain truth and offering them only the bait of gratification of self-love and vanity, it enervated and disgusted a good many of the best set to such an extent as to fling them into the sectarian but honest fanaticism of the Independent Labour parties, into the wild ideas of Utopiamongers and collectivist agitators.¹⁰⁷

The liberal politics of reason, it seemed, was falling victim to a mix of fanaticism and apathy.

Not everyone, of course, agreed with these pessimistic accounts. Liberal public intellectuals like Graham Wallas rejected the assumption that there ever had been such a thing as rational individuals making for rational democracy, or that people in modernity merged subconsciously into a herd, easily manipulated by leaders, as Gustave Le Bon had suggested in his theory of mass psychology. Parties generated emotions and loyalties, Wallas argued. Politics would be better off recognizing the emotional side of human nature, instead of pursuing outdated notions of ‘free reason’.¹⁰⁸

Chamberlain and Tariff Reform became a lightning rod for these growing fears about the collapse of public life. John Burns, President of the Local Government Board in the Liberal government and the first working man ever to attain cabinet rank, had a ‘serious talk’ with

this view, secured boundaries between the private and the public. It kept the arm of the state out of private homes. ‘Stop Thief!’, a Liberal postcard exclaimed, as the hand of Tariff Reform reached through the window to ‘rob’ the family cupboard (Colour Plate VI).¹⁰² Free Trade likewise insulated government against private interests and preserved ‘the purity of politics’. For A. V. Dicey, the leading constitutional expert of the period, ‘the worst danger of Protection’ was precisely that it would lead to ‘the confusion between public interest and private interest’.¹⁰³ Free Trade held out a mutually convenient if idealized concordat: politics kept out of business, and business kept out of politics.

In an abstract world, it might be possible to conceive of some special circumstances in which a ‘perfectly wise Government’ might use a tariff to some public benefit, but in the real world tariffs always corrupted politics.¹⁰⁴ It was this conception of politics, as much as trade theory, that brought out a group of eminent economists, including A. C. Pigou, Edwin Cannan, and F. Y. Edgworth, to warn the public in August 1903 of the ‘evils which Protection brings in its train—the loss of purity in politics, the unfair advantage given to those who wield the powers of jobbery and corruption, and the growth of “sinister interest”’.¹⁰⁵

But Free Trade did more than avoid the corrupting influence of tariffs. Its unselfishness and impartiality actively fostered private and public morality. A ‘nation’s greatness does not depend upon its wealth,’ Mrs Bury told liberal women, ‘but upon the healthy bodies, sound minds, and pure morals of its people’. Free Trade had done much to elevate these, making ‘English men and women ... proud of our politics and their purity as compared with other nations’.¹⁰⁶

The tariff challenge hit a deep nerve in a political system in flux. The electorate had dramatically expanded following the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts to include most urban and rural workers. More than two-thirds of all men now had the vote. Older parties, like the Liberals and Conservatives, moved towards greater centralization, giving birth to the ‘caucus’; the National Liberal Federation was born in 1877. New parties, like the Labour party, emerged on the horizon. Media, organization, and finance—all these forces assumed increasing importance in political life. Although the grip of central party organizations on localities was far from complete, their growing strength certainly fuelled anxieties.

Gardiner of the liberal *Daily News* in 1909. He lamented the 'vulgarising of public life, Americanising of Peers, and the materialising of politics'.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, for older Conservatives, like Hugh Cecil, it was not the particular issue but Tariff Reformers' 'whole attitude ... towards politics which is intolerable'—the sensationalism, the showmanship, their disregard for local constituencies.¹¹⁰ Not until Margaret Thatcher would a British politician again attract such an extreme mix of enthusiasm and visceral hatred as Joseph Chamberlain, the energetic and outspoken leader of the Liberal Unionists. Chamberlain's rise from metal manufacturer to Birmingham mayor to colonial secretary symbolized a new style of politics. In an age of bearded radicals, he introduced a clean-shaven and youthful look. And, from his home in Birmingham he created a personal organizational base and mass following. The subject of unprecedented media exposure, Chamberlain became a celebrity in an expanding political mass market, a phenomenon well reflected in the hundreds of thousands of Edwardian picture postcards bearing his trademark image, wearing a monocle and button-hole orchid.

To his supporters, 'good ol' Joe' was the greatest prime minister Britain never had. To his enemies he was the worst example of that dangerous new specimen, the demagogue and megalomaniac. Chamberlain had been with the Gladstonian Liberal Party until he broke away over proposed Home Rule for Ireland in 1886. He went on to develop his own Liberal Unionist power base and entered into coalition with the Conservatives, leaving deep scars and an image of untrustworthiness. He was a 'fanatical charlatan', observed the young John Maynard Keynes, who was baptized into public politics during the fiscal controversy as secretary of the Cambridge Free Trade Association.¹¹¹ The Liberal Robert Spencer was 'really appalled' by the 'awful untruths ... and vulgarity of the tone of J. Chamberlain's speeches' and worried about 'the degradation of public life'.¹¹² Chamberlain's whole style of politics lowered the standard of life—a more deadly evil ... even than jingoism itself', Campbell-Bannerman felt, because it was 'more chronic in its effect'.¹¹³ Whether in his earlier radical land reform programme of 'three acres and a cow', his annexation of gold fields in South Africa, or now with his promise of more work under Tariff Reform, it was always the same with Chamberlain: he 'plays up to the vulgarity and cupidity and other ignoble passions ...; and he uses the foolishness of the fool and the vices of the vicious to overwhelm the sane and wise and sober'.¹¹⁴

His business background did not help. Not only was he seen as an upstart from the provinces, but many suspected that a new business style was invading politics. Writing at the height of the Boer war, Shaw Lefevre, who could look back on a long string of ministerial positions in Liberal governments since the late 1860s, thought that Chamberlain 'has shown himself totally unfit for the higher spheres of politics. He thought he could carry on the game in the same manner as that by which he succeeded in his screw business by bluffing his competitors in trade and establishing a monopoly. There ought to be no mincing of words with regard to him'.¹¹⁵

Chamberlain's adoption of Tariff Reform on the heels of the Boer war confirmed a longstanding radical analysis of the causal connection between war, protectionism, and oligarchy. The pursuit of war led to higher taxes which elites off-loaded onto the people. Protectionism and imperialism were the natural reflexes of the party of reaction and monopoly. This radical diagnosis had been famously updated by the journalist J. A. Hobson in his *Imperialism* in 1902, where he exposed the collaboration between financial interests, jingoist press, and imperialist policy leading to the Boer war. At the time Chamberlain was widely (and rightly) suspected of having given Cecil Rhodes' men a base from which to launch the invasion that started the war in the Transvaal in 1895. Now, his Tariff Reform crusade appeared the automatic domestic follow-up to imperialist adventures abroad. The combined offer of protection and old age pensions mixed jingoism with bribery. Harold Cox spoke for all Free Traders when he warned that Tariff Reform would replace honest public debate with the 'underhand machinations of secret agents corrupting the electorate by lying promises and debauching the constituencies with shameless bribes'.¹¹⁶ Chamberlain, in short, threatened to turn the noble art of politics into a ruthless scramble for class and socio-economic advantage.

Tariff Reform also challenged the balance of powers between executive and the House of Commons by moving control over matters of taxation (such as bargaining tariffs) from the lower house to the government. It would be wrong, however, to see Chamberlain's failure to rally more support within the state or in Balfour's cabinet in 1903 as a simple clash between visions of a strong protectionist state and a weak Free Trade state. Rather, it was a conflict between different conceptions of what a strong state was. At one end was the Treasury, with its Gladstonian view of Free Trade and balanced budgets. For its leading officials, the Treasury was

it was eventually only carried by 'something approaching a Parliamentary coup d'État'.¹²¹

In the final analysis, it was the protection of special interests that created an unbridgeable gulf between Chamberlain's Tariff Reform and Lansdowne and the Balfour brothers. The old Free Trade doctrine needed to go, Lansdowne agreed. 'We want to make terms with foreign countries, to meet our colonies, so far as circumstances permit us, and to tap new sources of revenue. But this does not mean a high all round tariff, and an attempt to outbid the radicals by using the proceeds of the new taxes to corrupt the working classes.'¹²² It proved impossible to square the circle between industrial protection and considerations of social equity and state legitimacy. In November 1905, one month before resigning, Arthur Balfour once more spelled out why. Even if it raised revenue, an industrial tariff would advantage manufacturers at the expense of, for example, agricultural customers. Of course, government could use the proceeds of the tariff to relieve their rates, but this was going 'very near to Joe's methods of bribing each class of the community in turn'.¹²³ He would have no truck with it.

The identification of Free Trade with the purity of politics was linked to a more general moral crusade against wealth and selfishness. Such has been the association of free trade policies with materialism and corporate interests in recent decades, that Edwardian Free Traders' ambivalent even anti-materialist self-understanding about wealth may be surprising. 'We have in all things three great enemies', according to the Liberal leader Campbell-Bannerman: '(1) devotion to material prosperity, national and individual; (2) love of sport and gambling in all forms; (3) apathy.'¹²⁴ Protectionism would exacerbate all three—appealing to people's selfish interests, inserting a kind of gambling spirit into matters of national interest through tariff bargaining, and thus accelerating a disengagement from public life.

In the battle with Chamberlain, Free Traders managed to occupy the moral high ground, distancing themselves from an association with selfish materialism that became stuck to protectionists instead. Chamberlain's tariff proposals were a 'wholesale ... and insidious appeal to human selfishness', the rising Welsh Radical star Lloyd George told the New Reform Club to thundering applause in 1904. 'Mr. Chamberlain proposed to reorganise society on a principle of universal loot.' He was fomenting 'that spirit of rapacity which seemed to possess the age ... for electioneering purposes. ... Mr Chamberlain's rallying cry was: "Down with freedom! Long live King Greed!"'¹²⁵ When the People's League Against Protection was founded in

the guardian of a state whose strength derived from its legitimacy in the public eye as fair, equitable, and efficient. If it limited state power, Free Trade also ensured that it was as effective as possible, by preventing private interests from hijacking the state, limiting the room for corruption, and ensuring people paid their taxes. Free Trade, in this view, was essential to the trust between governors and governed. A surplus was as dangerous as a deficit, creating a 'great temptation to wasteful expenditure'.¹¹⁷ The cardinal rule was that the sole purpose of taxation should be to raise revenue. Any other taxes would create an avalanche of interest groups demanding more and more from the state. Where the Treasury supported new taxation, as it initially did with the corn duty of 1902, it was in part as an instrument of moral discipline: people needed to feel the cost of war.¹¹⁸ Once Chamberlain proposed to extend the corn duty into a system of colonial preference, the Treasury dug its heels in, and successfully pressed for the removal of the duty.

Nor did Tariff Reform find much support among groups in government and Whitehall keen to expand the scope and power of the state. For Arthur Balfour, the Prime Minister, the state was something bigger than the sum of individuals living at any given time. The state's interest transcended the creation of wealth and was no longer adequately served by a dogmatic adherence to the never-changing principles of Free Trade.¹¹⁹ At the Foreign Office and the Board of Trade, Lord Lansdowne and Gerald Balfour, the Prime Minister's brother, also looked favourably on fiscal reform, and continued to do so after Chamberlain had resigned. A moderate revenue duty promised to return to government the power and freedom to tax for purposes other than that of raising revenue. It could give the executive greater elbow room in foreign and commercial affairs, allowing for the threat of retaliation or anti-dumping measures. Unlike senior colleagues at the Treasury, the heads of Customs beavered away with plans to broaden the base of taxation by £13 million, with a small food tax to make Britain more self-sufficient and offer some colonial preference, and a tax on silk as a democratic luxury tax.¹²⁰

The problem with Chamberlain's scheme was that it threatened to weaken, not strengthen the government. A general tariff would mean a House of Commons full of sectional interests and infighting. Government would be deluged by lobbies and find it hard to push through its own programme. It had cost the German *Reichstag* a whole session to pass their new tariff in 1904, Gerald Balfour reminded colleagues, and even then

Direct contrasts with the materialist excess and decline of public life in protectionist America reinforced this moral message. Popular radicals joined liberal industrialists to decry the evil of American wealth. Chamberlain's wife Mary was American and on her mother's side connected to the Boston Brahmin Peabody family and Morgan, the bankers. America was proof of the unbridled materialism that naturally followed on tariffs. The real profits and social inequality in a Free Trade system faded from view. So did Americans' higher standard of living.

Free Trade has often been seen as a sharp break from an older culture, replacing a 'moral economy' with the 'modern' economics of the market.¹³² In fact, it gave older moral traditions a new lease of life. Free Traders invoked notions of just profits. The problem with Tariff Reformers was that they were not satisfied with 'ordinary profits', Lloyd George told a crowd in Perth, Scotland, in 1904: 'they wish to become millionaires'.¹³³ The American trustmongers, the Rockefellers and Carnegies, now took their place alongside the earlier villains, the aristocratic landowners. Exploitation and inequality followed from bad fiscal policies—not commerce as such. America became a showcase for the new kind of 'financial politics' run by organized capitalist interest groups. The deterioration of public morality and government followed on trusts and rings, which themselves were the automatic products of tariffs. A few Free Traders, like J. A. Hobson, warned against simply tracing new forms of capitalist organization back to tariff policies and pointed out that they were part of a more general shift from competition to combination. In the case of trusts like the Standard Oil Co. or the Carnegie Steel Co., for example, it was railroads that had enabled financiers to extend their control over transport and industries.¹³⁴ But these were isolated voices, muted by a large chorus proclaiming tariffs as 'the Mother of Trusts' and 'Foster-Mother of Monopoly'.¹³⁵

Cartoons and lantern slides in the general elections showed John Bull, blindfolded, walking the plank 'Protection', while 'Monopoly' sharks circled underneath.¹³⁶ Leaflets provided voters with a 'Voice from America', with short reports from American governors and the assurance 'Free Trade Means Freedom from Trusts'—a position shared by Chamberlain's brother, Arthur, much to the embarrassment of Tariff Reformers.¹³⁷ St Loe Strachey, the editor of the *Spectator*, received regular updates from Earl Grey in Canada about how protection had tainted the Republican party in the United States with 'the arrogant ostentation of great wealth and with shameless political corruption'.¹³⁸ There was nothing in the Great Republic that appealed to

December 1903, the democratic air of Free Trade was typically contrasted with the type of 'Park-lane millionaires' and 'wire-pullers of Trusts' who supported tariff reform.¹²⁶

Free Trade, by contrast, acted as a benign moderating force on the potential excesses of materialism in a commercial society. It promoted thrift, independence, and civic-mindedness. Competitiveness raised the moral properties of independent citizens as well as the national income. 'Competition', Free Traders explained, 'acts on our selfishness, like the automatic governor of the steam engine acts on the steam, regulating it to the ever changing needs of the society. Remove your governor (competition) and the steam (selfishness) soon jars your body politic to pieces'.¹²⁷ Unregulated, selfishness was 'the motive power of the rave'. Tariffs therefore increased the 'robber or barbaric element' in societies. They were like opium, leading to addiction and dependence amongst depressed industries and the poor. They created a nation of beggars, according to Lloyd George. 'The real policy was to take him by the hand, pull him up, give him freedom, let him walk straight and erect, make him a man and not a beggar'.¹²⁸ Tariffs would also cultivate a hedonistic lifestyle, an emotive issue for many, like the Conservative Robert Cecil who saw 'nocturnal amusements' and 'idleness' as far greater national dangers than foreign competition.¹²⁹

At the international level, too, Free Trade was believed to promote harmony, not greed and exploitation. Echoing eighteenth-century notions of the sweet *douceur* of commerce, Free Traders argued that trade wore down prejudice and animosity, and induced more peaceful, civil behaviour. Whereas enlightenment thinkers had mainly focused on the merchant as a peaceful man spreading an atmosphere of civil intercourse, Liberals now saw civilizing influences at work in an entire social system. Living in a Free Trade society made people more peaceful and other-regarding both at home and abroad. Early Victorian campaigners against the Corn Laws had presented the earth as 'diversified by an Almighty hand, each soil hath its productions, every land its capabilities', so that people traded with each other.¹³⁰ Edwardians continued to dwell on Britons' special role in this divine plan. Their holy mission, Lloyd George told a great demonstration at Aberdeen in 1903, was 'to open up through our national market-place a path for the nations to tread to the Temple of Concord'. Chamberlain's tariff proposals, by contrast, were 'a stirring of the evil passions', exciting 'international jealousy, rage, envy, anger, greed'.¹³¹

Hugh Bell. 'I do not desire to have a crop of millionaires ... I do not wish for a population striving for wealth at any cost', this not exactly poor Free Trader announced.¹³⁹

The New Yorker Franklin Pierce offered a gripping story of the evil influence of American tariffs at the international Free Trade Congress in London in August 1908. Afterwards he toured Unionist Free Trade clubs. Free Traders made much of his account of how American-tariff laws had led to a proliferation of trusts, 'parasites', and corruption. Lord Cromer wished Pierce's work would be read by everyone in the country, and it was widely quoted in popular propaganda. Because of tariffs, the 'plainer virtues'—thrift, rectitude, industry—had gone out of fashion, Pierce argued. A 'feverish, speculative, unscrupulous spirit' was sapping young American manhood. Selfish interests had taken hold of government.¹⁴⁰ For Strachey, America was proof of the 'deadly perils of the temptations of materialism'.¹⁴¹

There was nothing extraordinary as such about bashing America's materialism, as the global career of anti-Americanism in the twentieth century would show again and again. What is interesting is that this critique came not from a socialist or nationalist corner, nor from the margins of the world economy, but from what was the dominant Empire and centre of the global economy. The critique of American capitalism provided Free Trade with a human face. It disguised its own role in the creation of vast fortunes, social inequality, and imperial exploitation. It made it possible for the social reformer and supporter of the suffragettes Pethick Lawrence to attack Tariff Reform as part of a larger scheme to 'place free men and women more surely under the heel of capitalist domination'.¹⁴² Adding a colonial voice, Bhupendranath Basu, on his way to become president of the Indian National Congress, congratulated Free Traders at the annual Cobden Club dinner in 1911 for not having forgotten India: 'We who don't belong to the capitalist class don't want India to be exploited as America is being exploited by its great capitalists.'¹⁴³ This was an extraordinary endorsement coming from a colony which had seen its textile industry destroyed by Free Trade.

When it came to stories of American wealth and corruption, Unionist Free Traders were a particularly receptive audience. After resigning from Balfour's government in the autumn of 1903, the Duke of Devonshire and Lord Balfour of Burleigh led a small group of Unionists in the battle against tariffs—although 'leading' may give an unduly active impression

of years of indecision, infighting, and muted action. The Unionist Free Trade Club was a gentleman's club in an age of increasingly heated mass politics—and most members were keen to keep it that way. What this small group lacked in popular support and institutional muscle, however, it more than made up for with a passionate, dogmatic conviction about the general decay of politics. The achievements of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 were under threat and could only be defended by independent men, like themselves, whose moderation placed them above party and self-interest. In parliamentary speeches and articles Arthur Elliot, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, railed against the declining character of MPs and the fall in standards and procedures in the House of Commons.¹⁴⁴

For Lord Cromer, just back from Egypt as Proconsul, protectionism would mean the 'probable democratisation of our public life', the rule of the mob and private interests.¹⁴⁵ Members of the old elite, like Robert Cecil, prided themselves on representing a constituency—not a party. The strategy of Tariff Reform confederates to target and oust such moderate men from their constituencies struck at 'the root of all electoral independence'. It was 'unconstitutional', a denial of the very principles on which 'true representation' and parliamentary sovereignty were based—Cromer denounced confederates as 'political Jack the Rippers' at the Unionist Free Trade Club in 1909.¹⁴⁶ Instead of being an exponent of the national will, providing a space for deliberative reason among men of 'high character', Parliament was becoming a mere mechanical instrument for advancing Cabinet policy and private interests. The death in 1907 of Viscount Goschen, the former Chancellor of the Exchequer (1887–92) and a staunch defender of *laissez-faire* in the battle against democracy and egalitarianism, produced an outpouring of nostalgia for a golden age when morality, truth, and loyalty to an idealized public kept self-interest and party in check. Some wondered openly whether even the absolutist Charles I or James II ever wielded as much power as the Liberal and Conservative parties.¹⁴⁷

Such an idealized vision of parliamentary politics initially worked in favour of Free Trade. Once Liberals returned to power and began to marry social reform and progressive taxation to freedom of trade in 1909–11, however, this fixation with political purity was easily turned against the Free Trade government. Unionist Free Traders split into those to whom the defeat of tariffs remained the uppermost task, and a vocal camp to

Citizen—Consumers

Public morality, social justice, civic-mindedness—it was the 'consumer' who held moral and material concerns together. For contemporaries, consumers came to embody the public interest. Free Trade advanced into the first bill of consumer rights in history. It protected consumers against vested interests and unfair taxation. By giving attention to the consumer as a civic person as well as a customer, the defence of Free Trade planted 'the consumer' solidly on the map of modern politics. Consumers acquired a sense of belonging to a shared interest whose voice should be heard and whose interests should receive public recognition. As the campaign developed, there was a growing defence of the consumer as a universal, human interest. 'Tariff Reform... always takes it for granted that the consumer is a person who does not count', an article on 'the common sense of Free Trade' put it in the spring of 1910: 'We are all consumers; we have, most of us, dependent upon us other consumers who cannot be producers—women and children.' Tariff Reform might promise benefits to 'us [as] producers' but essentially this would always also be 'at the expense of ourselves as consumers and of our families'.¹⁵²

Of course, humans have consumed goods and resources throughout history. But this does not mean they have naturally tended to see themselves (or others) as 'consumers', with a shared sense of rights and interests. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed an unprecedented expansion of commercial life, goods, luxuries and shopping in western Europe and North America, as well as in parts of Asia. People shopped and debated the impact of luxury on public life. Adam Smith highlighted the place of consumption—'the sole end of all production'—in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776), but he and the next few generations of economists had surprisingly little to say about the consumer. Merchants and commerce, industrialists and agriculture were the focus of attention in the nineteenth century. Where consumers featured at all, they were treated as sectional interests, subordinate to the larger, more national interests of producers and landowners, and condemned for their wasteful, unproductive behaviour. A rare consideration of consumers in the 1820s, by the early cooperator William Thompson, neatly captured their low reputation: 'The consumer (monkey, king or bishop) devours the fruits without return.'¹⁵³

In the mid- and late Victorian era, cities like London were booming centres of consumption, from the dance platform at the Cremorne Gardens

whom the greater evil was the state 'socialism' of the Liberal government. The defence of liberty now required the sacrifice of a Liberal Free Trade ministry which, with its policies of old age pensions and unemployment benefits, had turned out to be worse than Tariff Reform. It had become imperative to get 'rid of this Lloyd George and Winston [Churchill]-ridden Government', Strachey in 1909 told Harold Cox, who had decided to stand as an independent: 'Nothing will ever persuade me that predatory socialism plus demagoguery of the most reckless and unscrupulous description are not worse than tariff reform.' There were still 'a great many ditches and hedges and other obstacles to be got over before we have Protection' but the rot and 'demoralisation' spread by growing state expenditure and intervention were already seeping in.¹⁴⁸ Social reform was undermining Free Trade and its benign effect on personal and public morals. There would be a vicious cycle of rising taxes and escalating demands on the state by all sorts of groups and interests which, sooner or later, would kill Free Trade itself. The Liberal government was creating a dangerous culture of dependence, threatening a sense of individuals' duty to themselves and to the state. Pauperism should be looked upon as a crime, not as a problem deserving public support, Dicey wrote in 1910: it amounted to a 'failure to perform one's full duty to the State'.¹⁴⁹ For men like Cox, the importance of self-reliance was such that it developed after the war into support for eugenic schemes of sterilizing 'the unfit'; artisans and the middle classes were lowering their birth rate while the poor were rapidly increasing, leaving the slum child a burden on the rest of society and weakening the nation.¹⁵⁰

Politically, this rear-guard campaign by champions of individual liberty was a solid failure. Neither was the Liberal government ousted, nor was the long-term trend of state expansion and welfarism halted. If the 1906 election had already reduced the 48-strong contingent of Unionist Free Traders to a mere 16, the January 1910 election annihilated them.¹⁵¹ Only Hugh Cecil hung on for Oxford University, unopposed. Cox came bottom in Preston, never to return to Parliament. Free Fooders who survived (like Peel or Bentinck) did so by swallowing hard and standing as Tariff Reformers. The Unionist Free Trade Club dissolved. But intellectually, this group had done much to crystallize a libertarian definition of Free Trade, linked to a minimalist state, that would become its dominant meaning as the twentieth century went on.

and new department stores in the West End, such as Selfridges and Whiteleys, to the worlds of mass leisure and temptation in music halls. These sites did much to open up public spaces for women, and in this sense enlarged the sphere of citizenship.¹⁵⁴ At the same time, economists, like Jevons and Marshall, put the maximizing behaviour of 'rational' individual consumers at the centre of economic analysis. The so-called 'marginal revolution' laid the foundations for liberal economics as we know it, with a mathematical and psychological focus on measuring 'the utility'—the pleasure and pain—of individual choices.

Significantly, however, it was neither the hedonistic shopper nor the rational economic individual who would drive the growing appeal of the consumer in public discourse. Rather, 'the consumer' matured in the political realm over questions of ethics, community, and citizenship. Boycotts of slave-grown sugar in the early nineteenth century explicitly appealed to consumers' human sensibility and social responsibility. Consumers also began to flex their muscle in local battles over taxes and representation in the mid- and late-Victorian period, especially in fights over gas and water which gave rise to the first consumer defence leagues.¹⁵⁵

The achievement of Free Trade was to invent a much more generalized language of the consumer as a public, national interest. The consumer became tied to the citizen, providing Liberal politics with a new base of support in an age of mass democratic politics. The distance travelled becomes apparent when we compare the early Victorian campaign against the Corn Laws with the language of Edwardian Free Trade. The consumer already appeared in a handful of places in Richard Cobden's speeches, but mainly as the person paying a tax on specific imports (like sugar). In the 1870s and 1880s, popular editions of the *Sophisms* and *Essays on Political Economy* by the French Free Trader Frédéric Bastiat helped circulate in England the idea of the consumer as the embodiment of humanity.¹⁵⁶ Gladstone could thus present the interests of the mercantile community as 'represent[ing] the consumer, that is to say the world'.¹⁵⁷ If Gladstone's voluminous diaries are any indicator, however, such references were still exceedingly rare. By the Edwardian period, by contrast, the consumer was ubiquitous, an umbrella concept denoting the legitimate public interest as a whole.

Liberals' focus on people's 'necessities' and basic needs produced an extensive campaign that addressed the consumer directly as the victim of food duties.¹⁵⁸ The language of the consumer gave particular attention

to those without a direct voice in public politics—the poor, women, and children. It also had a unifying appeal that was contrasted with a protectionist community divided by particular interests. Posters compared the prosperous Free Trade shop with Chamberlain's abandoned Tariff Reform shop, and showed a typical working-class cooperative 'woman with the basket' alongside well-dressed middle-class ladies (Colour Plate VII). Importantly, and in spite of the preoccupation with the suffering of poor children and mothers, the appeal to the consumer was also open to middle-class men. A leaflet from 1909 shows the well-healed middle-class consumer in black top-hat outside a shop wondering about the effects of tariffs on gloves and shoes (see Figure 4, overleaf).

The democratic image of the consumer fostered by Free Trade in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century stands in interesting contrast to Europe and America at the time. In the transatlantic network of buyers' leagues it was middle-class women and men who saw themselves as 'consumers' whose ethical considerations would improve the conditions of working-class 'producers'. In Imperial Germany, consumers were seen as a narrow interest group; even liberal critics of protectionism avoided the term for fear of being seen as a specialist lobby of clerks and alienating the rest of their bourgeois supporters.¹⁵⁹ In Britain, by contrast, Free Trade extended the language of the consumer from disenfranchised men and women to the public as a whole.

Nowhere did the consumer as a general interest enjoy more support within the political system than in the Treasury. It fitted perfectly the Treasury's own sense of itself as shielding state and public against excessive taxation and the influence of vested interests. Free Trade, Treasury control, and the consumer interest mutually supported each other. For Edward Hamilton, its financial secretary, Free Trade had been an epochal shift in power. 'In days of protection, producers were more powerful than consumers. Nowadays consumers are the more powerful and will remain so.'¹⁶⁰ At a time when there was no consumer representation, indeed no formal consumer rights or regulatory oversight, Free Trade functioned as a virtual form of consumer empowerment. The Treasury did not distinguish between different groups of users and purchasers. Consumers were lumped together as the payers of indirect taxes, contrasted with payers of direct taxes. And it was the balance or equity of taxation between these 'two attractive sisters', in Gladstone's image, that deserved the utmost consideration. A preferential duty would place an unfair burden on British consumers for

sugar exports—if foreign governments wanted to use export bounties that was entirely up to them. Free Trade meant free imports, not the global spread of free markets.

This was also the approach to the sensitive subject of dumping, shared by old and new Liberals and Treasury officials alike. It showed how the consumer interest could be extended to include industries as well as private shoppers. When foreigners 'dumped' surplus stock, like iron or sugar, Free Traders argued, this was a cause for celebration, not for alarm. Rather than driving out British competition, as Tariff Reformers argued, 'dumping' was a good thing, raising people's purchasing power and giving British industries extra cheap imports to turn into competitive products for the world market, such as steel or jam. And as the trusts and cartels behind these policies were seen as unsustainable, pathological outgrowths of protection in the first place, there was nothing to fear from putting the consumer first instead of regulating 'dumping' and related interferences with market forces.¹⁶⁶ This was the very reverse of the double-barrelled approach that has been so damaging to the reputation of the European Union and free trade more generally in recent years. Instead of pressing other countries to open their markets while creating an internal fortress of subsidies and price guarantees for European sugar and agriculture, Britain left other countries to their own devices and offered its own open market to foreign subsidized exports.

Liberals at the time stressed the prior consideration due to the consumer. 'Take care of the consumer and the producer will take care of himself', Free Trade women reminded audiences.¹⁶⁷ For Cox, the precedence of the consumer was rooted deep in the 'eternal facts of human nature'. 'The consumer gives the order; the producer only has to obey.' No 'Governmental contrivance' could ever change this.¹⁶⁸ This privileged position, though, was not limited to the private shopper. In the Victorian period shopkeepers and small businesses had sometimes combined to defend their interests as consumers, for instance regarding the provision of gas to light their shops. Free Traders broadened the consumer interest to include industrial consumers more generally. Alfred Mond embraced the 'British consumer, who is after all the most important person' in his defence of Free Trade from the point of view of the alkali industry; the commercial and private users of dyes, bleach, and alkaline chlorides would all suffer from a duty on imports.¹⁶⁹ When Free Traders contrasted consumers and producers, they meant the public versus a small self-interested class of the

rich. 'The combatants were the producer and the consumer', Lord James of Hereford, a leading Unionist Free Fooder, told a demonstration in 1910. 'He would willingly, under all circumstances, range himself on the side of the consumers.' Not only were they 'the more numerous; but also... the producers, or one class of producers, represented wealth, to which he did not care to add'.¹⁷⁰ The emphasis was on 'one class of producers'.

Tariff Reformers worked hard to position themselves as a national alliance of producer interests pitched against a Free Trade camp of consumers interested in cheapness at any price. Leopold Maxse, the hot-headed editor of the *National Review*, went as far as to suggest in 1904 that it was protectionists, not Cobdenites, who carried on Cobden's true principles. Cobden, in this view was 'first and foremost, a Free Exporter', a practical man to whom the national interest lay in 'prosperous production'. It was Liberals who had perverted this tradition into a fanatical school of 'Free Importers', subordinating everything to consumption and cheapness. Tariff Reform would return the country to a productive system where one 'buys for the sake of selling', instead of the spendthrift Free Trader policy where 'one buys for buying's sake'.¹⁷¹

But Britain depended just as much on imported raw materials and semi-manufactured goods as it did on imported food, and Free Traders responded that manufacturers were consumers too. Older Liberals like John Morley, Cobden's biographer, reminded audiences of the 'great principle' on which Free Trade rested: 'that the most important interest, that of the consuming public, is entirely reconcilable with the interests of the aggregate producers of the country'.¹⁷² Liberals of the next generation emphasized that industrialists were consumers too. These 'great consumers', Churchill told the inaugural meeting of the Free Trade League in Manchester in 1904, would have to pay more for their raw materials, and lose their competitive edge and independence: the 'small manufacturer... will find himself bought out—absorbed, like in America and Germany, in some vast syndicate—no longer his own master and an independent man, but the salaried servant of a great combine'.¹⁷³

Since the eighteenth century the honest, jovial, beef-eating John Bull had been the symbol of British strength and liberty. The ideal Free Trade consumer, by contrast, was modest, concerned with access to basic goods like bread, and a responsible housewife as much as a contented man. Stories of 'the hungry forties' presented older Britons as akin to starving, root-eating, and oppressed Frenchmen, but their progress under Free Trade

its apotheosis in the 'citizen-consumer', especially in the writings of the radical public intellectual J. A. Hobson. A genuinely heretical thinker, Hobson emerged as one of the most brilliant and prolific voices of the new liberalism. He mixed a good dose of Ruskin's ethical critique of commercial wealth with a controversial analysis of 'under-consumption'. The modern machine age, he argued, accelerated wasteful overproduction and set off violent economic cycles. There was a widening gulf between over-investment and society's ability to consume. Unless wealth was redistributed to boost consumption, capitalist society would self-destruct. Tariffs were doubly dangerous. Economically, they exacerbated the underconsumptionist crisis by shifting wealth further from the poor to the rich. The cultural repercussions were no less frightening. Unreformed capitalism, Hobson was convinced, promoted commercialization, bureaucratization, and the standardization of the human mind. It eroded the organic bonds of society, separating individual from community, family from labour, home from work. The music-hall, shopping, and cheap sensationalist media spread 'anti-social feelings' and weakened 'the bonds of moral cohesion between individuals'.¹⁷⁸ Civil society would be swept away by mass society.

A hallmark of this uncontrolled modernity was the growth of 'stimulants and drugs ... bad literature, art and recreations, the services of prostitutes and flunkeys'. Advertising and the spread of goods without 'survival value' were steadily weakening the natural instinct for healthy and creative pastimes. This was especially true amongst the lower middle and working classes, 'where a growing susceptibility to new desires is accompanied by no intelligent checks upon the play of interested suggestion as to the modes of satisfying these desires'. Worse, this transmitted the 'barbarian standards of values' of an old social order and its aristocratic elites. Modern leisure, epitomized by commercial sport, led to a 'lower leisure class' aping the leisured elite. It exhibited 'the same sex licence and joviality of manners' and adopted the life-style of the 'race course ... the club smoke-room, or of the flash music-hall'. Haunting this new pleasure economy were 'gypsies, tramps, poachers and other vagabonds, casual workers, professional or amateur thieves and prostitutes, street-sellers, cornermen, kept husbands, and other parasites'. Commercial leisure lessened class division, but any 'apparent gain in humanity' was outweighed by the damage done to social ethics and international solidarity. It put personal pleasure over social care. Honour displaced honesty, superstition reason. It encouraged uncritical

did not steer towards the jolly, well-fed John Bull. It was the Tories who initially exploited a more unrestrained version of popular consumption, a 'cakes and ale' conservatism high on manliness, sport, and drink.¹⁷⁴ This bullish version provided an antidote to the more sober nonconformist liberal culture in many towns in the late nineteenth century—and continues to do so. But it failed to generate a rival political language of the consumer. Tariff Reform's emphasis on 'the producer' as the most important national and imperial interest derailed what could have been a very different political history of the consumer. While protectionists argued that tariffs would increase employment and real wages, their denunciation of Free Trade's cult of 'cheapness' sidelined the older conservative celebration of true Englishmen indulging freely in occasional binges. Tariff Reform employers, like Mr Charteris, the head of the Rosefield Tweed Mills in Dumfries, asked workers at their annual social meeting in December 1903 to 'bear in mind that they were producers before they were consumers, and their interests as producers far exceeded their interest as consumers'.¹⁷⁵ Cheap goods and freedom to choose were bad for workers and bad for the nation. 'Free Trade means cheapness, especially cheap labour, cheap men', the Tariff Reform League told voters in January 1910.¹⁷⁶ The Conservative 'consumer' was stillborn—and would not find a significant political voice until the battle against rationing after the Second World War.

Instead 'the consumer' became the monopoly of Free Traders. Free Traders created a consumer associated with independent character, public morals, and social responsibility rather than luxury, selfishness, or the erosion of public life. At a time when there was grave concern amongst the elite and middle classes whether individuals could be safely left to choose in the political as well as the commercial market place, with moral panics about working-class gambling, excessive spending and debt, this was a considerable achievement. It depended on a distinction between different forms of consumption, rather than invoking a more neutral, indiscriminate use of 'demand' or favouring unlimited choice and consumerist hedonism. Free Trade offered a defence of the good consumer against flashy, morally doubtful or socially irresponsible forms of private behaviour. It was Chamberlain's programme that was portrayed by Liberals as appealing to 'speculators and loafers' and to 'fine ladies and "swells" more generally'.¹⁷⁷

The distancing of the civic consumer and Free Trade from the socially and morally ambiguous world of a market society in full swing reached

conformity. And it fed into an imperialist sense of white superiority and a global racist division between Western leisure and colonial work.¹⁷⁹

Hobson's critique, however idiosyncratic in parts, partook of the widespread unease about consumerist modernity on both sides of the Atlantic. Hobson exchanged ideas with the American Thorstein Veblen, whose seminal *The Theory of the Leisure Class* criticized the social waste from 'conspicuous consumption', as well as engaging with Le Bon's ideas of mass psychology. What was distinctive was that he also turned to the consumer as an answer to the problem of mass culture. Society could be regenerated by cultivating 'higher' forms of consumption. 'Everything in human progress will be found to depend upon a progressive realisation of the nature of good "consumption"', Hobson wrote in his *Evolution of Modern Capitalism* in 1897.¹⁸⁰ For Hobson, marrying Free Trade to the new liberalism would reverse what he saw as the ruinous producer-bias of earlier liberal economists for whom production simply and automatically created its own demand. In place of the increasingly numb consumer of standardized mass production, Free Trade and the redistribution of wealth would educate the people and raise the quality of their consumption.

The task was to turn people from passive shoppers into active citizens, to train what Hobson called a 'citizen-consumer'. 'Higher' consumption would reunite work and leisure. To genuinely enjoy goods, one needed to know how to make them. 'A true connoisseur of pictures must, in training and study, be a good deal of an artist: the exquisite *gourmet* must be something of a cook.' Gardening, painting, reading, and carpentry would lift the quality of consumption.

There was a pronounced gender division of labour in this vision; factory life was inconsistent with the position of a 'good mother', 'good wife' and homemaker: the promotion of quality consumption, Hobson believed, would also return 'female' caring qualities to the home. In general, the 'spirit of machinery' would give way to 'individual thought, feeling, [and] effort'. Free Trade was a favourable environment for this project of civic and cultural renewal. Not only did it provide material opportunities, but it also encouraged a civic outlook in which people acquired an interest in their neighbours. The citizen-consumer would show an 'increased regard for quality of life'. This included a concern for the conditions of workers who produced consumer goods, gradually raising the social and ethical standards of capitalist society. Selfishness in a competitive

market would be transformed into 'generous rivalry in co-operation'. Hobson eventually extended this model to the level of global relations. 'It is through consumption', he argued, 'that the co-operative nature and value of commerce is realized. Production divides, consumption unites.'¹⁸¹

In Britain, Free Trade established a system of beliefs and values that was able to inspire loyalty and passion akin to that inspired by nationalism and socialism elsewhere. The successful revival of Free Trade was not based on a uniform ideology—some groups looked forward to a cooperative commonwealth while others were quite happy with a liberal market society of competing individuals. Rather, the strength of Free Trade culture came from its flexibility in building up a set of shared core assumptions about what was legitimate politics, and what not, about the public interest, and about national identity. This consensus was built from the bottom up as well as from the top down. Free Traders were able to recycle older liberal ideals of politics, such as the independence of political deliberation and parliamentary autonomy from vested interests, by adapting them to confront a modern cast of enemies, like protectionist trust-mongers and millionaires. But success also came from the creative promotion of new collective identities capable of inspiring mass loyalties. The 'hungry forties' was a narrative of the people's inclusion in an evolving democratic culture. What military triumphs and sleeping medieval kings were to newly unified countries on the European continent, the repeal of the Corn Laws became to many Britons. Free Trade was a saga of internal unification. Like all founding stories, it is more interesting for what it reveals about the internal belief system of a society than about the actual past. Free Trade Britain was not free of social polarization, inequality, and exploitation—far from it. But its powerful vision of civil society and its new public language of the consumer provided a sense of inclusion and legitimacy that allowed it to avoid the simple association of Free Trade with wealth and selfish capitalists so widespread today. Fairness and equity focused on consumers. By ensuring cheapness, Free Trade guaranteed a fair price for basic goods for the people, especially groups formally excluded from politics, like the poor, women, and children. 'The poor people hereabouts look upon Free Trade as we do upon Trial by Jury', a Conservative concluded in Yorkshire in 1912, 'i.e. as an absolute fundamental right, to buy eatables as cheaply as circumstances will allow.'¹⁸² The Free Trade consumer became a way of imagining a socially responsible form of capitalism, one that reconciled

considerations of social justice and public morality with the material interests of importing trades and consuming industries. Free Trade culture was not so much about the virtues of the market as about a remarkable trust in civil society, its ability to thrive in an open economy, to raise civic-minded consumers, and to escape the dreaded materialism and selfishness associated with protectionist societies.

2

Bread and Circuses

This time the spread of enlightenment has reached the masses.

Alfred Mond, industrialist and Liberal politician, 1912¹

Vote For Branch, and Don't Eat Doggy.

A Liberal in Enfield turns his dog into a walking political advert, exploiting stories of dogmeat consumption in protectionist Germany, January 1910²

Since nobody can think statistically in millions, and only students can think diagrammatically, the ordinary man must be helped to think by contrasts, and in pictures.

G. Wallace Carter, secretary of the Free Trade Union, on the principles of propaganda, 1910³

The trouble started on Friday. Just as a final group of men was proceeding through the centre of High Wycombe, a small town in south Buckinghamshire just west of London, to cast their vote in the January 1910 general election, mayhem broke out. Amidst cheering and jostling from Free Trade and Tariff Reform supporters, a stone was suddenly thrown, shattering the screen of a motor car. Then, as the town clock struck 8 p.m., 'a section of the crowd' made an attack on the Penny Bazaar, the committee rooms of the protectionist candidate, Alfred Cripps, smashing several windows. The police beat back the crowd, but not for long. Free Traders now charged on Oxford Street, with the rallying cry of 'Dump! Dump!' Protectionists had opened a 'Dump Shop' there the week before with a shop-window display of cheap foreign goods that were undercutting honest British labour. Free Trade supporters had already threatened the Dump Shop in the previous days, and eventually protectionists had boarded it up at the advice of Chief Constable Sparling. Undeterred, the crowd now tore down the boards and knocked in the