norms, and principles in political discourse. This acceptance of an ideological dimension to healthy political activity culminates in Oakeshott's jettisoning of the concept of tradition altogether in *On Human Conduct* and his replacement of it by the concept of a practice. The latter concept places much greater emphasis on the intelligent responses of agents, over against unconscious habits and intuitions, and it highlights the contingency of political arrangements, over against natural growth.

All this is carefully and convincingly argued by Soininen. In the final two chapters of the book, she goes on to claim that Oakeshott's emphasis on contingency in his later works links him to antifoundationalist, postmodern thinkers like Richard Rorty and Zygmunt Bauman; she also suggests that his acknowledgement of the productive role of ideology in politics leads to a loosening of his rigid distinction between theory and practice. Unfortunately, these two claims are not sufficiently developed—the final two chapters of the book are only twelve pages long, whereas the chapter devoted to Oakeshott's "changing conception of politics" is a whopping 138 pages—and I would argue that they should not be accepted without considerable qualification. While there is much that Oakeshott shares with Rorty's antifoundationalist view of philosophy and human agency, in the end it is his differences with Rorty that allow him to make enduring contributions to our understanding of politics. Though his recognition of contingency in political life is important in this regard, no less important is his ability to abstract from the contingency and ambiguity of historical reality and theorize a relatively permanent ideal such as civil association. This nonhistoricist aspect of Oakeshott's political philosophy connects to the question of theory and practice as well. I do not doubt that the relationship between theory and practice in Oakeshott's political philosophy is far more complicated than the rigid distinction he draws between them often suggests. Nevertheless, it is one of the virtues of Oakeshott's political philosophy that he does not allow theory simply to collapse into practice and thereby fall prey to the kind of historicism and banal pragmatism that haunt Rorty's philosophy, and postmodernism in general.

–Paul Franco

DANCING ON THE GREASY POLE

Ian St. John: *Disraeli and the Art of Victorian Politics* (London: Anthem Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 239. $85.00)

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Few figures in political life are as endlessly fascinating as the enigmatic figure of Benjamin Disraeli. Convinced that he possessed commanding

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political gifts, he spent most of his career in opposition to or serving in short-lived minority governments. When he at last headed a government with a secure majority, age and illness left him unable to exercise power in a consistently forceful manner. Quick to claim a special insight into the needs and desires of humble people, he found his greatest pleasure as a figure of London society. Drawn to deep plans for directing international events, he has usually been criticized for succumbing to reactive and short-term thinking. Defender of the landed aristocracy and the territorial constitution, he was the son of an urban book dealer and one of only two nineteenth-century prime ministers not to have attended university. Champion of the Church, he was not baptized a Christian until the age of twelve—a fact that neither his allies nor his opponents ever forgot. Avid for the fame and funds that his novels brought him, he may have produced his greatest book in a work of nonfiction, his biography of Lord George Bentinck.

A man possessing these multifarious, not to say contradictory, characteristics is bound to hold an attraction for biographers as strong as that which Disraeli apparently held for the women in whose company he delighted all his life. The dandy-become-premier is irresistible as a subject because, in his cynicism and his humor, in his foibles and his failings, he seems much more modern than do many of his contemporaries. Russell, Peel, Gladstone, even Salisbury, are seen by the contemporary world as far more representative of what are seen to be Victorian, and therefore dated, attitudes, while Disraeli, Melbourne, and perhaps Palmerston have more affinities with a sensibility that fears, above all else, being thought to take itself too seriously.

This, then, is the challenging task that Ian St. John has set for himself—to take a character who, though he was Victoria's favorite prime minister, seems to embody anything but what are taken to be the Victorian values of sobriety, seriousness, industriousness, and faith in both science and religion, and to explain how it was that this person played a central role in Victorian politics for nearly forty years. The story of such a paradoxical career is almost bound to be filled with colorful episodes—Disraeli overthrowing his own leader Peel, Disraeli demanding that Jews be allowed to sit in the Commons, Disraeli "dishing the Whigs" with the Reform Bill of 1867, Disraeli charming the widow of Windsor, Disraeli striding the diplomatic stage at the Congress of Berlin—but does it have an explanatory theme?

St. John finds his theme in the conception of politics as an art in which leaders of stature manifest their superior qualities by demonstrating their ability to prevail in a contest for power and authority and then employ that power in ways that history will record and celebrate. Disraeli, in St. John's words, saw politics as "a grand drama in which individuals of vision and courage manipulated men and shaped the fate of nations," even as he interpreted his own life "as an artistic expression through the medium of the governance of men and women" (pp. 205, 206). Politics was a game that could be played well or badly, and there was an aesthetic pleasure to be derived from watching it played well, and even more from playing it well oneself.

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This general pursuit of self-realization through power was, in Disraeli's case, to be carried out in the specific arena of Victorian politics. Even the most commanding figure had to play the political game within the constraints of the social, economic, moral, and technological setting in which he lived. For Disraeli, these limiting conditions included a House of Commons that, for much of his political life, contained no stable majority and was, therefore, under the influence of shifting coalitions and persuasive speakers who could carry others with them through their performance in debate; the rapid industrialization and urbanization of his country in the middle years of the nineteenth century; the progress of science and repeated crises in the Church; the heyday of mid-Victorian prosperity followed by prolonged economic decline, particularly in agriculture; and the rise of one empire (the German) and the decline of another (the Ottoman), with all the consequences that those changes in the distribution of international power brought for European and global stability.

This understanding of political activity, and these facts of Victorian politics in Britain, meant, for example, that Disraeli would attempt to display his mastery by perfecting his debating style and adapting it to the tastes of the Commons; it was, in part, an artistic endeavor. This explains why he laid such emphasis on the mechanism of party—why he denounced Peel for betraying his party followers on the Corn Laws, and why, in the years following, he labored to improve the efficiency of the machinery of the Conservative Party—for it was only by establishing reliable party government that a superior leader at the head of the party could prevail over his opponents and impose his vision of the national destiny. Such a conception of politics meant that, despite his collapsing health, he insisted on being present in Berlin in 1878, for it was only by besting Bismarck, Gorchakov, and other leaders (and only by doing so with such style that they appreciated the performance) that politics as the aesthetically pleasing exercise of power could be taken to the very highest level. St. John points out that Disraeli's view of politics also explains his failures. A politics of performance and of the creative, almost heroic, surmounting any obstacle, is almost necessarily a politics of the moment—an almost instinctual response that reveals the resourcefulness of the statesman. This way of approaching political decisions militates against long-matured plans and coherent and grand strategies and makes politics more a series of tactical moves; St. John contends that, while Disraeli displayed consistent attitudes, he pursued few consistent policies. When out of office, he was content to await and profit by the errors of his opponents, and when in office, he left the formulation of legislative proposals to his colleagues. Display, not detail, was his strong suit.

Given that it is the picture of an age as well as the chronicle of an individual, *Disraeli and the Art of Victorian Politics* contrives to treat its subject in remarkably short order. In part, it does so by summarizing the work of others; each chapter concludes with a "Historians' Debate"—a section of several pages in which St. John sets down questions pertinent to his thesis and outlines the various

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answers that have been given to these questions by reproducing some lines from historians and others who have written on Disraeli. This book is, thus, more a work of synthesis than one of original research, and as such it is a valuable resource for students and other nonspecialists wishing to become acquainted with a historical figure as colorful as he was influential.

–David Clinton

GLORIOUS MYTH

Margaret Canovan: *The People* (Cambridge, UK; and Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2005. Pp. viii, 261. $62.95.)

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The concept of "the people" originates with the Roman *populus* and rises to a climax in modern times in such events as the founding of the American constitution by "we the people." The concept has thus endured through over twenty centuries, assuming a remarkable variety of mythical and theoretical forms and exercising a variable, sometimes slight and sometimes dramatic, impact on events. Canovan's book is essentially a survey of this complex story, with discerning comments at each stage. The author is clearly attracted to a particular version of the concept of the people—to be discussed at the close of this review—and comes within a hair's breadth of affirming that version. But she draws back at the last moment, so that the book remains a survey, done with exceptional care and learning and illuminated throughout by highly sensible comments. It will be valuable to anyone who desires to reflect seriously on democracy, populism, and allied matters.

Several interesting issues are just beneath the surface whenever the people are being thought about or appealed to. For example, does the authority of the people imply democracy? It seems obvious to the modern mind that it does. But very often, of course, it has been merely an ostensible source of legitimacy for some ruling minority. Thus aristocracies, as well as emperors and kings, have governed for centuries with a legitimacy supposedly grounded finally in the people. Only in relatively recent times have the people come to be viewed as—and, in fact, to be—an active force in the political realm. When this happens, the consequences can be striking. Canovan remarks that one of the reasons the American Revolution signifies "a turning-point in the history of the people is that it launched the career of the people as a universalist and progressive cause, with a wide-ranging radical agenda capable of subverting established institutions in the USA itself and around the world" (p. 32).

The idea of universality arises inevitably from the idea of the people, for there is a sense in which the people means everyone. But can everyone be meaningful either as a source of legitimacy or as a political agent? In other

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