THE CITIZEN’S BODY
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Desire, Health, and the Social in Victorian England

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In 1958 Hannah Arendt looked back over the troubled history of late modernity—the rise of democracy and of fascism, of the extension of citizenship and of semipermanent states of exception—and penned *The Human Condition*, her analysis of our political heritage and its possible futures. Early in the volume she devotes considerable space to the rise of the social, a historical fact she regards with resigned bitterness. According to Arendt, when late modernity, with its large populations organized into nation-states, enabled the realm of the household to invade the political arena, the social was born—and promptly, like the cuckoo in the nest, the social destroyed the legitimate existing domains of public and private upon which all truly political action could be based. What remains of the extinct demos is a mass of people without individuality who have lost the capacity to act and can now only “behave.”

In 1962 Jürgen Habermas would cover some of the same ground in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, at least somewhat more optimistically. During the same period when Arendt sees the political suffocating under the weight of the social, Habermas sees the birth of a vibrant public sphere. Despite the fact that this early work traces a rather dire debilitation of that public sphere in later years, Habermas’s oeuvre argues for a fairly optimistic vision of a new kind of political participation that emerges in this period, through the public sphere. Even if incompletely realized, he argues, this public of rational debate between putative equals allows for a new political relationship between an empowered public and sovereignty, which he sees as the ultimately worthwhile goal of the Enlightenment project. He, too, however, sees peril to this ideal from the intrusion of “private matters”—
identity issues, for example—in the public sphere. In this, at least, he agrees with Arendt's sense of the dangers of the introduction of the private into matters of state.

However, the growth of the public sphere that Habermas celebrates and the emergence of the social that Arendt decries are not discrete events. It is, I will argue, the social as a mediating domain that enables the development, in this transitional period, of a notion of liberal government that can mediate between “matters of the household” and those of citizenship, both allowing for and policing a more inclusive model of political participation.\(^1\) Far from destroying the public and private, the social permits the development of a specifically modern understanding of public and private, in which the structurally necessary fantasy of a public-private divide can be sustained through the reformulation of older models of citizenship. In allowing “matters of the household”—of the body and the realm of necessity—into public discourse about the social body, the realm of the social provided a way to connect the management of individual bodies to citizenship, while still allowing “private matters” to remain outside the boundaries of politics per se. Although perhaps ultimately untenable, this double gesture—of making the private central to government while apparently excluding it from political representation—allows modern liberal government to develop and function in a complex and changing period.

This volume thus addresses a fundamental problem in Victorian notions of citizenship—a problem that remains thorny for liberal theorists today. What is the role of the social in creating and sustaining the ideals of national

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1. A word is in order here about the use of the term “liberal,” which I use not in the specific sense of the Liberal Party (except when capitalized) or of a particular political theory. There were many kinds of liberals, of course, in mid-Victorian society, espousing theories from the economic liberalism of Smith to that of the later Mills, which emphasized social responsibility while retaining a largely Kantian notion of a core individual self. But I am referring here to the overarching philosophy of government in the period, stemming from Enlightenment ideals and largely shared by Tories and Whigs, and later by Conservatives, Liberals, and most Radicals alike. These ideals include the conviction that government should in some sense be representative, interest itself in building the good society (or in removing impediments to its development), be based when feasible on consent rather than force, and be founded on the inviolability of property and a relatively free circulation of labor, capital, and goods. It is at base a capitalist and possessive individualist vision. Although there were different interpretations of core terms, this was generally the ideal of government that most Victorians shared, and the one that comes under the broad term “liberal.” Thus, many people identified economic and social policies as “liberal,” especially in the beginning of the period, that we might see as conservative today because they were based on a fundamentalist view of economic liberalism. By the time the “Liberal” Party came along, the term had come to be associated with social policies favoring the extension of the franchise as later it would be connected to “social” measures such as universal education. But I am using the term here in its most catholic sense, and in that sense, Victorian Britain was marked by a steadily liberalizing vision of government.
community? How does the private self relate to the public one? And how can freedom of choice work to uphold a common ideal in a society in which cultural and personal values seem unmanageably diverse? As the idea of citizenship grew to be more inclusive, and liberalism posited a society of eventual universal citizenship, England confronted the problem of those whose behaviors did not seem to indicate fitness for the responsibilities associated with political power. In a liberal society, fit behaviors had to originate in individual choices rather than in coercion from above. In a market economy, rewards were held to accrue to those behaviors that were socially appropriate. Yet what of those who did not choose to behave appropriately? What of those who disregarded such rewards? Political economists and their early popularizers, such as Harriet Martineau, tended to assume that such misbehaviors (early marriages, bad saving habits, etc.) were the result of ignorance. Because establishing financial security, increasing social status, and nurturing a family were increasingly held to be natural human desires, those who failed to behave in ways designed to achieve those goals were assumed to be ill-informed. Once people understood the laws of economics, it was reasoned, they would certainly begin to behave appropriately, engaging in a kind of social citizenship that might (or might not) be the precursor of a suffrage-based citizenship.

By the mid-century it had become evident that this had been a utopian belief. Behaviors were based not on the intellectual awareness of enlightened self-interest but on the desire for the good things that those behaviors could bring. And too many people displayed desires that were antithetical to the notion of fitness championed by liberal thinkers. Thus, social outreach became a matter not simply of giving information but of a more comprehensive education leading to the management of desire, which in turn required an active role in the very formation of subjectivity. Since these desires were supposed to be natural, they were rooted in the private sphere—in the body and the family, believed to be the natural, universal substrata of the individual and social units. Preparation for citizenship came to be seen less as a matter of acquiring a public and political identity than of shaping the familial, moral, and physical environment required to foster a natural and healthy body and mind; in short, with liberal universalism, fitness for citizenship ceased to be simply a political issue and became instead explicitly a social matter rooted in the private and domestic spheres. The management of the social body through public medicine and discourses of health became the principal discourse with which to negotiate these new questions of citizenship and the Condition of England, of the fit individual and the problematic masses. The development of this discourse identified the healthy body and healthy desires as the basis of political fitness. Over the course of this period, the citizen became not only
a moral product of education but also a physical product of good domestic hygiene.

A flurry of recent books on Victorian liberalism focus on anxieties surrounding the figure of the citizen. Richard Dellamora’s *Friendship’s Bonds* traces the ideal of male homosocial bonds within a “just society . . . governed by friends” (1) and its shadow, anxieties about male homosexual exploitation—the fear that the city on a hill would become the cities of the plains. Amanda Anderson’s *The Powers of Distance* also examines problematic figures of liberal anticitizenship (and antimodernity). The celebrated powers of reason and cosmopolitan detachment valued by liberalism led to fears that such detachment taken to extremes undoes liberalism itself—taking the citizen toward rootlessness, dandyism, dilettantism, and amoral sensation-seeking. Anderson traces the anxiety around detachment specifically through aesthetic debates of the period. David Wayne Thomas’s *Cultivating Victorians* also examines the ideal of liberal agency in relation to aesthetic value; his concern centers more on questions of authenticity and the staging of the self through various cultural debates. Finally, Lauren Goodlad’s splendid *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* is most closely related to the concerns of this book, as it focuses on the oscillation between the desire for a managerial state and one fostering autonomy, a model of state as pastor. All of these studies focus on the anxieties of liberalism—in an inclusive state, what are the limits of inclusion? When does the nation itself lose its identity, and on what is that identity based? They also all identify nodes of anxiety around questions of individual agency and autonomy.

This book intersects with these recent works in a variety of ways. Anderson and Thomas attempt a revalorization of liberal values and frequently make compelling arguments to support their positions—among them, critiques of the tendency of recent scholarship to reject such values wholesale. Although sympathetic to many of the core values of liberalism that these authors advance, I attempt in this volume to provide a balanced critique of the problems and contradictions within those values, as well as the opportunities those contradictions have historically created. In the works above, also, whether citizenship is articulated through aesthetic practices, practices of consumption, sexual practices, or anxieties about identity, these debates tend to be articulated through ideals of normalcy—the normal individual’s tastes
and practices in relationship to the “healthy” ideal self or the deviant other. Rather than focusing primarily on those tastes and practices, however, this book focuses also on the ground of those tastes: the body. This book traces the construction of citizenship through the figure of the healthy body, in parliamentary debates on the franchise, in sanitary and housing publications, and in novels. Throughout the mid-century, evolving discussions of the healthy body and its tastes would undergird debates about individuality, the social body, and fitness for citizenship.

Much scholarship on the Victorian period in the past several years, following the insights of Foucault, has addressed the social body, a key term for the same period, and its relationship to the state. The rise of liberal government and new knowledge directed at measuring and controlling the economic and physical behaviors of the populace have a strong relationship to Victorian ideas about fitness and citizenship. Yet little work has explicitly connected these two areas of scholarship. In Victorian Britain the discussion of the franchise developed in the context of industrial capitalism and a slow enlargement of the polis, which allowed for a protracted and richly complex debate on the formation of the fit citizen and citizenship’s relationship to class and gender identity. In this period the legislative and cultural basis developed, not only for a modern liberal notion of citizenship as defined by political rights but also for its social corollaries. The emergence of the social as a key domain is fundamental to the definition of public and private that materializes over the long and troubled period marked by the First and Second Reform Bills (1832 and 1867). Yet this social sphere, of which much has been said, has actually been ill-defined in scholarly discussion. Theorists such as Mary Poovey, Jacques Donzelot, and Patrick Joyce have each placed its origination in historical periods more than one hundred years apart, a discrepancy that has not been adequately addressed. Finally, the operations of the social in relation to articulations of public and private have not been fully explained.

As a metaphorical description of a population in corporeal terms, the “social body” had a long history in the early modern period and took on renewed importance in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as discussions of the social body coincided with new views of the state’s role as a manager of physical health and facilitator of social cohesion. The social body should not be confused with earlier and very different concepts, such as the monarch’s two bodies, or the public, or the state. The “body of the people” is probably the closest concept. But only in the late eighteenth century did

2. A notable exception is Patricia McKee’s fine analysis of the gendered knowledge systems operating through the public-private divide in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
a concept emerge of a body of the nation that was neither identical with the politically active portion of the population nor simply the economic one. This new understanding of the body of the people positioned it as one to be managed in terms of its health, reproduction, and morality. This body was constitutive of the state but still disconnected from direct political influence. In the early nineteenth century, as political representation became conceptually linked to the social body for the first time (with the threat and promise of an ever-expanding suffrage), the social body began also to be medicalized. As Foucault’s work emphasizes, with the advent of new statistical practices to analyze the population, the figure of the social body as understood in this period divided society into masses of standardized or deviant individual bodies. Vice came to be seen less as the result of fallen nature than as the perversion of nature through adverse circumstances, such as living in urban poverty. Moral health was understood as coterminous with physical health; political normalcy was dependent on this healthy state. The advent of epidemic disease in urban areas lent both focus and urgency to this understanding of the social body. It also provided it with a vocabulary founded on the notion of physically healthy bodies as the basis of the modern state. Healthy subjects—structurally equivalent and behaviorally similar—would behave rationally and appropriately; hence, statistical science would not only measure but also predict behavior, contributing to the transparency of a thoroughly modern society. As the century wore on, this model was inflected with a number of other ways of reading the healthy body, including ethnicity (especially as compared to the Irish in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s) and emerging modern notions of race (mostly from the mid-1850s on). But these ways of reading “deviance” largely participated in and built on the sanitary rhetoric established earlier, as Irish or Indian bodies were read as “naturally” dirty or prolific.

3. Some readers may be surprised to find Foucauldian and Habermasian scholars side by side in this volume. Poovey’s analysis of the making of the social body is fundamental for me, and I see my work here in part as extending her analysis. Habermas and Nancy Armstrong have also provided me with key insights for understanding the period. Although I have fundamental differences with Habermasian liberalism, his work as a historian is foundational. Some historians have critiqued Structural Transformation as overgeneralizing and idealizing a never-never coffee house culture that did not live up to its own notion of itself. But Habermas is here a historian of an ideal; that is, he gives us a clear history of what people hoped for and believed in, if not of actual practices. That ideal is, of course, still very much with us. Foucault gives us a somewhat more cynical history of the epistemologies associated with those developments. In this sense, the two projects are complementary.

4. The impact of empire on visions of citizenship and the body cannot be underestimated, and clearly, the Irish famine, the Jamaica uprisings, and the Indian Rebellion of 1857 all weighed heavily on British visions of the nation and the body, although it is beyond the scope of this study to treat these topics with the care they deserve. For a discussion of the impact of empire on British understandings of public health at home, see Gilbert, Mapping the Victorian Social Body.
In the reform debates that took place between 1832 and 1867, the concept of citizenship was elaborated in relation to the franchise, which made elite perception of the working classes the site of contention about what constituted a right to or fitness for participation in government. The sense of fitness that developed, although formally tied to economic requirements, was increasingly defined in social terms. The first reform shifted qualification from property ownership to levels of consumption. Additionally, by the 1860s the criterion of “fitness” as a qualification to exercise the vote came to predominate; key to fitness was “individuality.” At the same time, in both political and sanitary rhetoric, the “masses” were seen as the antithesis of individuality and citizenship. The “fit” working man was by the 1860s defined as he who was able to act as an individual, defined in part by his modes of consumption, rather than as a part of a mass; the unfit noncitizen—the pauper, for example—was part of an aggregate who lacked individual interests and the ability to reason. This fear of the realm of necessity—of the body—reflects what J. G. A. Pocock calls an Aristotelian strand in Victorian theories of liberal citizenship: those caught within the realms of necessity, too engaged with bodily needs, were seen as requiring socialization before emerging into the public sphere, which was carefully separated from the domestic. This division perpetuated an illusion of politics as separable from materiality and economics, and of a bourgeois individual self that preceded the “mass” of humanity and was separate from it.

The social body, then, includes and depends upon a definition of the (ideal) body of the individual citizen. “Citizenship” is constructed as dependent on the internalization of certain kinds of desire and their enactment as consumption of goods and services (especially housing) and information. Thus, to make the pauper into a good citizen, it is necessary to teach him or her to desire appropriately—usually framed as desire for marriage, financial security, and upward mobility for one’s family. Citizenship, although defined as public and male, is therefore dependent on the domestic sphere—that is, on private and female modes of production and reproduction. Not surprisingly then, anxiety about the control of the working classes is centered on (feminine or feminized) inappropriate desires and on the inappropriate desires of middle-class women.

“Citizenship” is connected to the rise of the national narrative and positions itself explicitly as a category of identity overriding class identification; it is constructed to operate as a counter to class politics by incorporating all classes within a shared civic culture of appropriate consumption. Every citizen is a citizen of something. If not members of a class or other identity group,
individuals could not simply be monads, floating free of all communal sentiment. The imagined community that legitimated citizenship was the nation. National identity, as a widely shared identity value, comes into sharp focus in this period precisely as public authority is contested and as other identities, such as class, begin to appear threatening as loci of power. As Habermas’s analysis suggests, it required the presence of a public sphere, within which narratives of national identity might be played out in relationship to the concept of individual, private (bourgeois) identity being formulated in the novel. Western liberal notions of citizenship rely on this divide to safeguard both individual freedom and a state that is putatively free of identity politics. This division has, of course, been extensively critiqued as an ultimately untenable, if strategically necessary, fiction. Though national identity is fundamentally a public identity, it is one of the peculiar markers of this period and its rhetoric that individuals internalized their sense of this public self as a fundamental, physical (and later, racial) essence, which nonetheless never fully lost the public character bound up in the concept of citizenship.

As sanitarians struggled to extend their legal influence, the discourse of moral environmentalism contributed to the conception of healthful environment as a prerequisite of citizenship; health, like literacy, was something to which the potential citizen must have access. Health was defined as a set of hygienic practices that created a bodily habitus appropriate to the development of middle-class tastes, thus eradicating class boundaries. It was necessary to the nation that workers be both healthy and fit citizens, rather than physically degenerate and politically disaffected—either apolitical or, worse, identifying primarily with class interests. Paradoxically, then, the desire to separate the political man—self-as-citizen—from the realm of the body and necessity demanded an increasingly anxious emphasis on the body itself. The notion of the social body became a way to talk about the connection between the public sphere of nation and the private sphere of individuals, while citizenship—both as a way of defining the person as a member of the national social body and as the institutional link between nation and state—became the measure and the goal of its health.

Thus, national identity, as it operated in the mid-nineteenth century, was beginning to be defined in the public sphere as a link between the individual and the population as a whole—in short, as a mode of interpellation of the citizen, the public identity of the private man. The complete match between the nation and the social body could only be achieved if all members could be brought within that narrative and made into good, healthy citizens who identified with the nation as an overarching category more fundamental than other identities, especially class. Many institutions contribute to this process,
but perhaps none so fundamentally as that state-supported but private ideological apparatus, the family. Liberal inclusiveness demanded the careful and untiring construction of a subject perfectly free to act in accordance with his or her desires, provided those desires were “natural”—that is, constructed within increasingly narrow definitions of the normal and appropriate. Most of these desires had to do with domestic, “private” life and the reproduction of the family in a bourgeois mode.

Thus Britishness equals Englishness equals, by the end of the period, the healthy (clean, isolated), white, masculine, middle-class body. Women became the privileged site of production of this body through their ability to construct an appropriately domestic environment. As Foucault has argued, the move toward modern liberal government is marked by “governmentalities”—the development of bodies of knowledge that are also practices, particularly in regard to biopolitics (the management of populations) through public health, the census, and the like, which enabled governments to know about both the movements and living habits of their subjects. This information was also used to mobilize consent among those subjects to governmental aims, rather than relying on brute power. The discourses and practices that emerged in Britain in regard to these developments authorized themselves with the rhetoric of national identity, interest, and improvement; those we will engage include some of those associated with the development of the sanitary and housing movements and their relation to the emerging concept of the social body, especially in combination with citizenship and the franchise, domesticity, and pauperism.

What would come to be understood over the course of the period as public health—especially in relation to epidemic disease and sanitary issues—has a privileged role in the discourses of the social body. The public health debate did much to foreground the body and its environment as the basis of national health and morality; as the body took center stage in these discourses, citizenship itself came to be perceived as having a physical basis. The body itself is a key signifier. Basic representative of a materiality that is malleable yet limited, the body became in this period both the index and the metaphor of the nation. Individual bodies and their ills, as representatives of classes and populations, became indices of the condition of that less tangible entity, the social body; early on, the social itself, in both its physical and its moral manifestations, came to be understood as a medicalized physical entity that could be fixed, observed, and dissected both through the individual bodies of its subjects and in toto (or en masse) in the form of statistics. The social, like
a body (and like the economy), was supposed to work according to “natural laws,” laws that, nevertheless, had to be carefully learned. Because of this formulation, the social was not considered amenable to legislative or political solutions, but it was to pedagogical ones, especially those situated in the home.

This volume traces the discourse on the citizen and the social body in three forms of discourse in the public sphere. Section I of this book focuses on mid-nineteenth-century political views of citizenship. The first two chapters of this section provide a detailed analysis of parliamentary debates on the franchise and an exposition of competing notions of political fitness. Within these debates we can also trace the impact of sanitary visions of the body—connected to English political discourse partly through the aleatory conjunction of a major cholera epidemic arriving concurrently with reform agitation—on notions of political fitness for citizenship. Social issues coalesced around sanitary questions, just as political enfranchisement was insistently connected to the health of the social body. By the mid-century, as we see in chapter 3, progressive politics came to be allied with sanitary intervention. Victorians thus set the stage for a time when health, like education, would be a right of the nascent citizen; however, Victorian liberalism’s mystification of the interdependence of the political, social, domestic, and economic would also retard the recognition of those rights and contribute to their erosion in the latter years of the twentieth century.

Section II focuses on the social. In these three chapters, we shall examine how interventions in the domain of the social—specifically in the housing movement—clarify the relationship between the political, economic, domestic, and sanitary projects of the mid-Victorian period. First, chapter 4 offers a careful theorization of the divisions between public, private, and the social that clarifies the stakes of the succeeding readings. The well-wrought individual was thought to emerge from a physical environment that would foster not only health but also suitable values. It was in the domestic sphere that these values were formed. For this reason, following earlier successes at sanitizing the city, social outreach turned to the domestic environment. Yet the social need to house the poor well conflicted with the economic doctrine that charity pauperized by undermining independence. Chapter 5 explores the mid-century emphasis on inculcating bourgeois norms of privacy and separation in multiroom dwellings and how it conflicted with the reality of high urban rents and the habits of city-dwelling laborers. These and other problems encouraged social reformers to look not only at the built environment but
also at the behaviors and the desires of the poor. The poor, it was concluded, 
were problematic because of structural and economic problems and because 
their desires, shaped by their unusual home lives, were warped. Social work-
ers, then, needed to address not only the physical environment but also the 
unhealthy desire that it produced and reflected.

Because it dealt with this feminized domain of the home and the body, 
social intervention offered special opportunities for middle-class women. Yet 
as the social became central to the national project, it called increasingly for 
a professionalized class of social workers. Such professionalization threatened 
the status of the social as an autonomous domain emerging from the private 
by bringing it under state control. In chapter 6 Octavia Hill provides a tran-
sitional example: as the last representative of the mid-Victorian concept of 
liberal social action, she espoused a vision that tended inevitably toward the 
more professionalized activism of the 1880s and 1890s while highlighting, by 
her resolute refusal to acknowledge that trend, the particular issues of the mid-
Victorian vision of the social. Her work is revelatory of the roots of difficulties 
still with us today (especially in the United States), in terms of both wedding 
social activism to liberal democracy and reclaiming a tradition of female activ-
ism rooted in the separation of the social from political action. This history is 
particularly problematic for feminism, as the separation of the social is in part 
based on the discourse of the social as a body and the cultural associations of 
the body with a feminized system of care and a discourse of “nature” that is 
separate from culture and politics.

Section III turns to the novel and, with it, to the representation of the indi-
vidual. Hannah Arendt called the novel of the late eighteenth and nineteenth 
centuries “the only entirely social art form” (39). The novel is the privileged 
forum for the exploration and celebration of middle-class Victorian subjectiv-
ity and domesticity, as well as one of the most important arenas for social com-
mentary in this period. In chapter 7 the mid-century “social problem” novel 
enables us to examine narratives of the development of the social, sanitary 
reform, and their relation to the political in works by Benjamin Disraeli and 
Margaret Oliphant. After the initial flurry of Condition of England novels 
and the failure of the Charter, social fitness came to be defined less explicitly 
in terms of the franchise and more in terms of individual development. The fit 
body was defined in terms of continence and incontinence, and the fit subject 
was marked by a painfully achieved moral and physical self-containment, as 
we will see elaborated in Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Dickens in chapter 8. 
Finally, George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* rereads mid-century social problem novels 
in consideration of this attention to moral hygiene. Chapter 9 demonstrates 
how Eliot recuperates and revises an earlier tradition in both political writing 
and sensation novels in using addiction as a thematic correlative for politically
unfit behaviors. The closed, disciplined bourgeois body requires careful development and policing and is always under the threat of invasion and dissolution through mismanagement of its own desires. Intemperance and addiction become dominant themes for thinking through the threats to civic “fitness” in these novels, just as the beneficent influence of the feminized social is expressed through plotlines that emphasize sanitary reform and social work.

Thus, the book examines the epistemology of cultural divisions into public, private, and social domains and links the development of these concepts to the problems of class, gender, and citizenship that are particularly volatile in the mid-Victorian period. The striking centrality of medical discourse to politics and government in the context of parliamentary reform, women’s social activism, and conceptions of English identity testify to the importance of the body and ideas of health to citizenship. In each of the three sections of the book, a different kind of discourse is examined. At the state level, parliamentary debates lay out an explicitly political agenda for citizenship. These debates concern not only ideological questions but also structural ones—how will the newly enfranchised affect the existing system? Sanitary writings also deal with questions of the moral and physical health of the public and are written to encourage political change—that is, changes in legislation and policy. In the second section, social experts in the field of housing are largely writing to each other and to the general public. This shift not only reflects the reification of social intervention, in that it constitutes particular and specialized fields such as housing, which are public issues without being state issues per se, but also its general importance throughout the culture, as charity is systematized and organized under social theories. Such documents, generally intended to be persuasive to a general public, appeal to broadly understood notions of social appropriateness and desirable behavior in the service of specific arguments. The final section examines the incorporation of such narratives into novels, emphasizing the centrality of public health and its formulations of the social in the liberal domestic novel of the mid-century. These novels, like the texts explored in earlier sections, seek to communicate with the general public on political or social questions. But with their focus on private life and the elaboration of private subjectivities, they also offer detailed explorations of the relation between narratives of public and private life unavailable in the other discursive arenas studied here. In this section we can trace the increasing centrality of constructions of bodily desire and continence to these narratives over the course of the mid-century.

Each group of writings addresses fitness for citizenship in a different way, with different audiences and emphasis. Yet all, finally, concern the body, its environment, and its desires. The notion of the medicalized social body emerges as the most significant way to mediate competing discourses of
citizenship and nationhood, of the individual and the larger community. The development of the discourses explored here foregrounded the healthy body as the very basis of political fitness and defined the condition of England in terms of individual healthy bodies and the management of desire to produce the ideal bodily habitus. From the first reform seen as a potential cause of national ills to a second reform positioned as an inadequate cure for national incontinence, we can trace the establishment of a self-contained English body as a *sine qua non* of citizenship and the definition and disciplining of the social as its nurturing medium.
The articulation of fitness as a primary criterion for the franchise in the 1830s through the 1860s, even though fitness at this point still included a rental qualification, paved the way for a right to health. Fitness designated the child as a special category. Since the child could not choose where he lived or if he were educated, the development of fitness was not within his control. Education must be provided so the child could develop the basic literacy necessary to understand political issues; of course, education was also an opportunity for indoctrination into the elite view of political economy.1 School alone, however, did not affect the child’s living conditions.2 If the ability to labor and thus gain the income status required for qualification was injured, obviously the child could not develop fitness and might also become an economic burden on the rate-paying citizenry. But additionally, if the child’s health, which was viewed as prerequisite for the development of a minimal moral competence, depended on living conditions, then the living conditions necessary for the possibility of fitness must be provided for the developing citizen. As remains true today, the child became the site of a debate around entitlements and also a node of state interest in the realm of domestic privacy.

But (also as remains true today), liberalism infantilized every person or culture who did not fit into its view of the good citizen. By positing a universal “natural” subject, liberalism demanded that everyone who did not

1. See Marshall and Bottomore on this point.
2. For a discussion of education as a social right, see Bernard Harris.
fit the definition of this subject be seen as unnatural, deviant—or at least incompletely developed, a moral child. Darwin posited that all humans came from a single ancestor and that European civilization represented a high level of moral development that was itself predicated on the natural evolution of “social instincts.” By a similar logic, non-European civilizations—and Europeans who did not fit into their own civilizations’ notion of the “good citizen”—were seen as failures in natural development who had to be either coaxed back onto a proper developmental path or ruled with the paternal despotism appropriate to their infantile level of evolution.

The irony of this assumption is that it presupposes that the “individual” so prized under a liberal rule will be marked only by very minor and superficial differences: I like coffee, you like tea. Identity markers that may be constitutive of subjectivity—gender, class, race, religion—are still relegated to the private, although critiques of this division have been persistently mounted. Politics, in such a logic, becomes a rather narcissistic conversation about minor differences, the real business of state being so obviously agreed upon as to merit little discussion or even consciousness. Meanwhile, within the problematic of gender in liberal societies, residual structures of the public and private and the masculinity of the universal subject continue to plague women’s attempts to gain political power. Rights feminists have often made their advances at the cost of suppressing women’s difference from the universal subject, resulting, for example, in better access to labor opportunity at the expense of access to maternity and daycare benefits. On the other hand, the attempt to advance “women” as a category, often in response to the inadequacies of the aforementioned rights feminism, has often resulted in the suppression of racial, class, sexual, and ethnic differences. And the perpetuation of the public-private divide has meant that gains in one area have very often resulted in costs in another.3 The split we have inherited between public and private, political and social, is not sustainable, but within liberalism there has not yet been a successful retheorization of the problem.4

Capitalism, it has been argued, (re)created the social sphere after the demise of feudalism, founding the very conditions of citizenship. Conversely, it has been argued that capitalism “just grew,” and the conditions necessary

3. In the United States, for example, workfare programs designed to foster “independence” and possessive individualism are often poorly coordinated with childcare, resulting in excessive costs to mothers receiving “benefits,” or marriage-advocacy policies that attempt to shore up the family result in increased exploitation of and violence against women within the home.

4. Once again, I am referring here to Western liberal states. As Partha Chatterjee has noted, the development of ideas of nation and of the private have progressed very differently in some other locations. For a discussion of those differences in Bengal, see Chatterjee, especially 72–75.
to this brilliant weed required economic freedoms of the constituents of the labor force and hence social freedoms mirroring them that gave birth to liberal conceptions of rights. Either way, liberal citizenship encodes the most basic tension within capitalism, its promise of exclusivity universally available. If capitalism motivated the creation of modern citizenship, its desiderata seem plainly in opposition to foundational citizens’ rights now. Why neoconservatism and the dismantling of the welfare state? Why privatization of social services? Capitalism constructed the (first-world) citizen against its other, the pauper, and the English/British nation against its other, the colonies. But the empire has struck back.

In part, the first world has achieved its historically unstable prosperity, enabling mass consumption, by “outsourcing” poverty. Global late capitalism now struggles with its own necessary other, the “developing” world; the model of citizenship shows the fissures of its formation against the pressures of the new “massed” economic outcaste, as high-consuming nations are forced to confront their labor “slums” in Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, and so on. Whether (one) history “ends” as liberalism and capitalism saturate the globe, precipitating a necessary reconfiguration of relations of production, or whether liberal capitalist omnivorousness finds its final check in confrontation with indigestible Othernesses, it seems clear that many of the assumptions underlying today’s Victorian forms of liberalism will not bear the strain of current developments. It remains to be seen what a political philosophy that would revise some of these foundational fictions while retaining other, perhaps still viable, values would look like, what vision of the body and self, and what art, it will produce.

Among theorists who have attempted this task, Richard Rorty provides an important example of the difficulties these thinkers face. His utopian postmodern liberalism seems a step away from traditional individualism, advocating a decentered subject who understands his or her position as constructed. He argues that such a subject would have an ironic relationship with his or her “self,” understanding it as provisional and situational, liable to change with circumstance. This subject would easily shed its more private subject positions when called to debate public and political matters. Indeed, however, such ironic distance seems rather exclusively the purview of elites.  

Light irony, as George Eliot remarked, is an expensive production. It is rare

5. And, I should add, first-world elites, though I also want to clarify that my own discussion claims relevance only to late modernity in the United Kingdom and the United States. Even in other Western democratic societies, these debates have developed quite differently, and in other societies the strategic usefulness of liberal discourse may make for very different investments in different historical moments. It is telling that Rorty reads only white European men in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.
that the subaltern can afford to be—if, indeed, he or she would want or be able to be—other than in earnest in defending his or her commitments. And sometimes the subaltern may be, of necessity, closer to the kind of radically situated self that critic of liberalism Michael Sandel describes than first-world elites. The radically situated self is entrenched in a single subject position related largely to membership in one community and defines priorities more by communitarian commitments than by notions of the individual; such a self often does not move between multiple subject positions without paying a high price. That situatedness may be a condition of economic and cultural subalternity, as well as a deliberate choice (Native Americans attempting to preserve traditional communities on reservations come to mind). It is precisely what they might perceive as a value-neutral sense of irony and contingency that such subjects are rejecting.

Rorty, of course, does restrict this ironic stance to the intelligentsia in his ideal state, and strictly to civil society rather than politics; “irony” he notes, “seems inherently a private matter.” His “masses” would be “commonsensically nominalist and historicist” (87). But it is neither the “intelligentsia” nor the majority in the United States or United Kingdom who poses the most obvious problem for global liberalism, but the subaltern, at home and abroad. Rorty is persuasive when he bases his liberalism on the avoidance of cruelty within a recognition that all circumstances, including those defining cruelty, are contingent. But finally, we are faced with the question of what happens when powerful societies or groups “redefine” less powerful ones, and Rorty can offer only the old solutions: “we need to distinguish between redescription for public and private purposes” (91) in order to avoid “humiliating” less powerful others, who are again described as immature: “Consider what happens when a child’s precious possessions . . . are redescribed as ‘trash’ and thrown away. Or . . . are made to look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer, child. Something like that presumably happens to a primitive culture when it is conquered by a more advanced one” (89–90).

My point here is not to denigrate Rorty’s careful and often compelling argument by focusing on an unfortunate choice of metaphor but to point out that this metaphor is deeply embedded in the history of liberalism’s conceptions of the Other. The Other is assumed to use a universal standard of evaluation that dictates the intuitive judgment that first-world, mainstream

6. I am aware of the difficulties associated with the adoption of a binary of oppressor/oppressed, liberal subject/other. However, although these are not essential but situational characteristics, in any given encounter of the type defined above a power difference can be defined, at least within the boundaries of the particular situation, usefully in those terms. It behooves us, as we attempt to attend to the complexities of such encounters, to recall this basic disparity.
“toys”—customs, goods, and values—are better. This is the root of the difficulty that liberalism faces when it encounters the Other; because we are liberals, we have to care about another’s power to define her or himself, yet the whole edifice of the liberal state depends on a certain homogeneity in the conception of the self that is profoundly challenged by unassimilable difference, not to mention subalternity. Although liberal universalism defines itself against an “outside,” it also posits that all that difference is ultimately assimilable, as inessential to the deep structure of the self. We do not, under current global economic conditions, have the option to (nor is anyone choosing to), as L. T. Hobhouse suggested in his landmark statement *Liberalism* in 1911, simply leave the Other alone. Infantilizing the Other is the move that enables liberal “Western” states to ignore the incoherence of our position—a politically effective move in the short term, perhaps, but not, finally, a democratic or even a liberal one per se.

The major challenge to liberal universalism within the United States and the United Kingdom is, of course, the increasing cultural heterogeneity of the population and the claims of resultant counterpublics. Scholars who have attempted to address these changes argue that a shifting, situationally specific and avowedly imaginary boundary constituted with a language of (socially constituted) rights versus responsibilities rather than public and private per se could provide a valuable way to continue a form of liberal society in which we are constituted as subjects and which we therefore appropriately value highly. Movement away from a grand theory of liberalism toward a looser set of constantly negotiated values that can operate as a rough guide in a case-by-case approach to political situations—what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls strategies, rather than theories—may be the only way we can approach the challenges of dealing with difference.

This move leads us again in the direction of Rorty, or of Chantal Mouffe (and Ernesto Laclau), who have decoupled the concept of the public sphere of liberal, reasoned discourse from its link with capitalism. However, as Rorty and Mouffe imply, we must eliminate the assumption of liberal universality and recognize that there are situations and cultures in which liberal assumptions are not useful; that there are other valuable and viable ways to organize

7. This text was foundational in articulating the “New Liberalism”—a term coined to describe the work of political thinkers such as L. T. Hobhouse and T. H. Green in the early twentieth century, who embraced philosophical liberalism while rejecting classical economic liberalism and sought balance between the rights of the individual and the claims of communities.

8. See, for example, John Gray (305 and passim). He argues that this has resulted in the demise of liberalism as a theoretically viable construct, but that what remains is the viable legacy of civil society.
both states and human experience (see Gray 314–28, Mouffe 145–52). This
does not mean that individual liberal states must slide into relativism; as
Mouffe argues, it does mean taking seriously the fact that neither the state
nor liberal values can be neutral and that arbitrating between groups is both
difficult and value charged—and therefore thoroughly political. It does mean
giving up a Habermasian Enlightenment epistemology (though even Mouffe
and Rorty seem in practice to privilege reason and debate as a near-absolute
value). And thus it does mean, once again, that liberal debate will finally fail
to be an adequate response for many cultural encounters. As early as 1911
Hobhouse argued that “to destroy tribal custom by introducing conceptions
of individual property, the free disposal of land and the free purchase of gin
may be the handiest method for the expropriator. . . . If men say equality, they
mean oppression by forms of justice. If they say tutelage, they appear to mean
the kind of tutelage extended to the fattened goose” (20). In nearly a century,
we have improved little on Hobhouse’s articulation of the problem.

There are those theorists who would prefer to dispense with the state or
even a global government entirely, such as Giorgio Agamben. Agamben agrees
with Foucault that modernity has seen the full instantiation of biopolitics.
Biopolitics, he believes, reached its logical extreme in Nazi concentration
camps, wherein, as Arendt says, the penetration of privacy and the body by
state power is absolute. He argues, however, that the seeds of this tendency
existed at the very inception of Western political thought, in which the denial
of the oikos or the domestic and of zoe, or what he terms “bare life,” within
the sphere of politics paradoxically made bare life and power over it the unack-
nowledged basis of all forms of sovereignty and citizenship. He claims that
“only a politics that will have learned to take the fundamental biopolitical
fracture of the West into account” will be able to stem the “thanotic” tendencies
of biopolitics to absolute domination and destruction (Homo Sacer 181).
Such a politics, he envisions, would ultimately enable people to dispense with
a state altogether in favor of a community in which persons would not need
to be conceived within any “representable condition of belonging” (Coming
Community 86). Such a community would be founded on a human condition
in which there was no division between the political and bare life, and
no sovereignty as we now understand it.

I have said that the assumption of a universal subject and the splitting of
public and private mystify the nature of the state and its tutelary role and, by
rendering the subject it constructs “natural,” place (or attempt to place) this
subject beyond critique and revision and homogenize the political, public
sphere of debate in such a way as to deny access to Others, in whatever way
constituted. However, in objecting to the mystification of the state’s tutelary role, and in critiquing some of the values that it has historically inculcated, I do not object to the tutelary role of the state itself. All states—fascist, Marxist, democratic—perform such a role, whether through the exercise of naked power or the mobilization of consent. To assume that they should not, that human beings should develop in absolute freedom from state or even social tutelage, requires precisely the assumption that there is a preexisting self that society deforms.

I make this fairly obvious point because, in critics’ zeal to uncover the mechanisms by which power often shapes the subject, an evaluation of the effects and aims of such power is sometimes lacking. Surveillance is not all equally bad, just as “resistance” is not all equally subversive and “subversion” is itself not uniformly valuable. The state and political sphere may be a proper place for certain principles to be valorized, where they can be debated openly and where appeal to the rule of law is possible for groups that perceive themselves to be affected negatively. Perhaps better that the state should be the site of such debate than so-called civil society, whose exercise of real institutional power is often masked by the public/private divide so that no appeal for protection is possible—such were the problems, for example, that led U.S. lawmakers to pass laws in protection of minorities’ rights against employment discrimination rights that are continually endangered at the levels of both practice and legislation. On the other hand, though I am sympathetic to Michael Walzer’s arguments about the recurring need for communitarian critique in liberalism, I am also skeptical of some localist communitarian stances. To suppose that local communities are inherently more valuable than a community defined by the state is based on assumptions that are not entirely clear to me; after all, a culture that shapes its discussion of values at the state level—with a due regard for dissent within subgroups and protection of their access to the public sphere—does not necessarily have to be a less worthy site of community identity than a region, religion, or ethnicity.9

9. Partha Chatterjee has advanced a reading of Indian nationalism as proceeding through a different narrative. The colonial state destroyed the “fuzziness” and multiplicity of existing community affiliations in order to fix colonial subjects within certain “community” identities that were understood as—and structurally compelled to be—fixed and exclusive, to be ordered and subsumed within the state. Indian nationalism at certain points, he argues, opposed this new sense of community: Gandhi, for example, used a rhetoric that was “antimodernist, antiindividualist, even anticapitalist. The attempt is . . . to find, against the grand narrative of history itself, the cultural resources through which people, living in different, contextually defined, communities, can coexist . . . within larger political units.” In other words, the rhetoric of nation was used against the homogenizing tendency displayed by the rhetoric of the liberal nation-state in Europe. However, “this other narrative is again violently interrupted once the postcolonial nation state attempts to resume its journey along the
As strategies for resistance against harmful hegemonic forces, localism may be extremely useful, but sometimes the most passionate local investments can be the site of very ugly modes of identification based on violence and exclusion. Further, these same modes may be collaborative with those same hegemonic forces they appear to resist. If reports of the death of history have been greatly exaggerated, so has the postmortem of liberalism perhaps been hasty.

I also have (unsurprisingly) no proposal for a remedy to the difficulty I have identified—a problematic that has both enabled liberal advances and limited their efficacy. As I have already indicated, I believe we are not yet ready to move beyond the state, and I find the romanticism in some of Giorgio Agamben’s formulations troubling: his idealization of pure presence, of an unmediated subjectivity in a millennial “coming community.” One serious problem with his conception is that, much like liberal universalism, it assumes that local identities, or “representable conditions of belonging,” should be irrelevant in the ideal community. But Agamben’s effort to create the conditions of possibility to at least think such a community—or to think beyond what we have—demands our careful attention. And perhaps the very fact that he leads us back to a universalism-through-the-back-door indicates that we should rethink the usefulness of liberal values. Amanda Anderson, in *The Way We Argue Now*, has called for a return not only to a carefully theorized and pragmatic liberal cosmopolitanism but also, more controversially, to an openly avowed embrace of its normative and evaluative elements. After all, most of the challenges to liberalism in the West have relied implicitly or explicitly on norms of justice developed out of liberalism itself; to the extent that this is true, the question then becomes one of government structure and political practice rather than goals or values. Anderson aligns herself, with some reservations, with positions argued by Habermasians such as Seyla Benhabib—toward a liberal discourse ethics informed by a contingent universalism. However, Anderson focuses her attention solely on the political opposition between local (largely ethnic) identities and universal ones rather than on the question of public and private per se; she elides the important

...
question of how one comes to the conversation in the first place. One might say, however, that if liberalism has tended to suppress such identities unless or until they can become sites of political identification and mobilization, it has also, finally, provided a mechanism for those sites to be recognized beyond that point in time. As do many critics, I believe that within the utopian elements of liberal Enlightenment thought is something valuable, as well as dangerous.

Agamben points to the possibility of a modest beginning. In order to foster the “emergence of a field of research beyond the terrain defined by the intersection of politics and philosophy, medico-biological sciences and jurisprudence,” he offers a Foucauldian solution: we must first “examine how it was possible for something like a bare life to be conceived within these disciplines” and trace the historical development of our current situation (*Homo Sacer* 188). However, as bare life is endemic to any conception of sovereignty for Agamben, he wishes to move beyond sovereignty itself. I would argue that as the creation of bare life is endemic to sovereignty, the ability to critique and resist this category must already have come as well from within the structure in which it is conceived. To transcend our episteme, it is necessary first to understand how it formed and functions; it is also necessary to evaluate what within it has continued to be of value. This volume offers a step toward this project of historical analysis.

11. Anderson’s otherwise admirable book has a persistent tendency to elide the status of justice within the debate she critiques, conflating it with questions of affect.
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