

## “A Natural Anomaly”: Democracy, Equality and Citizenship in Nineteenth-century British Travelogues about America

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Many British travelers who visited America in the first half of the nineteenth century did so in order to see first-hand the democratic system and, depending on their own political views, warn their British readers against its dangers or present the U.S. as a model to imitate. My paper focuses on British travelogues written between the end of the Napoleonic wars (1815) and the American Civil War (1861), exploring how their authors conceived the American system and how they wanted to portray it to their compatriots. While progressive writers such as Harriet Martineau and Frances Wright believed that the young republic could, at most, be faulted on not being democratic and egalitarian enough, Tories such as Frances Trollope, Basil Hall and Charles Augustus Murray believed that the American model was harmful. The word “citizens” was used by them as a term of abuse, to signify people characterized by materialism and bad manners. They warned against equality, which they thought would result in leveling down, the tyranny of the majority and universal suffrage. The American model of citizenship seemed menacing especially in the 1830s and 1840s, when British Conservatives felt that the order of the Empire was threatened by the Radicals and the Chartist movement.

Keywords: travel writing; transatlantic studies; democracy; nineteenth century

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## “Una anomalía natural”: Democracia, igualdad y ciudadanía en los libros de viajes británicos sobre América en el siglo XIX

Numerosos viajeros que visitaron los EEUU durante la primera mitad del siglo XIX lo hicieron con el propósito de ser testigos de primera mano de su sistema democrático y,

dependiendo de sus ideas políticas personales, dar cuenta a sus lectores británicos de sus peligros, o bien presentarlo como un modelo a imitar. Mi artículo se centra en los relatos de viajeros británicos escritos entre 1815, año en que las guerras napoleónicas llegaron a su fin, y 1861, año en que dio comienzo la Guerra de Secesión, con el fin de analizar las diferentes formas en que estos percibieron el sistema político estadounidense y las quisieron plasmar para conocimiento de sus compatriotas. Mientras que los escritores progresistas como Harriet Martineau y Frances Wright eran de la opinión de que la joven república podría, como mucho, ser acusada de no ser suficientemente democrática e igualitaria, los conservadores como Frances Trollope, Basil Hall y Charles Augustus Murray pensaban que el modelo estadounidense era nocivo. El término “ciudadanos” era considerado denigrante y se empleaba para señalar a las personas que destacaban por su materialismo y mala educación. Estos autores advertían del peligro de la igualdad; se pensaba que esta quedaría reducida y que se caería en la tiranía de la mayoría y del sufragio universal. El modelo estadounidense de ciudadanía se presentó como hartamente inquietante, especialmente durante las décadas de 1830 y 1840, periodo en que los conservadores británicos percibían que el orden del Imperio quedaba amenazado por los radicales y el movimiento cartista.

Palabras clave: relatos de viaje; estudios transatlánticos; democracia, siglo XIX

After the end of the Napoleonic wars, America became a popular destination for British travelers. Some wanted to see first-hand the political system they dreamed of, while others came to observe the one they feared. The present article is a logical extension of existing research on Anglo-American relations in that period, filling gaps in the discussion of British travel writing on America by focusing more closely on British travelers' remarks on U.S. democracy and juxtaposing them with the writer's political views. Among the most influential books dealing with the subject, one should mention classics such as Jane Louise Mesick's *The English Traveller in America 1785-1835* (1922) and Max Berger's *The British Traveller in America, 1836-1860* (1943), both of which trace the typical experiences of Britons visiting the U.S. and describe common responses to American customs, economy, and political life. Newer works include Christopher Mulvey's *Transatlantic Manners: Social Patterns in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-American Travel Literature* (2008), which discusses the—usually unfavorable—impressions of those travelers who commented on the cultural differences between the two countries, and the collection *Nineteenth-Century British Travelers in the New World* (2013), edited by Christine DeVine. While recent years have seen fewer critical studies on British descriptions of the early American democracy, the subject remains a fruitful area of research. This article analyzes impressions of the young republic recorded by British authors traveling in the United States in the period after the War of 1812, when traveling across the Atlantic became possible for Britons on a large scale, and before the Civil War, which changed the American political landscape to an extent deserving of separate study. While it is true that those travelers' responses were colored by many factors, including class, cultural expectations, and personal experience, this article traces in particular the correspondences between their political views and their remarks on the American system.

In British travelogues on America, democracy was strongly praised by progressive writers such as Frances Wright and Harriet Martineau. Wright was a Scottish reformer and the first woman to have written about America (Mesick 1922, 12) in her *Views of Society and Manners in America*, which recorded her 1818-1820 tour, and who in 1824 returned to America in order to found Nashoba, a utopian community in Tennessee aimed at liberating black slaves. Harriet Martineau visited America in 1834 and published her analyses in *Society in America* (1837) and *A Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838). A more complicated case was that of Charles Dickens, who in his *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842) praised for example Harvard University (Dickens 1842, I.62), as well as American "institutions" such as facilities for the blind, prisons and insane asylums. While Dickens was also a progressive, his visit to America nonetheless resulted in a deep disillusionment. After it, he wrote in a letter to William Charles Macready: "This is not the Republic I came to see. This is not the Republic of my imagination" (qtd. in Meckier 1990, 19). This disappointment stemmed from the American press' unfavorable reactions to his appeals for establishing international copyright law and, more generally, from aesthetic displeasure with the lack of American

cultural refinement.<sup>1</sup> Still, the American system remained to Dickens, as to Wright and Martineau, a source of positive interest as an experiment in human freedom.

However, the number of conservative writers,<sup>2</sup> who worried that Great Britain might follow in the footsteps of its former colony, was significantly larger. The popularity of their travelogues was not necessarily dictated by the reading public sharing the political views of the authors, but by the larger trend of anti-Americanism. As Gulddal argues, the period was characterized by criticizing “American civilization as a whole,” which allowed British and continental writers to establish “a common European identity in contradistinction to the United States” (Gulddal 2013, 494, 510). Additionally, unfavorable descriptions of America were simply more entertaining and travelers knew that amusing commentaries could be expected; this is why for example Charles Augustus Murray warned that readers of his book were likely to be disappointed in this respect (Murray 1839, II.370). Kim Wheatley believes that those critiques “can be seen as genre-driven rather than—or as well as—politics-driven” (Wheatley 2001, 63). However, this essay argues that while the convention of British visitors mocking America played a significant role in the formation of the transatlantic travel discourse, political considerations still played an important role in how the remarks were formulated.

The conservatives discussed in this article include Scottish aristocrat Captain Basil Hall, who visited the United States between 1827 and 1828, and whose *Travels in North America* made him one of the most disliked British authors in the New World. Hall was a hero of Frances Trollope, who moved to America for financial reasons in 1827 and returned to England in 1831 after failing to establish a business in Cincinnati. Hall encouraged her to write her subsequent travelogue in a way which would support the Tory cause (Kisiel 2013, 66); as a result, Trollope’s *Domestic Manners of the Americans* caused offence comparable to the outrage provoked by Hall and made the author notorious on both sides of the Atlantic. Similarly unfavorable impressions of the American system were recorded in 1839 by Captain Frederick Marryat, a novelist and Royal Navy officer who, in his *Diary in America*, defined the purpose of his work to be warning his compatriots against the dangers of democracy, as well as George Featherstonehaugh, a geologist who lived in the U.S. between 1806 and 1838 and described his visit to the American South in the 1830s in his 1844 *Excursion Through the Slave States*. In addition, we find Scottish aristocrat Thomas Colley Grattan, a British consul to the state of Massachusetts and grandson of the last loyal governor of Virginia (Deis and Frye 2013, 148), who resided in America between 1839 and 1846.

The impressions of more moderate commentators were often as unfavorable of democracy as those of staunch Tories, especially if it was dealt with as a proposition which could be imitated in Great Britain. One could include here Frances Kemble, a well-known Shakespearean actress who toured America in 1832 and in 1834 married

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Dickens’s disillusionment with America, see Meckier (1990).

<sup>2</sup> This essay treats as “conservatives” both the writers who openly self-identified as Tory, as well as, more broadly, those who were critical of democratic ideals and opposed the Reform Movement in Great Britain.

an American planter, Pierce Butler. Scottish writer Thomas Hamilton visited America at roughly the same time and declared that, while at home he was seen as a progressive, he was certain to be seen on the other side of the Atlantic as a committed Tory due to his critical opinions on the young republic. The 1830s were also when Charles Augustus Murray visited the New World, staying for several months with the Pawnee tribe in 1835, which gave him the reputation of being a British expert on Native Americans. Isabella Lucy Bird, whose 1854 visit to the United States gave rise to a series of books on her travels around the world, also falls into this category.

As mentioned before, American democracy was not always criticized by British travelers. Quite expectedly, authors who held progressive views depicted it as a system nearing perfection. Harriet Martineau believed that it was the most stable political regime in the world, since while non-democratic countries were suffering from rebellions, “[i]n the United States, nothing worse than professed Nullification has yet been heard of” (1837, I.47). This passage reveals, however, the extent to which the writer failed to appreciate the danger which the doctrine of nullification—giving states the right to invalidate federal laws they believed to be unconstitutional—posed to America’s unity, but also points to the fact that she believed democracy gave voice to people’s needs in a way which made rebellions and revolts unnecessary. While Martineau’s enthusiasm correlated with her political views, more conservative travelers, on occasion, also appreciated certain elements of the democratic system. Frances Kemble, while severely displeased by the American lack of manners, admitted that equality resulted in greater honesty among the lower social classes (1835, II.11-12); Frederick Marryat believed that living in an egalitarian society made Americans naturally good-tempered, since it forced them to control their passions from an early age (1840, 145). He praised New York for abolishing debt imprisonment, recommending the measure to England as a very practical solution (1839, 155) and appreciated the pace of progress in the New World, stating that ten years in America was equal to a hundred in Europe (1839, 64).

However, the overwhelming majority of British commentaries on the American system were negative. Democracy was seen as a topsy-turvy arrangement, reversing the natural order of things. While in Britain “everything and everybody [was] comparatively speaking in his place,” in the United States there was a “chaotical [*sic*] want of gradation and discipline” (Marryat 1840, 65). Thomas Colley Grattan’s statement that “while legislators and rulers in other countries seek their inspiration from above, those of America look for it from below” was not only a factual comment on the bottom-up mechanisms of power in a democracy, but also an expression of a sense that the system resulted in the confusion of natural directions: the “above” and the “below,” which led to American politicians’ alleged “selfish ignorance,” “want of courage,” and “want of honesty” (Grattan 1859, II.273-74). Frances Kemble complained that “[i]n England, if an inn-keeper gives you a good dinner, and places the first dish on the table himself, you pay him, and he’s obliged to you. Here, an inn-keeper is a gentleman, your equal, sits at his table with you, you pay him, and are obliged to him besides” (1835, I.216). She was

not only criticizing the American lack of manners, but contrasting it with the “correct” and opposite model: England. Captain Marryat offered a similar description of a tailor who refused to come and take his measurements as an example of behavior resulting from democracy: proof that people in America did not know their place (1839, 130).<sup>3</sup> An apparently contrasting example can be found in Dickens’s *American Notes*, where he described the peculiar manners of a hotel host at Sandusky: “he constantly walked in and out of the room with his hat on; and stopped to converse in the same free-and-easy state; and lay down on our sofa, and pulled his newspaper out of his pocket, and read it at his ease” (Dickens 1842, II.171). However, Dickens claimed that this description was not a criticism, simply a pure characterization of foreign customs:

I should undoubtedly be offended by such proceedings at home, because there they are not the custom, and where they are not, they would be impertinencies; but in America, the only desire of a good-natured fellow of this kind, is to treat his guests hospitably and well; and I had no more right, and I can truly say no more disposition, to measure his conduct by our English rule and standard, than I had to quarrel with him for not being of the exact stature which would qualify him for admission into the Queen’s grenadier guards. (1842, II.171)

As a matter of fact, the passage quoted above functions as an apophasis, since by saying that he would not criticize Americans’ manners, Dickens actually drew the readers’ attention to their impertinent nature. What is more, his claim that one should not measure Americans by British standards may be read as implying that British standards are too high to hold Americans to. The passage therefore does not merely point to a cultural difference between the two countries; rather, it subtly reveals the writer’s preferences, speaking of the American being unfit for admission to the prestigious Grenadier Guards, though not openly criticizing American egalitarian arrangements.

Many British travelers depicted democracy as resulting in “the despotism of a turbulent and unenlightened majority” (Bird 1856, 413). Isabella Bird commented that “[t]he President, the Members of Congress, and to a still greater extent the members of the State Legislatures, are the *delegates* of a tyrannical majority rather than the *representatives* of the people,” and that they were forced to follow the whims of their constituents if they want to be reelected (1856, 421, italics in the original). Marryat complained that the American people should not be compared to “*restricted* sovereigns, but to despots, whose will and caprice are law” (1840, 119, italics in the original). Thomas Hamilton was perhaps the harshest in his comments, stating: “Public men in other countries *may* be the parasites of the people, but in America they are necessarily

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<sup>3</sup> The American system seemed so unnatural to Marryat that he expected the country sooner or later to turn into an aristocratic one, since “[s]ociety must have a head to lead it, and without that head there will be no fixed standard of morality, and things must remain in the chaotic state in which they are at present” (Marryat 1840, 149). The ordering and moral function of the aristocracy was to him so natural that without it the body politic was headless and lost its way.

so. Independence is impossible. They are slaves, and feel themselves to be so. They must act, speak, and vote according to the will of their master” (1833, II.114, italics in the original). The metaphor of politicians as parasites, suggesting that they do nothing fruitful while living off their people, connotes dependence, but also unproductivity. The comparison to slaves points to the politicians’ inability to follow their own will or conscience in political decisions, implying that they cannot do the right thing according to their own judgement but have to do the wrong thing in accordance with the people’s mistaken opinions. It is not accidental that Hamilton in his critique used the word “slaves,” as this term allowed him to hint at America’s most obvious ethical problem, pointed to by travelers from across the political spectrum, which will be discussed further on in this article. What is more, in the passage in question Hamilton accused the majority of American politicians of mediocrity, believing that they were “fitted for nothing better than what they are. God meant them to be tools, and they are so” (Hamilton 1833, II.115). This meant that even if the system had taken a different shape, their achievements would not have been great. At the same time, the writer did admit to having seen in the Congress some exceptional men for whom representing the people—or in Hamilton’s words, “support[ing] and illustrat[ing] the prejudices of the ignorant and vulgar”—must have felt degrading, as it distracted them from “those lofty purposes for which they were intended” (1833, II.115). Imagining the frustration of American politicians, Hamilton projected onto them his own views of what good government was. However, he believed that in general the republic’s statesmen were well fitted by their mediocrity to the menial tasks which they were given.

The bottom-up emanation of power dominated not only in American politics, but also spread to other spheres of life, such as journalism, thought by the travelers to cater to the vulgar taste of the masses (Hamilton 1833, II.388-89), or the voluntary religious system, where ministers willing to keep their positions became slaves to their congregants’ opinion (Marryat 1839, 205). Frances Kemble believed that the democratic spirit was altogether incompatible with the hierarchical structures of religion, and after attending an Episcopalian service during which the congregants did not kneel at the expected moments, she thought Americans unable to “wear the exterior of humbleness and homage, even in the house of the most high God” (1835, I.177). The American system indeed seemed to be hostile to all sorts of values cherished in the Old World: its influence on the form of religious rituals was only one of the problems. British authors feared its impact on the economy; the question of what happens to property in a democracy was perhaps among the most important (Rogers 1974, 67). Thomas Hamilton criticized laws against primogeniture as “unfavourable to national advancement” (1833, I.370), as too were those protecting the poor from the rich but not vice versa: “It [protection] was withheld where most needed; it was profusely lavished where there was no risk of danger” (1833, I.321). For British conservatives, the event of the rich using the poor was less plausible than the poor taking what was not “rightfully” theirs. Basil Hall openly stated: “There must in every democracy, as a matter of course,

be a permanent conspiracy against property” (1829, II.321). The American poor having political power meant that nothing could prevent them from taking property from the rich. Certainly, according to the conservative travelers, politicians were in no position to stop them: the president was ineffective, being elected only for four years, endowed with a low salary and a tiny army. When Thomas Hamilton explained this intentional weakness as resulting from the American fear of dictatorship, he commented with an air of superiority that one could “smile at such nonsense” were it not for the fact that it had “serious consequences” for America, so it would be more proper to “lament the extent and influence of the delusion” (Hamilton 1833, II.59).

Those strong words of criticism towards America did not merely stem from the fact that British travelers were used to different customs and political structures. The American model of citizenship seemed menacing especially in the 1830s and 1840s, when British conservatives felt that the order of the Empire was threatened by reform movements: the Radicals before the passage of the Reform Act of 1832, which democratized the British electoral system,<sup>4</sup> and later the Chartists, who fought for universal suffrage. One of the purposes of Frances Trollope’s book was to show those in England who wished for a greater degree of freedom that spending some time in America would teach them to “tremble at every symptom of democratic power among us” (Trollope 2006, 280). Indeed, she was encouraged by her publisher and by Basil Hall to frame her travelogue in a manner which would support the Tory cause (Kisiel 2013, 66), and the book was subsequently used by Tories as an argument against reform (Deis and Frye 2013, 131). Thomas Hamilton openly declared that his decision to write a book about the United States was dictated by hearing in Parliament that Britain should imitate the American system; therefore, his travelogue was intended as a warning (Hamilton 1833, I.iv). The author believed that “the practical results of the Constitution of the United States should be known” to his people (1833, II.124). His frequently biting critical remarks were not primarily meant to amuse his readers or satisfy their curiosity; rather, this ridiculing of America was to protect Britain from following in its footsteps. That is why Tory writers such as Frances Trollope and Frederick Marryat used the phrase “free and enlightened individuals” or “citizens” ironically or even in a derogatory manner. As such, for example, Trollope recorded her delight at “British” children in Canada, who curtsied to the travelers in order to show proudly that they were not “citizens” (Trollope 2006, 295). Democracy needed to be demonized in order to make it as unappealing as possible to the British reader. For that purpose, Basil Hall presented even excessive drinking as a natural consequence of democracy, saying that it was “probably not less hurtful to health of body, than that system of government appears to be to the intellectual powers of the mind” (Hall

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, not all historians agree that the Reform Act should be seen as the beginning of a series of democratizing measures: for example, Eric J. Evans believes that it was a “consciously anti-democratic” initiative, whose purpose was to “frustrate the plans of working-class radical leaders” by making it clear that this was as far as reform should ever go (Evans 1989, 96).

1829, II.84). Not only did he believe, implausible as it sounds, that democracy led to alcoholism—claiming that where the lowest classes ruled, their habits became dominant—but he also presented the system as a debilitating disease in itself, there being a sort of logic or poetic justice to the fact that one followed the other.

A way of mitigating those harsh words of criticism and presenting oneself as more moderate and objective was the often-repeated mantra that while democracy was harmful, the travelers would have had nothing against a republic. As Campbell points out, in the early nineteenth century the term “democracy” connoted in Britain “the French Revolution and the Terror that is mob rule,” while “republic” evoked more positive associations (Campbell 2007, 91). This is why some travelers criticized Jefferson’s admiration for the French Revolution, which “attempted to bring all to a philanthropic equality by the lively action of the guillotine” (Featherstonhaugh 1844, I.116). Basil Hall pointed to the fact that what the Founding Fathers had in mind was a republic, and maintained that they would have been distressed to see the current shape of things—Hall visited America in 1828, just when Andrew Jackson was elected president. He believed that democracy was suitable for small communities, while countries should rely on representatives who, in order to be truly independent, should be elected for a long period and not influenced by the “transitory impulses” which “are apt to mislead both the wishes and the opinions of the multitude” (Hall 1829, II.270). In other words, the writer professed that the people could be easily swayed in the wrong direction, and a representative should not really represent their wishes but know best what was good for them. He contrasted democracy with what he called a “correct representative form of government”—not even a better one—which would in theory be a republic, though in practice, the British constitutional monarchy. Frederick Marryat similarly declared that “[t]o suppose that a people can govern themselves, that is to say directly, is absurd [...]. They may govern themselves indirectly by selecting from the mass the more enlightened and intelligent” (1840, 179). Like Hall, he believed that George Washington had left America as a “pure and [...] virtuous republic,” while under Andrew Jackson the country “sank” into democracy (1839, 11). The metaphor of sinking was a clear comment on how British conservatives felt about the changes happening in America. The United States was falling from its original state of innocence, and it was only the more hopeful commentators who believed that one day it could again “rejoic[e] in the purity of its original republican institutions” (Bird 1856, 421). Even progressive writers, who in general embraced the American system, found it difficult to fully accept Jacksonian democracy; Frances Wright was among the few who actually believed in the superiority of democracy over a republic, maintaining that America’s doctrine of representation would save the country from the sad fate of the Roman republic (1963, 63).

The fall of the republic of Rome was often quoted as a precedent proving that all in all, republicanism was an impractical system. Frances Kemble declared: “I believe

in my heart that a republic is the noblest, highest and purest form of government; but I believe that according to the present disposition of human creatures, 'tis a mere beau ideal, totally incapable of realization." This, according to Kemble, was because "a republic is a natural anomaly; there is nothing republican in the construction of the material universe; there be highlands and lowlands, lordly mountains as barren as any aristocracy, and lowly valleys, as productive as any labouring classes. The feeling of rank, of inequality, is inherent in us, a part of the veneration of our natures" (Kemble 1835, I.56). Through her metaphor of the landscape, the writer naturalized hierarchy, suggesting that political arrangements were as unchangeable as the laws governing the physical world. At the same time, her assertion that a republic was a utopian project that was impossible to realize allowed her to present herself as a seasoned European thinker, less naïve than the idealistic Americans.

In her opinions about the unfeasibility of all egalitarian systems, Kemble was in good company: Captain Frederick Marryat maintained that there would never be a time when people could govern themselves effectively and that democracy was doomed to fail (1840, 182). Even though de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was at the time a bestseller, many British writers disagreed with the French thinker's assertions that democracy was the future of the Western world. Understandably, it was the progressive writers that thought democratization was unavoidable, and quite enthusiastically so. Harriet Martineau depicted democracy as being a natural consequence of the egalitarian spirit of Christianity, as representing the will of the majority which is "always ultimately in the right" (Martineau 1837, II.217, 186), and, most importantly, as practicable: the fifty years of America's existence proved to her that "the capacity of mankind for self-government,—is established for ever" (1837, I.2).

It was not only self-government by the people, but equality at large which many deemed impracticable. Thomas Colley Grattan believed that social equality could only exist in small communities, and even that was never certain. He spoke of Brook Farm, a utopian community established in the 1840s in Massachusetts, claiming that its failure was due to the fact that "educated gentlemen and ladies could not by possibility [...] descend to such low and degrading occupations, or assimilate their tastes, habits, and thought, to such an intercourse as would conduce to the general harmony or comfort" (1859, II.158). Too big a pressure on social cohesion was contrary to human nature and taste. Charles Murray ironized about the American tendency to overuse military titles and refer to everyone as a "gentleman," commenting that Americans would not "continue long to wage this useless war with common sense and the common meaning of words; but [would] return to the usual acceptance of terms acknowledged by other civilized nations," as they "cannot change human nature" (1839, I.121). Murray correctly intuited the ability of language to shape one's world, and interpreted the semantic shifts happening in the U.S. as an attack on existing social ranks. However, the *status quo* expressed for him "human nature" and "common sense," which made fighting it a utopian venture. What proved to him the impracticability of equality—

although any proof was in fact “superfluous to any reflecting mind,” given the obvious superiority of hierarchy—was the fact that even in America true equality existed only on the western frontier, while it disintegrated in “civilized life” (Murray 1839, II.85).

The least critical thing that conservative writers were able to say about democracy was that it befitted Americans, but not the British. Thomas Colley Grattan stated in the 1850s that “[t]he democratic forms of America are widely inconsistent with the instincts, traditions, and capabilities of the European nations. To force those forms upon the people of the Old World would be almost impossible [...]. The political events which agitated Europe in 1848 and 1849, and their miserable result, may justify this opinion” (Grattan 1859, I.xiii). Americans alone—as if not sharing the same traditions as Europe—were capable of prospering in a democracy, which was why they should be taught that “their peculiar form of government is good as adapted to them, but would be full of mischief if forced on other communities” (Grattan 1859, I.218). This passage does not denounce democracy altogether; rather, the writer argued only for Americans to allow other nations to remain faithful to monarchy, and criticized their “prejudices in favour of their own institutions, and against ours” (Grattan 1859, I.219). It is a remarkably defensive passage when compared to the texts of earlier British travelers, but also to Grattan’s own words in other chapters, where he often expressed a feeling of national superiority. In the vein of nineteenth-century science, he believed that natural conditions shaped the character of a people. As such, he was able to accept democracy for a vast country such as the United States, but not for the “cramped but refined communities of the old world” (1859, I.221).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Grattan’s argument that each nation had its own political destiny would quickly give way to implying that Americans were unrefined: “a loftier order of civilisation is not in keeping with their institutions, [...] it is incompatible with their own nature, [...] it is, in fact, beyond their reach” (1859, I.222). The traveler made it completely clear which system was superior and which people were good enough to embrace it.

Even if British travelers were able to accept some degree of democracy, they often believed that America had simply too much of it, especially in the Jacksonian era—from Jackson’s election as president in 1828 through to the 1840s. Many criticized universal (white male) suffrage in particular, referring to it as “that fatal principle which has been the leading cause of the prevailing degeneracy” (Featherstonhaugh 1844, I.xxiv) and claiming that it brought “into Legislatures of the States ignorant and incompetent persons, to the exclusion of the ablest and most experienced” (Hall 1829, II.69-70). Thomas Hamilton believed that the lack of property qualification for voting would ultimately bring about the fall of the United States. The writer admitted that while in other countries property may not have been the best indicator of who should vote, in America it was an “unerring” criterion, since “in a country

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<sup>5</sup> Here Grattan openly contradicted his comments on Brook Farm, where he stated that egalitarian social arrangements were possible only in small communities.

where labour is so highly rewarded” one must be “idle or profligate, or more probably both” not to have accumulated some property. His argument was not the usual claim that only property owners had a stake in society, but that in a country so open to social advancement material wealth indicated not only “intelligence, but [...] moral character” (Hamilton 1833, I.320-21). Another symptom of excessive democracy that the travelers complained about were presidential levees: receptions during which the people could meet the president directly. Frederick Marryat disliked the custom so much that he praised President Van Buren for “striking at the very roots of their boasted equality” by preventing “the mobocracy from intruding themselves at his levees” (1839, 92). Harriet Martineau, due to her progressive views, praised the custom of the levees, but even she added that it was easy to laugh at them, there being many sights open to ridicule (1837, II.152). The idea of different social strata being able to mingle together was seen as exotic, and only occasionally not blameworthy. Thomas Hamilton described a similar phenomenon taking place during the Wistar parties in Philadelphia: an open house for discussing vital subjects, which, in the traveler’s view, performed an educational function: “A modest and deserving man is brought into notice. His errors are corrected, his ardor is stimulated, his taste improved. A healthy connection is kept up between the different classes of society, and the feeling of mutual sympathy is duly cherished” (Hamilton 1833, I.342). One can easily see that even though Hamilton appreciated certain aspects of the egalitarian system, he did not understand equality in the American sense; rather, he held the paternalistic view that the lower classes should be elevated by the higher ones.

When progressive writers criticized the American system, it was usually for not being democratic enough; for example, Harriet Martineau did not like the fact that justices of the Supreme Court were elected for life (1837, I.29). At the same time both progressives—who were enthusiastic about democracy—and conservatives—who disliked democracy and equality on principle—disapproved of the fact that America did not live up to its professed values. They recognized that equality in the United States did not extend to everyone, especially not to people of color. As slavery in the British Empire was abolished in 1833, British travelers were proud of their abolitionist views and thought slavery to be a disgrace, especially in a country which boasted of its egalitarian principles. Many condemned the treatment of Native Americans motivated by Americans’ greed for more land, especially the Indian Removal Act signed by President Jackson in 1830. Thus, Frances Trollope described Americans as “with one hand hoisting the cap of liberty, and with the other flogging their slaves” (2006, 173). Thomas Hamilton treated the discrepancy between American ideals and slavery as a lesson in human nature, which would make one return home “a wiser, if not a better man” (1833, II.144). By “wiser,” the writer meant conservative: “better satisfied with his own country and government, and less disposed to sacrifice the present *good* for a contingent *better*” (italics in the original). Hamilton’s visit to America was supposed to teach not only him but also his compatriots to be cautious of any projects promising a better future for humankind.

American expansionism too was seen as a sign of hypocrisy: the annexation of the Republic of Texas—formerly part of the Republic of Mexico—by the United States in 1845 was criticized by both conservative writers such as Frederick Marryat (1840, 168) and progressives such as Harriet Martineau, who called it “usurpation” (1837, I.223). The accusation of hypocrisy pertained also to American internal matters: real equality was simply seen as impossible. Frances Trollope called the phrase “all men are created equal” the “phrase of mischievous sophistry,” declaring its falseness to be commonsense, which allowed her to not have to argue her point of view, but to present it as obvious (2006, 64). The writer believed that “American citizens [we]re not equal. Did Washington feel them to be so, when his word outweighed (so happily for them) the votes of thousands? Did Franklin think that all were equal when he shouldered his way from the printing press to the cabinet?” (Trollope 2006, 247). The comment on Franklin reveals that, for Trollope, the very inequality of conditions and the fact that some people attained higher places than others disproved equality as a viable concept. This was because, as Jack P. Greene explains, America at the time was not a classless society, but rather a rankless one: it was based on the equality of social standing with regards to the law, and not to wealth (Greene 1993, 206).

Many travelers maintained that Americans themselves were not interested in equality, but that they secretly longed for social distinctions. Thomas Hamilton complained about “the fashion to call the United States the land of liberty and equality,” presenting it not as a serious intellectual proposition, but merely a fad (1833, I.109). In reality, “[t]here [was] quite as much practical equality in Liverpool as New York,” since people differed in their skills and talents, and had a “natural” need to distinguish themselves against others (Hamilton 1833, 109–10). Like Frances Trollope, he did not mean equality of opportunity but of conditions, and when he did not see it, he concluded that the famed American egalitarianism was a mere empty slogan. American aristocratic tendencies were, according to Hamilton, best visible in Philadelphia, a city with a rigid system of social advancement, contrasting it with New York, where commerce was so strong that people there made and lost money more quickly, changing their social situation more often (Hamilton 1833, I.388–89). Frederick Marryat had similar impressions of Philadelphians, claiming that since they were all rich, they could not be distinguished by their possessions. As a result, they cared excessively about “lineage and descent,” especially those who did not belong to the best families (1839, 80). He also described the Virginia sulfur springs as the most aristocratic place in America: “It is at this place that you feel how excessively aristocratical and exclusive the Americans would be, and indeed will be, in spite of their institutions” (1839, 134). Frances Kemble believed that the spirit of aristocracy was omnipresent, but that it had a different basis in different parts of America: in Boston it was connected to intellectual distinction, in New York to wealth and in Philadelphia to birth (1835, I.196). She believed America to be egalitarian only in its political arrangement, which did not correspond to people’s preferences: “Democracy governs the land; whilst, throughout society, a contrary tendency shows

itself" (1835, I.197). In reality, she claimed, "[t]hese democrats are as title-sick as a banker's wife in England" (Kemble 1835, I.56). The traveler's comparison highlighted not only Americans' alleged pretensions and social ambitions, but also suggested that they were all commoners, hence their longing for titles.

A similar impression can be traced in Thomas Colley Grattan's travelogue, in which the writer claimed that Americans found a romantic appeal in the concept of aristocracy (1859, I.199). While finding such fascination understandable, Grattan believed American attempts at imitating European aristocracy to be distasteful and ridiculous and expressed his feeling of superiority quite openly. In his opinion, social distinctions in America "degenerate[d] into mere burlesque," since they were purely arbitrary. "Why, Mr. A., the oil merchant; or Mr. B., the clother; or Mr. C., the shipping agent; should not be one in the same circle with Mr. D., the ci-devant linendraper; or Mr. E., the grocer of some years ago [...]—it would be very hard to tell," he ironized (Grattan 1859, I.119). In the traveler's eyes, Americans were indeed equal in their mediocrity and lack of what he referred to as "civilization."

As Berger states, travels in America rarely changed the writers' preconceived notions of the country (Berger 1943, 183). Rather, travelers reinforced their existing views, since the way the United States was experienced was strongly colored by their personal situations, social position, but most of all, by their political opinions. One may see this as a phenomenon characteristic of the genre in general: as Carl Thompson argues, travel writing usually reveals something about the traveler and his/her context to at least the same extent as about the country visited (Thompson 2011, 10). Tim Youngs too maintains that travel writing is an inherently ideological genre, which reflects the writer's predispositions (Youngs 2006, 2). Since most British writers visiting the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century held more or less conservative views, most of them were quite critical of democracy and equality. They believed it to be a topsy-turvy system, contrary to tradition and to human nature itself and impossible to implement in practice. Democracy resulted in their view of the tyranny of the majority, empowering its mediocre representatives to govern and taking power away from the skilled and able. While it is true that the period saw the general popularity of anti-American sentiments (Gulddal 2013, 494), and that criticizing everything American became a literary convention in itself (Wheatley 2001, 63), unfavorable comments about the young republic were expressed not only for the sake of intellectual discussion, but were also intended as a warning against Reformers and Chartists and reflected the fear of the highborn for their inherited property. At best, travelers admitted that democracy was a system benefitting America when it was not carried to excess, but one which could never succeed in Europe. They also perceived the United States as unable to practice what it was preaching: be that through not granting equality to its minorities or respecting its neighbors, or through Americans' hidden aspirations at aristocratic distinction, observable in the major cities on the East Coast.

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