

The consequences of Gregory Conti's *parliament the mirror of the nation*

Christopher Macleod

To cite this article: Christopher Macleod (2022): The consequences of Gregory Conti's *parliament the mirror of the nation*, History of European Ideas, DOI: [10.1080/01916599.2022.2064683](https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2022.2064683)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2022.2064683>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 28 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 69



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

The consequences of Gregory Conti's *parliament the mirror of the nation*

Christopher Macleod

Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

ABSTRACT

In this review of Gregory Conti's *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation*, I offer an outline of what I take to be the thesis of that work: that during the mid-Victorian period, mirroring was a key goal of representation, which dominated and framed discussions of post-1832 debates on parliamentary reform. I focus, in particular, on the teleological orientation of the arguments that Conti uncovers in his systematic reconstruction of debates that Conti offers.



KEYWORDS

Parliamentary reform;
Nineteenth Century political
thought; consequentialism;
proportional representation;
democracy; mirroring

Gregory Conti's *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation* is a remarkable achievement. It is simultaneously a detailed textbook on a key aspect of the nineteenth century account of political representation – one to which I expect to return year on year for the exposition it offers on key theorists of the period – and a rich and persuasive narrative of an important change which occurs in the thought of the period.

To sum that narrative up briefly: during the mid-Victorian period, *mirroring* was a key goal of representation, which dominated and framed discussions of post-1832 debates on parliamentary reform. The composition of Parliament, according to this ideal, should 'mirror' the composition of the nation more broadly, in order to adequately represent opinion. The ideal is likely to strike us as one which flows downstream from an increased commitment to democracy in the period – but perhaps surprisingly, as Conti shows, the ideal was in reality theoretically *prior* to, and was often used to argue *against*, increased suffrage.

In fact, the commitment to the mirroring ideal commonly involved an endorsement of the *variety of suffrage thesis*, which might now strike us deeply anti-democratic. A looming worry was that in the post-1832 era of increased and increasingly uniform enfranchisement, one section of the nation would dominate by virtue of sheer mass of voters – and, importantly, would do so across all constituencies. Parliament, as the site of national deliberation, would for this reason simply not hear the opinions of a certain sections of the nation, for some sections (perhaps most worryingly, it seemed, the elite) would go unrepresented. This was the problem to be solved, and a leading contender in these debates was the idea that variety of representation could be achieved by varying qualifications for the vote between constituencies. Some constituencies might have lower and some higher qualifications for the vote, ensuring that different categories of voter were represented in Parliament. This thought was not uniformly accepted, of course, and one of the useful points of Conti's study is to show the different ways in which individual theorists argued for or against

CONTACT Christopher Macleod  christopher.macleod@lancaster.ac.uk  Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

the need for such a measure. But it was in this context that arguments took place, and in which institutional reforms were considered.

The claim that certain *sections* of the nation should be represented in Parliament was a corporatist view: that not individuals, but parts of the community, should be the subject of representation. As Conti points out, the claim itself leaves open the question of what the salient groupings for representation within society *are*, and *how one would determine their proper weighting*. The answer to these ‘sociological’ (33) questions became less obvious as the century progressed, and under Hare’s scheme of PR the issue was in a sense devolved to the voters themselves, as the locus of representation shifted toward the individual (under Hare’s scheme of PR, voters would choose groups to identify and combine within selecting representatives). Interestingly, however, the justification for the corporatist model of representation, and for Hare’s individualistic scheme of PR which struggled against it, shared a common approach: they were teleological in orientation, appealing to the good outcomes that could be expected to come from effective institutional design – edifying and progressive debate, social stability, and the moral improvement of the electorate.

This perhaps bears emphasis. Conti’s study shows that almost never within this debate were issues of institutional design approached as matters of meeting demands of (as Mill would put it in *On Liberty*) ‘abstract right’ (77–78). In this debate, a figure such as George Harris, who appealed to the *entitlement* to the vote in arguing for specific forms of representation was very much part of the ‘philosophical heterodoxy’ (56). The overwhelming rule was to argue for institutional structures not on the basis of some section’s *right*, but rather by appealing to the consequences reform would have for the population at large.

Even where strictures seem to take on the characteristic of absoluteness – as when Hare argues that *every* voter should be individually represented, or when Mill claims that *every* person should have a voice in an election – the claim is justified on the basis of the consequences of a system which was committed to the principle, rather than its inherent fairness. This is, I suspect, what allows some manoeuvres which now seem to us unthinkable – as when Mill notes that although all should have votes, some should have more votes than others (215), or when Stapleton suggests that corporate bodies such as the Inns of Court and retired military servicemen should send representatives to Parliament (68). The question of what the *effects* of such a proposal would be could scarcely arise for us, being ruled out by their violation of what seems to us some deeper constraint, practical or deontological.

Conti notes that the faith which the Victorian period put in the programmes of electoral reform as potentially transformative and world-altering has been lost (364). But so too, has the openness to even the possibility of such imaginative reforms, at least in the Anglophone world. There is an interesting question as to the history of that gulf itself – how it came to be that proposals which were evidently treated as serious constitutional possibilities on consequentialist grounds 150 years ago now seem almost fantastic. This history is not one that Conti attempts, though it would be a fascinating one to read, and would cast light on how we can and should relate to the ideas Conti uncovers.

Let me finish by a comment on the *type* of study Conti has produced. The book appears in the Cambridge School *Ideas in Context* series, and is historically rich. But it is also systematic in its orientation – offering a detailed account of theories of its main protagonists. This is to be welcomed. Often, sophisticated historical treatment can seem to come at the expense of maintaining the status of theories *as* theories. To the extent we are invited, to focus on the illocutionary aspects of authors’ writings that context can reveal – what authors were *doing*, in saying certain things – we are moved towards considering theories as *actions*. Treated as actions, however, theories can often seem to lose their coherence as intellectual structures which make demands and exemplify modes of understanding. They become so closely tied to agents’ ends as to lose their status as putative accounts of the world which are aimed at comprehensiveness and consistency.

When this is the case, target historical theories hardly seem capable of offering fully articulated accounts which can be seen as genuine alternatives to our own. Conti’s treatment, however, while

offering real historical detail, exhibits the theories he considers as internally robust and coherent. It is this systematic approach to historical political theory that enables us to see just how interesting and unfamiliar these theories are.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).