

THE PRODUCTION OF ECONOMIC KNOWLEDGE
IN THE ANTI-CORN LAW CAMPAIGN, 1839-1846

by

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Abstract

Science studies contends that scientific knowledge is produced through social and geographical processes. This dissertation applies this insight to the production of economic knowledge, specifically addressing how the Anti-Corn Law League, an organisation that campaigned against the protectionist Corn Laws in Britain in the 1830s and 40s, made economic truth. The argument is organised in five chapters. The Introduction discusses the key theoretical ideas from science studies – controversy, consensus, and credibility – that later chapters use in interpreting the Anti-Corn Law campaign. Chapter II supplies the social and intellectual context of the Anti-Corn Law movement, showing how its origins in Manchester shaped its meaning, and how uncertainty about the benefits of free trade compelled Leaguers to present a persuasive case for it. Chapter III explores how the League’s public meetings were conducted, arguing that economic knowledge was produced through the processes of presenting and authenticating testimony, in which mass assent, expressed through various imaginaries of the nation, functioned as a rhetorical voucher of truth. Chapter IV examines a case in which assent was not attained, and the means through which the League sought to maintain credibility. It is argued that the League depicted itself as trustworthy according to assumptions society shared about what counted as knowledge and honesty, assumptions that constituted what can be called a cultural map of credibility. The Conclusion summarises the main arguments of the thesis. It explicitly relates the study to the literature on the geographies of science, and elaborates on how geographical imaginations are inscribed in the process of knowledge production.

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I Introduction

This thesis concerns the Anti-Corn Law League and how it made economic truth. The Anti-Corn Law League was a band of free traders who in the first half of the nineteenth century campaigned for the repeal of the Corn Laws, protectionist legislation restricting the import of grain to Britain.¹ The League's campaign aimed to produce 'true' knowledge about the Corn Laws and free trade. Leaguers traversed the country to persuade the public that repeal would serve their interests by demonstrating how the Corn Laws harmed Britain's wealth. In 1846, the laws finally fell, backed by 'truths' the League had made to legitimise their repeal. In justifying the abolishment of protection, the British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel asserted the Corn Laws' unjust effects on the poor, an assertion deriving directly from the League and the 'truth' it produced.

The language of 'truth' was the League's. Leaguers consistently insisted that their knowledge of the Corn Laws' effects was 'true'. When the League's parliamentary supporter Charles Pelham Villiers spoke in the House of Commons in 1840 about the laws, for instance, he addressed himself to 'those who care[d] for truth'.² Three years later, John Bowring, another League supporter, conveyed a similar message in verse to an audience at London's Drury Lane Theatre, showing how the League's

... truth shall make

A still more eloquent appeal

To those who think – to those who feel

¹ For present purposes, these admittedly brief definitions will suffice. A fuller description of the League and the Corn Laws will be provided in the next chapter.

² Quoted in Archibald Prentice, *History of the Anti-Corn-Law League*, vol. 1 (London: W. & F. G. Cash, 1853), 146

The public woe, the public weal,
Are now at stake.³

But what did Villiers, Bowring, and the other Leaguers mean? In what sense was their knowledge ‘true’? My argument will be that ‘truth’ meant for the League statements that either received mass assent, or were made by trustworthy persons. Through these two means knowledge was made true for the League. How the League in its statements achieved mass assent, or drew on trustworthy persons, will be the core concerns of this thesis.

I rely heavily on Simon Schaffer’s and Steven Shapin’s works on the Restoration experimental philosopher Robert Boyle. In their pioneering *Leviathan and the Air-pump*, Shapin and Schaffer proposed to use scientific controversy to unsettle naturalised conceptions about science, that is, taken-for-granted beliefs about scientific practice.⁴ One such naturalised conception is that facts and experiments are necessary for making knowledge. To undermine that conception, to show that facts and experiments are not the only legitimate means to knowledge, Shapin and Schaffer used the controversy between Robert Boyle, the leading exponent of the experimental approach to knowledge in Restoration England, and other natural philosophers regarding the proper means to true knowledge.

In the 1660s, Robert Boyle was interested in the properties of air, specifically, a phenomenon which we today would call air pressure. To investigate this matter, he proposed the use of experiments to produce what he called ‘matters of fact’, which he

³ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 67

⁴ Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985), 7

equated with true knowledge of nature. Boyle was seeking to secure knowledge of nature by conducting experiments that used custom-built scientific apparatus like the air-pump, a hollow and tightly sealed glass globe from which air could be removed. One of Boyle's experiments involved placing the Torricellian apparatus – a tube of mercury whose sole open end was dipped in a basin of mercury – into the air-pump from which air was then removed.⁵ As the air was taken out, the height of mercury in the tube fell, which, according to Boyle, resulted from the removal of air from the globe, and the consequent fall in air pressure on the mercury in the basin.⁶

In Boyle's experiments, witnesses were gathered around experimental apparatus in places like Gresham College to observe its operation, and to confirm what they had collectively observed.⁷ If collective assent or consensus was obtained, the observed effects were deemed matters of fact, true knowledge of nature. Matters of fact produced this way were authoritative because two features of the experimental programme guaranteed their authenticity. First, there was strength from collective assent. The use of multiple witnesses and the requirement that they agree gave credibility to statements of knowledge. Justification for this position came from legal trials. As Boyle reflected, in a legal trial 'though each testimony single be but probable, a concurrence of such probabilities [by the agreement of many witnesses], ... amount[s] to a moral certainty'.⁸

⁵ Ibid., 41-3

⁶ Ibid., 44

⁷ Gresham College, located at Bishopgate Street, London, was home to the Royal Society from 1660 to 1710. From 1667-74, when the 1666 Great Fire of London made the college unavailable, the Royal Society moved to Arundel House, residence of the Duke of Norfolk, on the Strand. See Steven Shapin, 'The House of Experiment in Seventeenth-Century England', *Isis* 79, no. 3 (1988): 381.

⁸ Robert Boyle, *Some Considerations about the Reconcilableness of Reason and Religion*, 182, quoted in Shapin and Schaffer, 56

Collective assent was enabled by the second feature of Boyle's programme which guaranteed authenticity. Matters of fact were made by machines rather than humans. In Boyle's case facts were generated by the air-pump, which not only made unobservable effects visible, thereby enhancing the senses' perception of natural phenomena,⁹ but also – and more critically – created a boundary between humans and nature. Witnesses stood *apart* from the air-pump to watch it function. In this way, humans did not appear to interfere with or distort the production of facts; their contributions (of observing and testifying) were passive and *post hoc*. The machine established a tangible boundary between society and nature: it depersonalised the latter, crystallising it, quite literally, as an autonomous *space* that human subjects could objectively behold, and a coherent *category* that members of society could conceive.¹⁰ In this way, the machine created 'natural' *objects* whose behaviour humans could agree (or disagree) about.¹¹

In all this, it was the observable effects that mattered. For if knowledge was to be produced in front of witnesses, and if agreement was to be necessary for truth, then the foundation of that truth had to be something all witnesses could access: the observable behaviour of nature.¹² By contrast, questions about imperceptible things like causes or the composition of the Torricellian space – the space left in the glass tube by the descending mercury – were not questions Boyle entertained in his experimental philosophy.

Modern science followed Boyle's experimental method in privileging experiments in the generation of matters of fact, and facts in the production of

⁹ Shapin and Schaffer, 36-7

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 76-9

¹¹ So the air-pump was an 'objectifying resource'. See *ibid.*, 77.

¹² *Ibid.*, 50-1

knowledge. While experimentation has become a predominant mode of scientific inquiry, facts, those observed particulars about the world, have become central to modern knowledge, their authority as the basis of truth assumed and unquestioned. Whereas our ‘theories, hypotheses, and our metaphysical systems may be jettisoned, ... matters of fact stand undeniable and permanent.’¹³ The necessity of experiment and the power of facts in modern science are banal and distinctly *uncontroversial*.

Shapin and Schaffer’s project was to disturb such naturalised assumptions by showing how experimentalism and the facts it produced were not natural at all. Rather, it was the subject of intense controversy. In particular, Boyle’s approach drew critique from the likes of Thomas Hobbes, Franciscus Linus, and Henry More. Among these, Hobbes was perhaps the most virulent, and pointed out many ways in which he thought Boyle’s experiments failed to secure knowledge. For one, Hobbes objected that Boyle’s equipment had physical flaws which prevented it from producing *accurate* effects about how nature behaved. Hobbes also denied that Boyle’s enterprise was properly ‘philosophical’ because it was silent on questions of *cause*. Hobbes had contested Boyle’s method because it lacked the features – of accuracy and of causal explanation, among others – which Hobbes regarded as necessary for proper natural ‘philosophy’. For Shapin and Schaffer, such criticisms of Boyle’s experimental programme show that Boyle had redefined natural philosophy in ways that were unacceptable to other practitioners. The authors’ study of controversy revealed different visions of science, and different versions of what science *could be*.

¹³ Ibid., 23

Studying controversy can also destabilise the self-evidence of economic truth, and help us understand its meaning.¹⁴ By examining debates around free trade, like those related to the Anti-Corn Law campaign, we can see how its epistemic legitimacy was made, how its tenets were turned into ‘truth’.¹⁵ The 1830s and 40s were a time of intense controversy about the Corn Laws and its effects on British wealth. On the one hand, Anti-Corn Law Leaguers contended that the laws were creating an economic crisis in Britain and that repeal would reverse this trend. On the other, protectionists associated with the Corn Laws were keen to show that protected trade did not cause crisis, that other factors were to blame, and that repeal would not solve the problem. Revisiting this controversy, as this thesis intends, reveals that the League’s ‘truths’ were not self-evident, and that the truth content of its claims – insofar as ‘truth’ refers to claims that correspond to external reality – cannot fully explain the success of free trade in 1846:¹⁶ first, by indicating there

¹⁴ Because my point of departure is science and its object, nature, it may seem natural to address the emergence of Political Economy as a science, and its object, ‘the economy’, in the nineteenth century to set the context for the formation of *economic* knowledge in the Anti-Corn Law campaign. However, the League was not synonymous with Political Economy: although Leaguers almost certainly read political economic texts, and although they shared ideas with political economists, the relationship between the two, as I show below, was ambivalent, if not strained. Thus, I have neglected to discuss Political Economy in any depth except in the form expressed below (see Chapter II). Readers interested in these issues may consult Michel Foucault’s *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2004 [1966]), especially Ch. 6. Here, Foucault connects the emergence of ‘the economy’ as an object of knowledge during the age of mercantilism with the redefinition of wealth in terms of (in principle, limitless) objects of human desire (rather than the (limited) intrinsic value of precious metals), and the emergence of money as a representation of that wealth. These developments enabled an ‘economy’ and its constituents to be represented, and their relationships to be articulated. For a more recent discussion, see Timothy Mitchell’s *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002). Readers should note that while Mitchell’s work focuses on Egypt in the late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century (and elsewhere on more recent Peru), his conclusions regarding the construction of economic discourse and ‘the economy’ are more widely applicable. Contra Foucault, however, Mitchell places the emergence of ‘the economy’ – which he seems to associate with the emergence of macroeconomics, especially in the work of Keynes – firmly in the twentieth century. For a summary of his position, see his ‘Rethinking Economy’, *Geoforum* 39, no. 3 (2008): 1116-21.

¹⁵ Although I am referring to free trade, I am not concerned with trade under neoliberalism (as it is today), so a genealogy of neoliberalism will not be provided.

were viable alternatives to the free trade programme before it attained legitimacy, and that these were based on good reasons; and second, by demonstrating that the triumph of free trade was not a ‘natural’ outcome owing to ‘natural’ laws or truths, but a *produced* one reflecting a set of particular social interests. The social interests involved in the legitimisation of free trade are seen in how the League participated in the Corn Law dispute.

The League’s approach to the Corn Laws and free trade was similar in some respects to Boyle’s around nature, though quite different in others. Boyle argued that settling the dispute around the character of air required experimental evidence. Likewise, one free trader referred to statistics on corn prices as ‘EXPERIMENTAL evidence, the safest test of what is practically true’.¹⁷ Also, the League resorted to producing observable economic matters of fact to show that the Corn Laws were truly causing poverty all over Britain. Unlike Boyle, however, the League’s approach did not involve machinery, but enlisted two types of witnesses who participated in its public meetings. The first type presented testimonies regarding the Corn Laws’ effects on Britain. Such witnesses generally confined their testimonies to what was directly observable: while some spoke the facts about the nature and extent of poverty in the localities they were from, others quoted statistics about the state of trade for a particular commodity like cotton or corn. Their function was to relate, as the air-pump had done in recording the impact of changes in the volume of air on the Torricellian apparatus, the effects of protection on Britain’s

¹⁶ For a discussion of how empirical correspondence (and logical coherence) fail to fully explain the dominance of free trade as a doctrine, see Eric Sheppard, ‘Constructing free trade: from Manchester boosterism to global management’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 30, no. 2 (2005).

¹⁷ A Cumberland Landowner, *Free Trade in Corn: The Real Interest of the Landlord and the True Policy of the State* (London: James Ridgway, 1828), 1

economy. Such witnesses were subjected to ‘observation’ by the League’s audiences, the second type of witness. These witnesses compared the testimonies they heard to their experiences of the world, and endorsed the testimonies as matters of fact when their experiences agreed with the statements presented. As in Boyle’s experiments, economic matters of fact, or true knowledge about the economy, were produced when assent was obtained.

It is reasonable to think that the League used witnesses in making its knowledge because information at the time, particularly about the condition of society, was so poor. This may seem peculiar because the early nineteenth century is widely associated with the outpouring of printed numbers on health, education, poverty, and trade.¹⁸ The 1830s, in particular, was a decade which saw the mushrooming of institutions systematically producing data about these issues.¹⁹ Nevertheless, very few of these institutions were successful. The Manchester Statistical Society, formed in 1833, was ‘the first [of all provincial societies] to be founded, far and away the most active, and the only one to survive throughout [the first half of the 1800s].’²⁰ Driven by a group of Mancunian

¹⁸ What the philosopher Ian Hacking has called an ‘avalanche of printed numbers’. See Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Ch. 4, and pages 28-9 for the British case. The geomorphological metaphor is scattered (and extended) throughout his print, but can be found, in the form quoted here, on page 3.

¹⁹ By and large, most provincial societies were animated by attempts at social improvement; hence, their concern with statistics on poverty, health, education, and trade. But the London Society, founded in 1834, was established arguably for different reasons. While Cullen contends that the Society was conceived as a means of elevating British science in relation to its Continental cousin, Goldman ventures that it emerged as an empiricist rival (from the natural sciences) to the inductivist approach that was gaining ground in Political Economy, especially in the hands of David Ricardo and John Ramsay McCulloch, at the time. See Michael J. Cullen, *The Statistical Movement in Early Victorian Britain: the Foundations of Empirical Social Research* (New York: Harvester Press Limited, 1975), 77, and Lawrence Goldman, ‘The origins of British ‘Social Science’: Political Economy, Natural Science and Statistics, 1830-1835’, *Historical Journal* 26, no. 3 (1983): 596-600.

²⁰ Cullen, 105. Or, the first of all Statistical Societies in Britain to be founded (see Cullen, 77, for the contest between Manchester and London in this respect).

businessmen concerned with what was seen as the negative impact of industrialisation on the physical condition and morality of the working classes, the Society strove to uncover the situation of workers in Ashton, Bury, Dukinfield, Salford, Stalybridge, and, of course, Manchester, to improve their circumstances.²¹

Sadly, the Society quickly lost momentum. Enthusiasm waned about 1838, and the Society's membership dwindled shortly after. Financially, the Society was unable to support its activities, and gradually lost its leading members to other organisations.²² Societies elsewhere also suffered similar fates, as collecting factual information proved financially unviable, and too onerous, for it took up too much labour power.²³ Even the Statistical Department of the Board of Trade, 'founded in 1832 to improve and collate the growing number of returns made to Parliament' to provide 'reliable information on provincial Britain, especially its trade and manufactures', was less than effective.²⁴ For fact collection was expensive and inefficient: many informants entrusted with the task of providing data simply did not cooperate. By 1842, therefore, when statistics regarding the state of trade could have helped the League, there was little to show that the government had successfully gathered data of sufficient quality for its use, or, indeed, the use of others.²⁵ As we shall see, however, the League did end up using some of the statistics produced by the Board of Trade, although it had to utilise other means where information was deficient.

²¹ Ibid., 111

²² Ibid., 115-6

²³ Ibid., Ch. 9, passim

²⁴ Ibid., 19

²⁵ Ibid., 24-5

So, the League turned to witnesses, and its procedure for producing truth shared two further similarities with Boyle's. First, just as the air-pump differentiated nature from society by separating the two within the space of experiment, the League's meetings created differences between an economic 'nature' and its human observers. Contained within the confines of the lecture theatre and separated from the speaker by the threshold of the stage, attendees of League meetings could conceive and articulate an economy that was simultaneously located beyond the spatial limits of the venue – an economy 'out there', and that was represented by the speaker located onstage. In other words, the physical borders of the meeting area established a conceptual boundary between humans and 'the economy', depersonalising the latter and making it amenable to observation.²⁶

Second, consensus, as in Boyle's experiments, was for Leaguers a mark of truth. But though Boyle's experiments did not yield answers to questions about causality, the League's method had to because an effective case against the Corn Laws needed to show that the laws *caused* the crisis. Thus, the League extended the consensus requirement to causes: if everyone shared its knowledge that the Corn Laws caused the crisis, then that knowledge had to be true. Such are the conclusions we will reach in a later chapter by following the process through which the League made knowledge.

That the League relied on witnesses in making knowledge raises questions about who those witnesses were, and why the League and, more crucially, its audiences, found them

²⁶ I am presently content to speculate about rather than to discuss in any depth this similarity between the League's method and Boyle's. Whether the League consciously intended that these borders be demarcated, whether its audiences perceived them, and whether the similarity reflects a deeper historical relationship between the technologies of visualisation and presentation in theatre, science, and politics, are questions that cannot be answered by the sources I have examined. Even so, the commonality between the two programmes is striking, and warrants further inquiry.

trustworthy, questions which Shapin posed in a later book on Boyle, *A Social History of Truth*.²⁷ Shapin's approach was a geographic one: he noted that experiments and observations were done and made in particular spaces that not everyone could access.²⁸ While those within the scientific 'laboratory' (at the time typically located in gentlemen's homes) or at the field site had easy sensory access to natural phenomena, those beyond the threshold of such venues did not. A geographical problem – that of uneven access to scientific space – raised an epistemic one – that of how to judge testimony: those outside the space of science had to depend on those within for testimony regarding what had happened. But how could one know that such testimony was true?

In responding to this query, Shapin noticed that the witnesses Boyle enrolled in his experiments were of a particular social type. Boyle's witnesses were typically rich men from the gentle classes whom he regarded as properly disinterested because their economic independence meant they were unlikely to lie for financial gain, and because they had imbibed a culture of honesty in which deceit could lead to physical violence, even death. As autonomous subjects that bowed to the will of no one for economic gain, and to whom the social costs of deceiving were great, such gentlemen were least likely to lie and were therefore helpful as observers in the production of truths.²⁹ Boyle and his contemporaries possessed, as it were, a cultural map which located credibility in persons of a particular social cast. The assumption that all gentlemen were more likely to be truthful because of their social location meant that social location could, conversely,

²⁷ Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994)

²⁸ On this point, see also Shapin, 'House of Experiment', 374-6.

²⁹ Shapin, *Social History of Truth*, Ch. 2 and 3, passim

function as a marker of credibility and a warrant for trust. Or, as Shapin put it, Boyle had recruited a cultural resource – gentility – as a means to judge testimony, a solution to the problem of trust.

One might expect that the League, too, had an analogous resource that indicated which persons could be trusted, and the obvious candidate of its time was ‘respectability’: obvious because it was usually associated with a middle class that included many Leaguers who, in prospering and becoming more economically independent, may have seemed, at least in Shapin’s terms, most deserving of trust. Respectability – the ‘favourite word’ of the age for one observer –³⁰ denoted a quality warranting attention, respect, even deference,³¹ and was without doubt important to the League. Women and religious ministers, for example, were invited to participate in the League’s campaign because their allegedly innate morality made it respectable.³² Leaguers valued the involvement of such persons because it allowed them to articulate their campaign as a moral and humanitarian issue worth backing. Without the inclusion of women and ministers, the movement could easily have been identified as a political issue associated with corrupt and immoral political strategies which were usual for political campaigns at that time, and which in popular opinion deserved denigration rather than support.³³

³⁰ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English* (Shannon, Ireland: Irish University Press, 1971 [1833]), 31

³¹ See the entry on ‘Respectable’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*

³² Alex Tyrrell, ‘“Woman’s Mission” and Pressure Group Politics in Britain (1825-60)’, *Bulletin of John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 63 (Fall 1980): 204-5

³³ Simon Morgan, ‘Seen but not heard?: Women’s Platforms, Respectability, and Female Publics in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, *Nineteenth Century Prose* 29, no. 1 (2002): 50; Paul A. Pickering and Alex Tyrrell, *The People’s Bread: A History of the Anti-Corn Law League* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), 89; Tyrrell, 214-7. Among other things, the League is known to have forged petitions and purchased favourable commentaries in newsprint.

While respectability was useful in recasting the question of the Corn Laws as a moral one, it was less helpful in compelling trust for two reasons. First, respectability was, in practice if not in theory, a more elastic category than gentility. While the latter was generally determined by birth,³⁴ the former was quite ill-defined. For some, respectability simply meant the ability to gain wealth, while for others, respectability was earned through ‘socially responsible’ behaviour. Thus, whereas the writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton reflected ‘that every man strives to be rich’ in order to become respectable,³⁵ the working class leaders of friendly societies struggled to maintain respectability for their clubs by eradicating behavioural taboos like insobriety and trade unionism, and relocating their meetings from pubs, among other things.³⁶ The meaning of respectability, in other words, varied too widely across different contexts, making it hard to discern who exactly was ‘respectable’ in each case. Moreover, there is little evidence to suggest that the discourse was well-defined when questions of credibility as Shapin defined them arose in epistemic contexts.

In fact, and second, it is plausible that respectability would not have helped problems of trust, for it was more about the appearance of virtue than its actual existence. In the early nineteenth century, ‘People were encouraged to talk the talk of virtue and to judge each other by outward appearances of respectability and public rectitude, which had nothing to do with inner morality.’³⁷ Respectability became a display of qualities that

³⁴ Shapin, *Social History of Truth*, 52-6

³⁵ Bulwer-Lytton, 31-2

³⁶ Simon Cordery, ‘Friendly Societies and the Discourse of Respectability in Britain, 1825-1875’, *Journal of British Studies* 34 (January 1995): 42-3. Friendly societies were ‘democratically managed insurance clubs offering sickness and burial coverage and sociable activities in return for regular payments’ (see Cordery, 36).

upper class men and women accepted and admired, an outward performance that tantalised the social palette without resembling inner merit. Consequently, concerns over ‘etiquette’ – behavioural norms inherited from Renaissance courts aimed at enhancing conviviality among the rich – eclipsed the interest in ‘conduct’ – an Evangelical creed that valued the cultivation of an independent, truthful, and moral inner self.³⁸ In practice, therefore, there was little connection between respectability and virtue, much less honesty. Respectability, therefore, could not function as a mark of truthfulness.

Nevertheless, the League possessed a cultural map which located disinterest and credibility in particular ‘social regions’, social categories like that of gentility which society as a whole takes to be reasonably well-defined and meaningful. In particular, the League considered those of the disinterested manufacturing class, and those from other classes who supported repeal, as trustworthy agents whose statements about the Corn Laws were dependable.³⁹ To reconstruct this cultural map, I will in a later chapter observe the ways Leaguers portrayed themselves and their enemies, and the social characteristics Leaguers ascribed to themselves and their foes. In doing so, I appear to be gesturing to concepts which the sociologist of science Thomas Gieryn has called ‘boundary-work’ and ‘maps of science’ (or credibility). To prevent confusion between his terms and mine, it is necessary to clarify the differences.

In Gieryn’s formulation, scientists ascribe traits to science and themselves in their struggle for ‘epistemic authority’, the power to legitimately articulate what and how

³⁷ Ben Wilson, *The Making of Victorian Values: Decency and Dissent in Britain, 1789-1837* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 6

³⁸ Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774-1854* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 89, Ch. 3, passim

³⁹ I will address the apparent paradox of the disinterested repealer in Chapter IV.

reality is.⁴⁰ Such is the scientist's analogue to the problem of demarcation, a question which has traditionally preoccupied philosophers of science wishing to tease out the differences between science and non-science.⁴¹ Gieryn dubs the process by which scientists ascribe traits 'boundary-work': scientists' 'attribution of selected characteristics to the institution of science (i.e., to its practitioners, methods, stock of knowledge, values and work organization) for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as "non-science."⁴²

Boundary-work composes a 'map' of science because it creates discourses which distinguish authentic truths and scientific credibility from falsehood and pseudoscience by delineating them as if they were regions located in space.⁴³ The Victorian physicist John Tyndall, for instance, drew a strict border between religion and empirical science to reject religion as a proper means to knowledge. Among other things, Tyndall considered religion inferior to science because it was based on unverifiable spiritual forces, whereas science was based on observable effects, and because he regarded religion as subjective and emotional, and science as objective and bias-free.⁴⁴ Such ascriptions of science and religion arose in Tyndall's attempt to place epistemic authority in the hands of science and scientists.

⁴⁰ Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1

⁴¹ Gieryn, 'Boundary-work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists', *American Sociological Review* 48 (December 1983): 781; Steve Woolgar, *Science: the Very Idea* (Chichester, Sussex: Ellis Horwood Limited, 1988), 15-7

⁴² Gieryn, 'Boundary-work', 782

⁴³ Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries*, 10

⁴⁴ Gieryn, 'Boundary-work', 785

The need to create maps of science through boundary-work emerges because accounts of nature are seldom definitive, even within science itself. Scientific inquiry often encounters problems that make its representations of nature less than exact. In some cases, for example, the equipment used for observation or experimentation may be insufficiently precise to produce evidence that fully validates a theory;⁴⁵ in others, a given set of evidence may yield equal support for different theories.⁴⁶ As such, no accounts of nature are completely satisfactory, and boundary-work arises: since ‘nature does not allow but one order of understandings, ... therefore those serving up discrepant realities can draw discrepant cultural maps to legitimate their claims as uniquely credible and useful.’⁴⁷

Consequently, definitions of proper science and credible truths emerge simultaneously through boundary-work. There are no pre-existing, self-evident truths that automatically confer legitimacy on the scientists who uncover them. Nor is there an already known perfect method of inquiry that attains truth routinely and infallibly. The categories of ‘truth’, ‘science’, and ‘scientist’ are never preformed certainties, but protean boundaries made and remade through the struggle for epistemic authority, a battle in which scientists seeking to secure legitimacy fight over what counts as ‘Science’ and ‘truth’.⁴⁸ As we shall see, much of this applies to the case of the Anti-Corn Law League. The League drew upon assumptions society shared about which qualities indicated genuine knowledge and credibility, attributing these to itself to appear trustworthy, and so

⁴⁵ See, for example, Thomas Kuhn’s example of Newton in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970 [1962]), 31-2.

⁴⁶ The problem of underdetermination. See, for example, Woolgar, 18.

⁴⁷ Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries*, 17

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 15

we will find its boundary-work inscribed in what I will call its map of credibility. My usage of this term differs from Gieryn's because I will not only show how trustworthy witnesses were discursively defined by the League, but also how these definitions mapped closely, as was for Boyle, onto social regions.⁴⁹

To pursue these ideas, I begin in what follows with an introduction to the League and to the Corn Laws, and a survey of the numerous meanings the League and its enemies attached to the laws and their repeal. The aim will not be to exhaust all the attitudes associated with protection and free trade, since the League embraced a range of arguments so varied and detailed they cannot be fully represented here. Conspicuous by their absence will be arguments relating to religious order, international peace, and taxation, and arguments in favour of a freer rather than a free trade to be attained through the lowering rather than the abolishment of duties. The goals, however, will be to revisit a time before ideas about free trade became dominant; to emphasise that the issue of repealing the Corn Laws was acutely controversial for Britons in the period under consideration; and to introduce major ideas that will recur in later chapters. For these purposes, we need only rehearse the primary arguments the League used in showing that the Corn Laws were causing economic depression in Britain, and the responses their enemies made to these claims.

Were the Corn Laws beneficial or detrimental to Britain? I show that the League argued the laws harmed Britain, that they were causing a great injustice to all Britons in favour of the aristocracy, and that this injustice was finding expression in an economic

⁴⁹ Which makes my use of the term closer to Shapin's geographic metaphor when he argued that 'Roughly speaking, the distribution of credibility followed the contours of English society' (see Shapin, 'House of Experiment', 376).

crisis that was intensifying about 1842. Using the debate surrounding this crisis, its extent and relation to the Corn Laws, I then argue that the League sought to produce true knowledge about free trade at its public meetings using common assent as a rhetorical voucher for truth.

Following this, I consider an episode in which consensus was not secured, thus threatening the League's depiction of the truth. I argue that under conditions of disagreement, the League undermined their enemies by depicting them as producers of unreliable sources of information. In exploring the League's response we can better understand what counted as knowledge for them, and what kinds of persons they believed were trustworthy.

Through all this, the approach will be geographic. Because knowledge is produced in real and imagined spaces, we can study those spaces to understand it, use spatial concepts to apprehend it, and document its spatial forms – that of 'national' assent and a 'cartography' of trust.⁵⁰ So we begin by examining the conditions in Manchester that led to the League's formation; we scrutinise the spaces of its meetings to observe how consensus was built; we investigate the national imaginaries that constituted its image of mass assent; and we explore the social geographies that underpinned its map of credibility. In exploring these geographies, I have omitted many others. Readers may be

⁵⁰ This sense of geography comes from Shapin, who argues that because space is 'a necessary condition for there being such a thing as science' (or knowledge), geography becomes a lens through which we can learn about it: 'space and place are closer to what the political philosopher Michael Oakeshott called 'modes': self-sufficient ways of apprehending the whole from a particular, and therefore non-exhaustive, point of view.' See Shapin's review of David Livingstone's *Science, Space and Hermeneutics*, *British Journal for the History of Science* 36, no. 1 (2003): 90. In this sense, this thesis is geographical because it considers the spatial practices of science to understand what epistemic discourses like 'truth' mean; the emphasis has not been placed solely on questions of chronology such as, 'When did Pasteur discover microbes?', which characterise more traditional accounts in the history of science. (Though, for an interesting account of how geographical accounts of science can help settle questions of chronology in the case of Pasteur and more generally, see Ch. 5 in Bruno Latour's *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)).

perplexed to find, for example, no maps in what purports to examine the League's 'geography' of truth production.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the account that follows has been guided by the geographical themes of site, region, and circulation drawn from the literature on the geographies of science. In this regard, the concluding chapter will review the geographies explored in this thesis, discussing the ways in which the League's epistemic project can be considered geographical, and relating them to the broader literature on the geographies of science.

⁵¹ Although maps have proven useful in many geographical accounts, I have omitted them here because the sources available to me do not, I think, allow the construction of maps that yield meaningful conclusions above what other authors have made. While maps of the emergence of Anti-Corn Law organisations over time and space, for instance, can be drawn, inferences regarding geographical differences in the strength of the campaign from these maps are hard to make because not all organisations participated in the campaign with the same intensity and regularity. For interested readers, one such map is provided in Pickering and Tyrrell, 45, although, as the authors admit, much care needs to be taken in its interpretation.

II Meaning

On 26 June 1846, after a long and arduous agitation, the Corn Laws finally fell. Four days later, on 30 June, the British Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel, speaking in Parliament for the last time in that capacity, attributed the repeal of the laws to the man who had led the resistance against them.⁵² Peel admitted that neither the Whigs nor the Tories, the two parties that dominated Britain's government, were responsible for rescinding the Corn Laws. Rather, 'the name which ought to be, and will be associated with the success of those measures, is the name of the man who, acting, I believe, from pure and disinterested motives, has, with untiring energy, by appeals to reason, enforced their necessity with an eloquence the more to be admired because it was unaffected and unadorned'.⁵³ This man was the pre-eminent leader of the Anti-Corn Law League, the Manchester calico merchant, Richard Cobden.

Richard Cobden was born on 3 June 1804 in a farmhouse in West Sussex close to the Hampshire border.⁵⁴ From a young age, he was whisked from his agricultural origins, sent to school in the north of England, and then to assist his uncle's calico-printing business in London as a clerk in 1818. In less than a decade, Cobden had taken on the position of main commercial traveller in his uncle's firm, touring the British Isles and exploring the sooty industrial districts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, and their surrounds.⁵⁵ On these travels, Cobden was impressed by the ability of manufacturing to generate

⁵² Norman Longmate, *The Breadstealers: the Fight against the Corn Laws, 1838-46* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984), 223-4; Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 439

⁵³ Peel, quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 439-40

⁵⁴ John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, vol. 1 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1881), 1-2

⁵⁵ Simon Morgan, 'Cobden and Manchester', *Manchester Region History Review* 17, no. 1 (2004): 28

wealth, and with Francis Sherriff set up ‘business in the North, acting as commission agents for an established calico-printer.’⁵⁶ As the firm expanded in the 1830s, part of it was located in Manchester under Cobden’s charge.⁵⁷

Manchester by then was the leading city in Britain’s textile trade, which was concentrated in the north of England.⁵⁸ Here, one could find clusters specialising in the production of each major cloth type, with linen production concentrated in towns like Liverpool, Preston and Warrington; fustian production in towns like Blackburn and Bolton; and woollens manufactured in such towns as Bury, Colne, Haslingden, and Rochdale.⁵⁹ To the south was a more eclectic region of production: here, workers handled not only the manufacture of linens, fustian, and woollens, but also the production of felt, silk, and smallwares.⁶⁰ At the centre of this last region was Manchester, an industrial city that far exceeded any other in its production of cloth – cotton, in particular – and cloth-related products.⁶¹ Here fibres were spun into threads and turned into cloths, ribbons were weaved and buttons made, and cloths were bleached or dyed or printed for clients all over the world.⁶²

⁵⁶ Ibid., 28-9

⁵⁷ Ibid., 29

⁵⁸ Quoted in Asa Briggs, *Victorian Cities* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968 [1963]), 93

⁵⁹ Jon Stobart, *The First Industrial Region: North-west England, c. 1700-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 66, 68-9

⁶⁰ Ibid., 68-9. Smallwares refer to textile-related items like thread, buttons, tapes, and ribbons (see page 74).

⁶¹ The growth of cotton production, centred around Manchester, famously eclipsed the growth of wool, worsted, linen, and silk from the last two decades of the eighteenth century. The astonishing growth of cotton is usually attributed to the introduction of technologies which enhanced the efficiency of cotton production, lowering its price, and changes in consumer tastes in favour of printed fabrics and simpler fashions. See Maxine Berg, *The Age of Manufactures 1700-1820: Industry, innovation and work in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1994), 40-1, 213-4; S. D. Chapman, *The Cotton Industry in the Industrial Revolution* (London: MacMillan Education, 1987 [1872]), 16 and Ch. 2, passim.

The cloth industry irrevocably altered Manchester's landscape. As the city became the seat of British cloth-making, textiles were its main employer. By 1841, nearly 40,000 Mancunians were engaged in the trade, twice the size of the city's next most common occupation.⁶³ The city's population also exploded due to natural increase and the in-migration of labourers seeking work in the trade. Between 1801 and 1831, Manchester's population doubled from 70,000 to 142,000.⁶⁴ The city's spatial limits were breached, as workers desperate for housing swamped the suburban middle class enclaves at Ardwick, Chorlton-on-Medlock, and Greenheys, that had formed in the 1820s and 30s.⁶⁵ Attending this growth was a deepening of social inequality. Manchester was a city in which social wellbeing was increasingly defined by economic wealth. While the middle class merchants and manufacturers resided in quality housing served by public amenities because they could well afford it, workers inhabited neighbourhoods of inadequate sanitation and unpaved roads.⁶⁶ By 1830, therefore, 'it was a commonplace to attribute basic social and political differences to economic divisions of interest between mill owners and workers'.⁶⁷

In part, these inequalities were exacerbated by what was seen as the outmoded, even feudal, political structures governing Manchester at the time. Before the city gained self-governance in 1838 through municipal incorporation, Manchester's administration

⁶² Stobart, 74, 78

⁶³ Martin Hewitt, *The Emergence of Stability in the Industrial City: Manchester, 1832-67* (Aldershot, Hants: Scolar Press, 1996), 31

⁶⁴ Briggs, 88

⁶⁵ Hewitt, 54-6

⁶⁶ Briggs, 91; Hewitt, 56

⁶⁷ Briggs, 89

was dominated by the manorial Court Leet, an institution inherited from feudalism that comprised jurors appointed by the Lord of the Manor responsible for selecting the boroughreeve, constables, and other manorial agents, and a Police Commission created by the Police Act of 1792 that was, *inter alia*, responsible for maintaining law during the night.⁶⁸ Marred by infighting and incompetence, however, these institutions were ineffectual in the main, and failed to provide the regulation that befitted a swiftly expanding city. Consequently, few streets in Manchester were paved and drained, sanitation was appallingly deficient, and there was little sense of even the most basic law and order especially among members of the working class.⁶⁹

The concentration of power and authority in the above institutions was, however, quickly overturned by a campaign Cobden led in 1837 for Manchester's incorporation, which triumphed the next year, giving the city self-governing powers.⁷⁰ By that time, however, the city was embroiled in a quite different problem. Textile manufacturing was in economic crisis, 'the first great prolonged depression' – and the most severe – 'since the industrial revolution'.⁷¹ For the next four years, many businesses bankrupted as profits shrank, and scores of workers were laid off. 'By the last quarter of 1841, 23.6 per cent of all cotton mills in Lancashire were working short-time or were completely shut down.'⁷²

⁶⁸ Hewitt, 67-8

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 69

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 71-2

⁷¹ Briggs, 97

⁷² Roger Lloyd-Jones, 'Merchant City: the Manchester business community, the trade cycle, and commercial policy, c.1820-1846', in *Free Trade and its Reception 1815-1960*, ed. Andrew Marrison (London: Routledge, 1998), 99

But by now Manchester was well-placed to deal with the malaise, as far as those who were about to create the Anti-Corn Law League were concerned. The concentration of cloth production in Manchester had brought together a group of merchants and manufacturers sympathetic to, if not wholly interested in, the free trade of all goods including corn, giving birth to what historian Asa Briggs called the city's 'family nexus'. 'Manchester was not a collection of separate individuals, but a network of families, each with its own history.'⁷³ For it was here that Cobden came into contact with other middle class radicals who were linked through marriage and friendship, and who were predisposed to greater liberalisation of both trade and politics. These were the radicals who had endorsed Manchester's incorporation to end the former undemocratic political system that was under Conservative control from 1810, and who were now prepared to abolish the Corn Laws both to revive their businesses along with Britain's ailing economy, and to erode what remained of Conservative civic power. In 1839, Cobden joined such other members of Manchester's middle class as the mill-owner John Bright, the journalist Archibald Prentice, the campaigner John Benjamin Smith, and the manufacturer George Wilson, to forge a nation-wide movement against the Corn Laws.

The Corn Laws were protectionist or monopolistic policies that regulated Britain's internal and external trade in corn.⁷⁴ At various points in their history, the Corn Laws restricted the sale of grain – that is, wheat, barley, oats, rye, peas, and beans – from one

⁷³ Briggs, 109. See also V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Incorporation and the pursuit of Liberal hegemony in Manchester 1790-1839', in *Municipal Reform and the Industrial City*, ed. Derek Fraser (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1982), 24-9.

⁷⁴ William D. Grampp, *The Manchester School of Economics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1960), 9

British manor to another, and between Britain and foreign countries.⁷⁵ While restrictions on corn trade within the country were made by laws that threatened to imprison and to confiscate the property of offenders, changes to Britain's external corn trade were made by placing import and export duties on grain.⁷⁶

According to the historian Donald Barnes, restrictions on the corn trade were made to protect the interests of British buyers and sellers of corn, although the interests of the two groups were not always equally matched. While the laws favoured consumers of grain up till 1660 by keeping corn prices low, and while the interests of consumers and producers were more balanced between 1660 and 1814, the legislation after 1814 focused on protecting corn producers.⁷⁷ In this last period three important laws were passed: the Acts of 1815, 1828, and 1842.⁷⁸ While the first law banned the import of wheat when local wheat prices fell short of 80 shillings per quarter and allowed wheat to be freely imported otherwise, the second and third laws introduced a variable duty or 'sliding scale' that applied different taxes on foreign corn over a range of local corn prices.⁷⁹ Despite their differences, the laws had a common purpose: whereas laws before 1814 aimed to provide consumers with enough grain to eat at fair and affordable prices, later Acts were more focused on ensuring that farmers would obtain adequate prices on their corn.

⁷⁵ Donald Groves Barnes, *A History of the English Corn Laws* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1930), xiv; 2. For the definition of 'corn', see Thomas Jevons, *The Prosperity of the Landholders not Dependant on the Corn Laws* (London: Longmans and Co., 1840), 2.

⁷⁶ Barnes, xv, 2

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv

⁷⁸ Grampp, 40

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 40; Longmate, 8-10

In the first half of the nineteenth century, therefore, the British government framed its Corn Laws around a price it deemed would fairly remunerate farmers: the laws were stipulated to prevent the price of corn from falling below this level.⁸⁰ In particular, the 1815 Corn Law was introduced in large part to prevent the surfeit of corn in Continental Europe that had suddenly become available for export after Napoleon's defeat from flooding British corn markets and decimating prices.⁸¹ In that year, Parliament decided that farmers could be fairly compensated only if they received 80 shillings or £4 per quarter of wheat.⁸² If the grain did not attain this price, all imports of foreign wheat were prohibited.

Although the corn laws of the 1800s stressed the welfare of the corn producer, some concessions were made to consumers in times of deep crisis. In 1842, at the height of the economic depression, Parliament revised its estimate of fair remuneration, lowering it to 56s. per quarter of wheat, and reducing the range of duties applied on corn imports accordingly.⁸³ In 1842, the highest duty on foreign corn was halved. Rather than the previous tariff of 38s. 8d., 20s. was charged on each quarter providing the price of local corn had fallen to 51s. a quarter.⁸⁴

Such concessions, however, were exceptions not the rule. Throughout the early 1800s, Parliament remained convinced that corn producers needed and deserved protection, so it never entertained seriously the possibility of entirely removing the Corn

⁸⁰ See C. R. Fay, *The Corn Laws and Social England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 84

⁸¹ Morgan, 'Cobden', 30

⁸² The fairly remunerating price was 53s. per quarter for rye, peas and beans; 44s. for barley and its varieties; and 27s. for oats (see Longmate, 8).

⁸³ Fay, 84; Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 312

⁸⁴ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 312

Laws. This situation dissatisfied the Mancunian free traders who desired, for reasons I discuss below, nothing less than the total and immediate repeal of protection. So, Parliament's revision of the protectionist legislation in 1842 was met only with contempt. Prentice, an ardent repealer who was to later write a history of the League, scorned the new tariff: 'Here was a change!' he announced sarcastically, 'The 38 feet 8 inches wall of exclusion was to be pulled down till it was only 20 feet high!'⁸⁵

In attempting to demolish the protectionist barricade, the free traders formed on 20 March 1839 an Anti-Corn Law League that sought to persuade Parliament to rescind the Corn Laws.⁸⁶ This League was not the only organisation to advocate repeal, and was certainly not the first. As early as 1836, an Anti-Corn Law Association was initiated in London which failed because it lacked support.⁸⁷ The next year, a similar institution was established at Kirkcaldy, Scotland, while five more associations sprung up in 1838 at Bridgeton and Hamilton in Scotland, and at Manchester, Salford, and Stockport in the north of England.⁸⁸ These associations were more local in nature compared to the League, which operated at a national level. Yet, they all shared the goal, as set out by the Manchester Association on 28 January 1839, of 'obtain[ing] by all legal and constitutional means, such as the formation of Anti-Corn Law Associations, the delivery of lectures, the distribution of tracts, the insertion of articles in the public papers, and

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 124

⁸⁷ Ibid., 47-8

⁸⁸ See Appendix 1 in Pickering and Tyrrell, 253-60

[the] forwarding [of] petitions to Parliament, the total and immediate repeal of the corn and provision laws.’⁸⁹

The declared purpose of the Manchester Association deserves pause for thought. The techniques of giving public lectures, of dispatching pamphlets about free trade, and of organising petitions to Parliament, were strategies borrowed from previous public campaigns like the movement against slavery, and the movements for catholic emancipation and parliamentary reform.⁹⁰ This was the strategy of ‘pressure from without’, a strategy of first persuading the public that free trade would serve its interests, and then using the public’s support to pressure Parliament into repeal. In this, public support functioned as a sign of political legitimacy: Leaguers wanted to show it was the League rather than the government that properly represented the common interest, ‘the vast majority of the people of Great Britain.’⁹¹

The League had resorted to this strategy as a consequence of its marginal position within Parliament, and more generally, within Britain. In its early days, the League had few allies within the government and found it hard to push its agenda there. The free trade motions fielded by the League’s earliest parliamentary ally, the MP for Wolverhampton, Charles Pelham Villiers, were decisively and consistently defeated.⁹²

Likewise, a Glaswegian petition for repeal presented to Parliament by Earl Fitzwilliam on

⁸⁹ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 104

⁹⁰ Patricia Hollis, *Pressure from Without in Early Victorian England* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974), 5, 7, 12; Henry Donaldson Jordan, ‘The Political Methods of the Anti-Corn Law League’, *Political Science Quarterly* 42, no. 1: 58; Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 62

⁹¹ ‘The League and the City Election’, *League*, 7 October 1843 (page 18); see also Hollis, 16, on the need for a ‘national voice’, and Anthony Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England 1846-1946* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 30.

⁹² Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 59-61

2 July 1838 was dismissed on the pretext that the government would not act against the Corn Laws until it was certain the people wanted a change.⁹³ Outside of Parliament, the League also encountered sceptics who failed to see how repeal could benefit Britain. For example, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce – an organisation meant to represent business interests to Parliament – was apathetic, at best, towards repeal,⁹⁴ and the general reluctance by the commercial men of the City of London to endorse free trade exasperated the Leaguers.⁹⁵ If the geographical distribution of Anti-Corn Law agencies within England is any indication of geographical differences in the campaign's strength and the support it received, the movement was certainly strongest in the north and weakest in the south.⁹⁶

The rejections ignited outrage among the free-trading Leaguers, and the hardest hitting were those by Parliament. Writing at the time, Prentice regarded Parliament's dismissals as 'a sufficient warning to the masses, that they must depend upon their own exertions, and not trust to the ministry, or the legislature for justice.'⁹⁷ Joseph Parkes echoed this cynicism in a letter to Cobden: 'Pressure from without', he resolved, 'will

⁹³ Ibid., 62

⁹⁴ See, for example, Lucy Brown, 'The Chartists and the Anti-Corn Law League', in *Chartist Studies*, ed. Asa Briggs (London: MacMillan, 1967 [1959]), 343. The Chamber's apathetic attitude towards repeal is usually attributed to its reluctance to antagonise property owners in England, many of whom held positions of power in government.

⁹⁵ For most of the campaign, London businessmen seemed more interested in 'moderate free trade' (trade with a moderate fixed duty) than in the League's more extremist advocacy of a 'total and immediate repeal'. It was only in 1843 that '[Samuel Jones] Loyd became the first major City figure (although with Lancashire roots) to subscribe to the Anti-Corn Law League.' See Howe, 12-8.

⁹⁶ This picture is supported by the fact that of the 23 localities represented at 6 or more of the League's 8 National Conferences, 'nearly two thirds were in Lancashire, Yorkshire, or Cheshire' – what Leaguers classified as the 'Manufacturing District'. See Pickering and Tyrrell, 46-7, but also the precautionary footnote above (footnote 51).

⁹⁷ Ibid., 62

alone rouse the Government. They will otherwise do nothing. Standing still & staring about is their principle & political practice'.⁹⁸

With such advice in mind, the League began its 'agitation from without', a public campaign that involved activities such as arranging petitions for repeal, sending lecturers to public meetings, organising free trade soirees and bazaars, and writing and distributing tracts in favour of repeal.⁹⁹ Since the League aimed to mould the general opinion about free trade at a national level, its petitioners, lecturers, and tract distributors traversed the country, seeking out persons from distant localities that would potentially support its cause. In 1840 alone, League lecturers gave approximately 800 lectures in 34 counties in England, in 40 to 50 places in Scotland, in 20 to 30 places in Ireland, and in 'almost every town and village' in Wales.¹⁰⁰ Such was the extent of the campaign that League supporter John Bowring could confidently declare in 1843 that 'the League has a locomotive power; it is an ambulatory truth; it is a mental power in motion. Everywhere will it be present where evil [of the Corn Laws] is to be reduced and good to be done'.¹⁰¹

Despite the League's energetic campaign and the rising support for free trade, Parliament was not easily swayed. Consequently, the League broke the bounds of traditional 'pressure from without' strategy and began to interfere directly and aggressively in politics. In 1840, the League started extracting promises from MPs to support free trade, and the next year, Leaguers themselves ran for elections, with Cobden

⁹⁸ Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League 1838-1846* (London: Unwin University Books, 1968 [1958]), 18

⁹⁹ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 62

¹⁰⁰ Pickering and Tyrrell, 20

¹⁰¹ 'The National Anti-Corn-Law League', *League*, 28 October 1843, page 68

represented at Stockport, and J. B. Smith at Walsall.¹⁰² After 1841, the League began to manipulate electoral registers and to create new voters. These tactics hinged on the complex array of criteria introduced by the Reform Act of 1832 that defined which persons were qualified to vote. Based on these criteria, the League attempted to swell the ranks of electors favourable to repeal in three ways: it identified persons who were qualified to vote but who were not yet registered to do so; it challenged the right of protectionist electors to vote by submitting formal objections to the registration court; and it created new electors by encouraging richer free traders to buy property for their sons, and helping poorer repealers to own property through housing co-ops, because the ownership of property worth forty shillings or more gave one the right to vote.¹⁰³

The League's ingenuous and complicated political strategy required thorough planning and coordination, a task accomplished at the League's headquarters at Newall's Buildings, a three-storey office tower located near the end of Market Street, Manchester, built in the 1830s and owned by the eponymous grocer, William Newall.¹⁰⁴ While the League occupied initially only the second floor, it took over the entire building in 1843 as the campaign expanded.¹⁰⁵ Here, numerous functions were fulfilled for an effective public campaign: the general office and meeting rooms, social lounges and print rooms became the spaces where League leaders met to discuss the campaign's conduct; where the League lecturers were recruited and paid; where letters were received and replied to;

¹⁰² Hollis, 17; Jordan, 64; Pickering and Tyrrell, 28

¹⁰³ Hollis, 17-8; Jordan, 67-75; Pickering and Tyrrell, 30-2

¹⁰⁴ Pickering and Tyrrell, 14

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

where League tracts and newspapers were written and published; and where free trade memorabilia were made and stored for despatch.¹⁰⁶

Newall's Buildings was a hive of activity. In 1843 alone, over nine million items were reportedly dispatched from the site, including a million that were sent out during a single week in February. 'In total this was approximately 100 tons [101, 000 kilograms] of literature, which was unprecedented by the standards of the day.'¹⁰⁷ Still more astonishing, perhaps, was the fact that these materials were distributed by foot when the post was not used. In Cheshire, for example, just five men delivered 11,000 packets of brochures in 1842, with 'Each man distribut[ing] 50 to 100 packets a day walking from door to door.'¹⁰⁸ League lecturers too had to suffer podiatric torment. Over a period of sixteen days in September 1839, the Manchester Association's first lecturer Abraham Paulton travelled fifteen to twenty miles each day and lectured for three hours each night.¹⁰⁹

Such activities incurred a large expenditure and it is no coincidence that the League was continually canvassing funds. Membership of the Manchester Association, for example, required a payment of five shillings, a subscription rate calculated to balance the financial and political needs of the organisation. For although the Association required funds for its operations, subscriptions could not to be so high as to exclude poorer supporters. Naturally, however, subscribers were encouraged to contribute more, and often did, especially the wealthy supporters of free trade. In 1839, Londoner Robert

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., Ch. 2, passim

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 22

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 20-1

Stuart, for instance, donated £10 without qualm, acknowledging that a successful campaign would need more than five shillings per member if it was to endure.¹¹⁰ Prentice's history of the League is replete with more examples of such generosity. Individual donations had grown to amounts of £50 and £100 by early 1839, and on 10 January alone, the Manchester Association received £1,800 with promises of larger sums if needed.¹¹¹ In a month, the fund exceeded £6,000.¹¹² Given such strong financial backing, it is no wonder that the League went on to collect sums of £100,000 and even £250,000 as its campaign intensified.

The Herculean efforts by Leaguers to obtain repeal reflected their deep commitment to free trade, a policy they had desired for reasons political and economic. Some Leaguers, especially those associated with the radical wing of the Liberal party, saw repeal as a means of eroding Conservative power. The Conservative influence in the British government had grown since the 1835 General Election when the Liberal majority in Parliament was substantially reduced, and was manifest in the recurring dismissals of free trade motions and petitions in the House of Commons mentioned above.¹¹³ These rejections enraged the Leaguers, who, as radicals with minor representation in Parliament, were powerless in the face of the strength of the Tories and the more conservative members of the Whigs. Repealing the Corn Laws potentially undermined this power, since Conservatives depended on landholders for support, whose economic

¹¹⁰ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 74

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 91

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 93

¹¹³ Grampp, 98; McCord, 16, 20

and political power was buttressed by the Corn Laws.¹¹⁴ It was contended – as David Ricardo suggested – that protection allowed landowners to charge tenant farmers higher rents by raising the price of grain. The Corn Laws were thus ‘a rent law, increasing rent to the landlord’,¹¹⁵ its ‘object ... to enable the farmers to get a higher price for their corn, so that the landlords may thereby get higher rents for their land.’¹¹⁶

As the landlords got richer, they gained political power and social prestige. Protection was ‘not simply [about] the rent roll – it was not simply a desire to enjoy the largest possible return from their landed estates that influences the landowners to maintain this system of restriction’. Rather, ‘it [was] the wish that there should be maintained by act of Parliament a sort of social ascendancy in favour of the landed aristocracy of this country.’¹¹⁷ By repealing the Corn Laws, Leaguers believed they could remove an important source of economic and political advantage for Britain’s landed class and wear down the support this class gave the Conservatives.

Political gains aside, Leaguers also believed that repealing the Corn Laws would bring economic benefits. Chief among these was the revival of Britain’s manufacturing trade and its economic health. Leaguers believed that the Corn Laws were damaging British manufacturing by reducing the demand for its products, and that Britain’s prosperity, as a whole, depended crucially on the wealth that manufacturing could generate. To illustrate the effects of the Corn Laws on Britain, the Anti-Corn Law

¹¹⁴ McCord, 20-1

¹¹⁵ Cobden, quoted in Henry Ashworth, *Recollections of Richard Cobden, M.P., and the Anti-Corn-Law League* (London: Cassell Petter & Galpin, 1877), 134

¹¹⁶ Cobden, quoted in *ibid.*, 129

¹¹⁷ Thomas Milner Gibson, quoted in ‘The National Anti-Corn-Law League’, *League*, 28 October 1843, page 69.

Leaguers related the impact of the laws on the demand for manufactures, on the employment and incomes of different social groups, and on the competitiveness of British manufacturing and agriculture. They argued that while protection diverted economic resources to the landed class, as described above, it reduced the demand for Britain's manufactures, and, consequently, the work opportunities and wages of the operative, the manufacturer, the farm labourer, and the farmer. Protection, the Leaguers argued, also weakened the competitiveness of British manufacturing and agriculture in world markets.

The Corn Laws lowered the demand for British manufactures by undermining the ability of Britons and foreigners to buy them. In Britain, the Corn Laws raised the price of wheat for the consumer of corn, reducing the portion of that consumer's income which would have gone into purchasing manufactured goods: 'It cannot be denied that if bread were sold at half the present price, the provident labourer would have at his disposal one half of the money he now expends in this necessary of life wherewith to purchase clothing and all other domestic comforts he and his family needed'.¹¹⁸ In some families, almost half of the entire household budget was spent on bread.¹¹⁹ The fact that bread took up such a substantial portion of the budget meant a loss of the 'demand from five millions of operatives and tradesmen for our various manufactures of wool, cotton, iron, wood, flax, silk, &c.'¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Lawrence Heyworth, *To the working classes whose comfortable circumstances, assured to them by their good morals, individually, and by their emancipation from unrighteous legislation, collectively, constitutes the broad basis of the social structure, on which rests securely the prosperity and well-being of every class in the community* (Manchester: J. Gadsby, 1841), 3

¹¹⁹ See Longmate, 58

¹²⁰ Heyworth, 3

Beyond Britain, the Corn Laws constrained foreign demand for British manufactures by lowering foreign receipts from corn. Without earnings from corn, foreigners who had little else to sell lost the capacity to buy British goods: the Corn Laws ‘diminish our commerce ... in the case of some nations which have no money to give for our manufactures, but which would take them in exchange for corn.’¹²¹ Leaguers argued, too, that some foreign countries had retaliated against Britain’s protectionism by placing duties of their own on British goods, duties which ‘prohibit or limit the entrance of our manufactures into their markets.’¹²² Such changes to the international market for British goods worsened the situation. Because some foreign countries had refused to take the manufactures, merchants had had to take those goods elsewhere, flooding those markets and reducing the price of the goods there drastically.¹²³ The Corn Laws distorted both the demand and the supply of British goods, undercutting their worth worldwide.

Shrunken demand adversely affected the British economy, Leaguers argued. The reason was one familiar to students of political economy. When trade in manufactures was brisk, manufacturers would earn higher profits and produce more goods, hiring more workers in the process. As the demand for workers grew, the price of labour, or wages, would rise. ‘When work is plenty masters compete with each other and wages rise.’¹²⁴ In turn, higher wages would increase spending across the economy:

¹²¹ William Anderson, *The Corn and Provision Laws arraigned, convicted and denounced as inflicting poverty, disease, and death; and promoting irreligion, vice, and sedition* (Glasgow: Glasgow Young Men’s Free Trade Association, 1843), unpaginated (page 354 in the reprint)

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Heyworth, 10

¹²⁴ Alexander Harvey, *The influence of the Provision Laws on trade, wages, and society* (Glasgow: Glasgow Young Men’s Free Trade Association, 1843), 14

The working men must consume the corn. They would be set to work to pay for that corn with the produce of their wages. They went to the shopkeeper; the shopkeeper was enriched by the custom of the labourer. The shopkeeper went to the wholesale dealer; each shopkeeper went to the neighbouring shopkeeper, and they again enriched each other. The wholesale dealer went to the manufacturer; the manufacturer could only supply the demands of the wholesale dealer by setting to work more operatives. Such was the beautiful order in which Divine Providence regulated this world. There was a circle of continuous links, which could not be injured in any one point, but it would, like electricity, pervade the whole chain.¹²⁵

When the demand for manufactures was low, however, the demand for labour would fall correspondingly, and depress its price. The virtuous cycle of income would be usurped by a vicious one in which workers lowered their wage demands to be employed: ‘When work is scarce, workmen underbid each other, and wages fall.’¹²⁶

While such arguments presumed that labourers lacked mobility,¹²⁷ others implied the contrary: it was impossible ‘for the workmen in one department of trade, to keep up their wages, while others are depressed’, because ‘this, in a free country, will soon become impossible’. ‘[N]umbers will press into that trade that is best paid, and gradually

¹²⁵ Cobden, quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 51-2

¹²⁶ Harvey, 14

¹²⁷ Or that, in the first scenario, the economy was very close to or at full employment, and that, in the second scenario, the economy was very depressed with a high rate of unemployment. The first assumption allows in the first case that workers in other industries do not flood the booming industry and saturate its labour market, and the second assumption allows in the second case that workers faced with worse alternatives may choose either to stay in the industry if they already belong there, or to enter the industry if they do not.

bring down their wages to a common level.’¹²⁸ The implication was that a poor manufacturing trade and the consequent retrenchment of operatives in urban districts would drive those workers back to the country, saturate the rural labour market, and lower wages there.¹²⁹ Compounded by population growth, wages would fall more steeply: ‘The natural increase of population ... becomes an insupportable evil, and the peasant’s own offspring become his deadly competitors for the labour he is engaged in, and the wages he receives.’¹³⁰ ‘It is, therefore, to the operation of unremitted [*sic*] free trade, and to the cheap cost of production, that we must look for the surest means of securing plenty of permanent employment, and for the best guarantee of good wages to all classes of labourers.’¹³¹

Leaguers also believed that the Corn Laws destroyed the competitiveness and efficiency of British manufacturing and agriculture. In agriculture, protection was said to shield British farmers from foreign competition, enabling them to earn profits even when production was inefficient. The protectionist system simply did not provide the right incentives for farmers to invest in the production of corn. Although it was widely known that farmers needed to ‘improve cultivation, and lay out half-a-crown wherever they could get a moderate profit in return’, ‘comparatively few farmers seem[ed] to understand’ this, ‘because he has been taught to look to monopoly and high prices for “remunerating returns.”’¹³² As a consequence, the productivity of English farming had

¹²⁸ Harvey, 14

¹²⁹ Heyworth, 6

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 6

¹³² ‘Hints from agriculturists’, *League*, 30 September 1843 (page 9, 10)

collapsed: fields were badly managed and output was low. Some farmers had become ‘careless and negligent’ because ‘the operation of the Corn Laws has a tendency to ... [induce the farmer] to think he can conduct his business with facility, under the shelter of a monopoly’.¹³³ Compared with the more efficient Scotch farmer who was able to harvest four to five quarters of wheat per acre of land, ‘the farmers in the south of England barely produces three quarters, and with green crops the difference is still greater.’¹³⁴

In manufacturing, the Leaguers complained that the Corn Laws raised the price of grain and food, augmenting the cost of living. This caused two effects detrimental to British competitiveness. Firstly, it raised the price of labour in Britain and the costs of production. So, British manufactures were dearer and less competitive on the world market. Although several members of the League believed this argument, and did in fact wish that labour costs were lower, it was difficult to make this claim in support of repeal.¹³⁵ For the argument implied that the Leaguers were trying to reduce wages, a suggestion which made the League intensely unpopular among the workers it wanted to court.

Since it was ‘untenable and unpopular’ to call for ‘cheap bread in order to reduce the English rate of wages’,¹³⁶ Leaguers emphasised the second effect of the Corn Laws, contending that the rising cost of living in Britain was driving Britons to emigrate. It was

¹³³ ‘The sleepers are waking’, *League*, 11 November 1843, page 107

¹³⁴ ‘Why should agriculturists stand still?’, *Economist*, quoted in *League*, 7 October 1843, page 24. It is unclear from this article why the Scotch farmer or the farmer of more efficient English counties would be more productive, which is odd given that the Corn Laws affected the whole of Britain. The suggestion seems to be that the Corn Laws encouraged inefficiency for some farmers but not others, who may have remained more efficient as a result of a genuine interest in the scientific improvement of agriculture, or other reasons.

¹³⁵ Grampp, 5

¹³⁶ Prentice, quoted in Briggs, 122

because ‘A family could not exist in England, without undergoing severe privations and severer humiliation, upon the small sum which will enable them to live well in France’ that they were heading ‘to a strange land’, and enduring the discomforts of ‘a strange language’ and ‘strange customs’.¹³⁷ In turn, emigration meant the transfer of British technologies and production methods to foreign countries, and the creation of powerful competitors for British manufactures there. As one League lecturer reminded his audience in 1842, ‘many of the manufacturing establishments in Belgium, Germany, Russia, Mexico, and America’ were ‘erected by British capital. The machinery has been fabricated by English mechanics, and is superintended by British artizans [*sic*].’ If the Corn Laws had not raised the costs of living in Britain, ‘both the capital and the operatives of this country could have been more profitably employed at home ... and consequently, would never have been engaged in raising up formidable rivals against ourselves.’¹³⁸

In sum, the Corn Laws engendered a whole host of destructive consequences for British wealth: they drained the local and foreign demand for manufactured goods; they destroyed the opportunities for manufacturers, workers, farmers, and farm labourers to earn a living; and they reduced the efficiency and competitiveness of British agriculture and industry in world markets. The implication of these trends was obvious to the League: protection weakened the British economy, pushing the country into a state of economic depression.

Repeal might have come more quickly if those in power shared these ideas. As it turned out, advocates of the Corn Laws had good reasons to reject the Leaguers’

¹³⁷ ‘English absenteeism’, *League*, 11 November 1843, page 110

¹³⁸ Harvey, 13

arguments and to believe that free trade would harm the country. Among other things, the League's antagonists variously believed that the agriculturists needed and deserved protection; that the Corn Laws had not caused the crisis; and that repeal was an inappropriate solution to economic malaise. Such ideas were circulated widely by opponents of repeal during the League's campaign, heightening both uncertainty about the benefits of free trade, and ambivalence surrounding repeal at the time. In the rest of this chapter, I relate the arguments protectionists (or monopolists) made against the League to foreground the uncertain reception of its claims about free trade.

Protectionists rejected the League's claim that the Corn Laws disadvantaged Britain. The legislation, they argued, protected the agricultural wealth of the country, keeping farmers and their labourers in employment, and Britain self-sufficient in corn. For some, farming was more important than manufacturing to Britain's wealth, and so the former deserved protection. The 'average proceeds of Agriculture in England and Wales', by one author's estimation, was roughly double that of the proceeds to manufacturing in 1841.¹³⁹ In addition, 'For every £1 employed in Manufactures, £15 is employed in the cultivation of soil.'¹⁴⁰ To this author, agriculture was more important than industry because it earned more, and because more was invested in it. Such protectionists shared the physiocratic belief that a country's prosperity depended on its agricultural wealth, and that farming ought therefore to be protected.

For those who believed that there were other causes of Britain's trading crisis, repeal seemed an unlikely solution. Some monopolists regarded the application of new

¹³⁹ *The Corn Laws: Facts are stubborn things* (London: William E. Painter, 1844), 1

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1

machinery to industrial processes as the primary cause of unemployment in Britain. Because these machines were more efficient than human workers, they replaced and displaced them. Others turned a deaf ear to Jean-Baptiste Say's contention that supply creates its own demand and argued that the crisis came from 'overproduction'. The manufacturers, they argued, overestimated the demand for their goods, producing them in excess. Upon receiving lower prices for these goods or in failing to sell them, the manufacturers were unable to pay their workers, and so reduced their wages or laid them off. The proper solution to the depression was not repealing the Corn Laws, but avoiding oversupply.

If Britain's economic woes owed more to these causes than to the Corn Laws, and if the laws were effective in protecting agriculture, repealing the legislation would cause more harm than good. For Sir James Graham, 'a sudden change in the corn laws' would 'have the effect of a great displacement of agricultural industry'.¹⁴¹ Without protection, farmers' profits would dwindle and put them out of business. In turn, this would 'diminish the demand for their [the farm labourers'] employment, and should place them at the same time in a condition at all approaching the sufferings of the manufacturing labourers'.¹⁴² Graham's pessimistic prognostication was that repealing the Corn Laws, 'so far from bring conducive to the general good, would involve all the labouring classes of this country in one common ruin'.¹⁴³

Benjamin Disraeli held a comparable opinion for different reasons. Repealing the Corn Laws would work only if foreign countries agreed to open their markets to British

¹⁴¹ 'House of Commons, Friday, July 1', *Times*, 2 July 1842, page 2

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

goods; a unilateral free trade in corn would solve nothing for Britain if foreign ports remained closed to it. Thus, the sale of cutlery from Sheffield and woollens from Leeds would improve if commercial treaties were negotiated with France to admit those items.¹⁴⁴ A repeal of the Corn Laws could not on its own ensure that France would buy those goods. 'The fact was incontrovertible, that foreign powers would not be induced by any measures, however liberal, of ours, immediately to ameliorate their commercial policy.'¹⁴⁵ The proper antidote to depression was political, not economic.

Ironically, the protectionists' concerns about repeal found support in classical political economy, a body of work known to champion free trade. But while political economists favoured free trade generally, they were never unqualified advocates of the idea.¹⁴⁶ This is why monopolists often found in their arguments ways of disputing claims about the benefits of free trade, and perhaps why, although we find glimpses of the economists' arguments in the Anti-Corn Law League's propaganda, their presence there is ever so faint and elusive. While the League cited the authority of political economists on occasion, in many cases it avoided exploring those economists' theories in any detail, or making claims that referred to them explicitly. Rather, it preferred using its own arguments, some of which contradicted what the economists said.¹⁴⁷ One League pamphleteer even went as far as to diminish the importance of the subject in a statement

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., page 3

¹⁴⁶ Grampp, 16

¹⁴⁷ An example of a pamphlet which cites the authority of political economists is *Authorities against the Corn Laws*. Here, Adam Smith is quoted as saying that 'The unlimited, unrestrained freedom of the corn trade, as it is the only effectual preventative of the miseries of a famine, so it is the best palliative of the inconveniences of a dearth', and Ricardo, is quoted stating that 'All classes, except the landlords, will be injured by the price of corn' (page 1). Thomas Chalmers is cited on the back page (2).

revealing the confusion and uncertainty around political economy: ‘The question of the Corn Laws is a simple one ... and the less men’s minds are puzzled about it by Political Economists the better.’¹⁴⁸ As it breaches the scope of this thesis to discuss in depth the ideas of political economists on free trade, two examples will suffice to illustrate how the subject was uncertain regarding the effects of free trade, and why Leaguers may have been reluctant to explicitly cite its authority.¹⁴⁹

Adam Smith, the Scottish moral philosopher regarded as the first political economist, would seem a natural ally of the League.¹⁵⁰ In his book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Smith undermined mercantilism, which held that a nation generated wealth by selling more goods than it bought. Smith argued that the trade balance was a mistaken criterion for wealth. The expansion of exports was not an indicator of how the country was performing *as a whole*.¹⁵¹ Embedded in this argument was the idea of opportunity cost, the acknowledgement that when a country possessed a fixed amount of capital and labour, it could boost production in one industry only by sacrificing the resources of another.¹⁵² The trade balance was a poor reflection of wealth because it did not express the resources and production lost to other industries when the export sector was booming. Applying the notion of opportunity cost to foreign trade,

¹⁴⁸ Anglus, *Artisans, Farmers and Labourers* (London: Ridgway, 1839), 3

¹⁴⁹ The argument that follows regarding how Leaguers and protectionists received the arguments of political economists is only a plausible one, since it will not be possible in the space we have to analyse what they understood of economic thought. However, the fact that many Leaguers and protectionists were well-versed in political economy and yet omitted arguments originating from it suggests that they were aware of the extent to which political economy could serve their purposes.

¹⁵⁰ See Douglas A. Irwin, *Against the Tide: An Intellectual History of Free Trade* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 75

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 77

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 78

Smith argued that countries should import those goods that were cheaper when purchased from abroad than when made locally.¹⁵³ Why spend more on making the good when you could buy it more cheaply?

Although Smith was generally in favour of free trade, he specified three instances in which protection was justified. First, Smith argued for duties to be placed on imports if the same goods, produced locally, were taxed. The import duty would equalise the taxes on the goods, and the competition between them in the local market.¹⁵⁴ Second, Smith proposed that previously applied protection be removed ‘only by slow gradations, and with a good deal of reserve and circumspection’ to prevent an extreme displacement of capital and labour in the industry that was losing protection.¹⁵⁵ And third, Smith suggested that protection be maintained on industries that were conducive to a nation’s security because ‘defense ... is of much more importance than opulence.’¹⁵⁶ Smith was not prepared to trade political security off for economic wealth. His endorsement of the Navigation Acts protecting merchant shipping was a corollary of this rule.¹⁵⁷

Smith’s ideas appealed to the protectionists, who used them in defence of the Corn Laws. The monopolists argued that local corn bore a high tax burden. Only farmers had to pay the ‘tithe, land tax, church rates, poor rates, highway rates, and county rates’, which added to the cost of cultivating grain.¹⁵⁸ To level the competitiveness between

¹⁵³ Ibid., 79

¹⁵⁴ Grampp, 17; Irwin, 81

¹⁵⁵ Grampp, 17; Irwin 82

¹⁵⁶ Irwin, 81

¹⁵⁷ Grampp, 17

¹⁵⁸ *The Anti-Corn-Law League and the Duke of Wellington* (Manchester: J. Gadsby, [c. 1842]), 3

local and foreign grain in the British market, a tax had to be placed on imported grain. Monopolists also considered the League's call for a 'total and immediate' repeal of the Corn Laws excessive. To abolish the Corn Laws at a stroke would be to consign farmers and farm labourers to instant austerity: lands would be thrown out of use, as Graham, quoted above, had argued. If protection was to be removed, then it should be removed gradually.¹⁵⁹ Lastly, protectionists claimed that the Corn Laws were crucial for Britain's self-sufficiency in food. Without protection, Britain would be forced to give up its agriculture and rely on foreign countries for food, losing its ability to independently feed itself, which was crucial in times of war.¹⁶⁰

In a similar way, while several of David Ricardo's theories appeared to help the Anti-Corn Law League, as I hinted above, many others served the purposes of the monopolists. Ricardo had agreed with Smith that goods should be imported when they could be bought more cheaply than otherwise: 'If, in consequence of the price of foreign commodities being cheaper, a less portion of the annual produce of the land and labour of England is employed in the purchase of foreign commodities, more will remain for the purchase of other things.'¹⁶¹ He had also made a compelling case for trade even when one country could make all items more cheaply in absolute costs than its trading partners: a country, he argued, should specialise in producing what incurred the least opportunity cost in that country, and exchange those goods for other goods which incurred a higher

¹⁵⁹ Grampp, 17-8

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 18

¹⁶¹ David Ricardo, *On the Principles of Political Economy, and Taxation*, in *The Works and Correspondence of David Ricardo*, ed. Piero Sraffa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975 [1951])

opportunity cost to locally produce.¹⁶² By saving resources in purchasing cheaper foreign products, a country would afford a larger sum of local and foreign goods.¹⁶³

Ricardo had also shown that the landlords could charge higher rents by encouraging farmers to cultivate poor quality land. Rent, he argued, was the excess that superior fields produced over inferior plots of land. If land was abundant and unvarying in quality, landlords could charge no differential rents. But ‘When in the progress of society, land of the second degree of fertility is taken into cultivation, rent immediately commences on that of the first quality, and the amount of that rent will depend on the difference in the quality of these two portions of land.’¹⁶⁴ As these poorer lands were cultivated, diminishing returns would also raise the costs of production, increase the general price of agricultural goods, and enhance the value of goods produced by superior lands. In this way, ‘the advantages of fertile over inferior lands are ... transferred from the cultivator, or consumers, to the landlord’.¹⁶⁵

Ricardo would have been a promising authority for the League for having shown that free trade could profit Britain, and that since protection encouraged farmers to till marginal lands, it only enriched the landlords. Yet, there were less savoury portions of his theory. Ricardo had argued that the price of labour would eventually fall to the level of

¹⁶² Ibid., 134-5. Interestingly, several economic historians have questioned if comparative cost reasoning, for which Ricardo is famous, was in fact his innovation. Douglas Irwin, for instance, considers Robert Torrens and even James Mill as more likely sources of the idea (see Irwin, 90-1).

¹⁶³ Ricardo, 130-1

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 70

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 74

subsistence in an economy.¹⁶⁶ Ricardo reasoned that wages depended on the supply and demand of labour, and the price of goods on which wages were spent.¹⁶⁷ As population grew, market wages would fall as the supply of labourers outstripped their demand.¹⁶⁸ The real value of wages would fall even more, since production costs would be raised as diminishing returns set in, augmenting the price of goods on which wages were spent.¹⁶⁹ The combined effect of these trends was a fall in real wages: ‘they [money wages] would not rise sufficiently to enable the labourer to purchase as many comforts and necessaries as he did before the rise in the price of those commodities.’¹⁷⁰

In turn, this fall in wages raised profits, a conclusion Ricardo had made explicitly in his *On the Principles of Political Economy, and Taxation*:

It has been my endeavour to shew throughout this work, that the rate of profits can never be increased but by a fall in wages, and that there can be no permanent fall of wages but in consequence of a fall of the necessaries on which wages are expended. If, therefore, by the extension of foreign trade, or by improvements in machinery, the food and necessaries of the labourer can be brought to market at a reduced price, profits will rise.¹⁷¹

By these words, Ricardo had shown that the economic interests of the labourer and the capitalist were incompatible. And his chapter on machinery made a further suggestion

¹⁶⁶ This idea is often attributed to Ferdinand Lassalle, and is known as the iron law of wages. See, for example, Joseph A. Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963 [1954]), 650.

¹⁶⁷ Ricardo, 97

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 101

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 101-2

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 132

that seemed to confirm this point. There, Ricardo argued that the introduction of machinery into industrial processes would lead to unemployment if capital in a country was scarce. Ricardo distinguished between fixed and circulating capital by their durability. While circulating capital was used within a productive period, fixed capital was used over many productive periods.¹⁷² He also suggested that employment varied directly with the amount of circulating capital in an economy.¹⁷³ Because machine construction involved turning circulating capital into its fixed form, constructing new machines when capital was limited depleted circulating capital and lowered the level of employment.¹⁷⁴

In making this argument, Ricardo was concerned to show that he was analysing a highly specific case: that of ‘the situation where machinery was suddenly discovered and extensively introduced. Generally, discoveries were more gradual, and, rather than diverting capital from another sector, they encouraged a higher rate of saving.’ Thus, he cautioned against the generalisation that the introduction of machinery should be restrained.¹⁷⁵ Yet, his argument was widely misunderstood by his contemporaries, and even his disciple John Ramsay McCulloch accused him of having given credibility to those who rallied against machinery.¹⁷⁶ Unsurprisingly, Ricardo’s ideas attracted a legion of monopolists, some of whom painted the Leaguers as mercenary capitalists interested in raising profits by cheapening corn and dampening wages, and some of whom attacked

¹⁷² Maxine Berg, *The Machinery Question and the Making of Political Economy 1815-1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 59; Schumpeter, 636-7

¹⁷³ Berg, 66

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 68

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 72

machinery for causing unemployment, though their arguments lacked Ricardo's nuance and simplistically acknowledged that machines, as mentioned above, induced unemployment by 'replacing' labour.¹⁷⁷

The sources of uncertainty for the League's call for free trade were thus numerous and varied: they spanned arguments that protectionists had made in favour of protection, and theories by political economists which did not fully endorse repeal. Such controversy regarding free trade presented the League with the task of publicly building a persuasive case against the Corn Laws, a topic I will now address using the debate following the passage of the 1842 Corn Law.

¹⁷⁷ See *ibid.*, 67

III Meeting

In 1841, a commercial depression spawned four years previously intensified in Britain's manufacturing districts, systematically wiping out profits, wages and work. Bankruptcies were rife; employment low and falling.¹⁷⁸ By early 1842, the crisis was reaching a fever pitch, and the Queen opened Parliament on Thursday, 3 February, to note 'with deep regret, the continued distress in the manufacturing districts', and to urge that the Corn Laws be reconsidered.¹⁷⁹

On the Wednesday following the Queen's speech, Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel announced a policy to ameliorate the crisis. Wishing to please both growers and buyers of wheat, Peel replaced the old tariff with a new sliding scale that assigned a range of more moderate duties varying inversely with wheat prices. So when a quarter of wheat cost 51 shillings, the tax would be 20s.; when it cost 52 to 55s., the tax would be 18s., and so on.¹⁸⁰ This measure enraged the free-trading Leaguers. To them, a sliding scale had proven hopeless in the past, and could do nothing to soothe the depression now. To this erroneous policy Richard Cobden, leader of the League, ascribed an ignorance of how the economy worked. On 24 February 1842, he 'went on' in Parliament 'to controvert' the fallacies he believed prevented Parliament from repealing the Corn Laws.¹⁸¹

'Yes! I say an ignorance upon this subject which I never saw equalled in any body of working men in the north of England.' he proclaimed. Then, to the followers of

¹⁷⁸ Lloyd-Jones, 99

¹⁷⁹ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 302

¹⁸⁰ For the full sliding scale, see *ibid.*, 312.

¹⁸¹ The image of Cobden as a controverter of fallacy is Prentice's; see Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 319. This image is repeated in Ashworth's history of the League; see Ashworth, 48.

Ricardian economic theory who believed that repeal would lower wages and who used this argument to block repeal, he said,

Do you think that the fallacy of 1815 which to my astonishment I heard put forth in the house last week, namely, that wages rise and fall with the price of food, can prevail in the minds of the working men, after the experience of the last three years? Have you not had bread [prices] higher during that time that [*sic*] during any three years during the last twenty years? Yes. Yet during those three years the wages of labour in every branch of industry have suffered a greater decline than in any three years before.¹⁸²

In this statement, Cobden was trying to prove much: that a claim previously exposed as fallacious should never again be persuasive; that given their experience in the last three years, the working classes were convinced that the Ricardians were wrong; and that the past three years showed that the Ricardians were wrong (i.e., that prices and wages were inversely, rather than directly, related). Cobden's convoluted speech expresses the political difficulties of a radical free-trader in that time. Spurned by the Tories and the Whigs, and unable to form a free-trade government to secure Corn Law repeal, radical free-traders had turned to rousing the public to demand repeal from outside Parliament.¹⁸³ To this end, the League established a series of public meetings in the form of lectures, tea-parties, soirees, dinners and bazaars in multiple locations to teach the British public that free trade favoured them.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 319-20.

¹⁸³ See, for example, McCord, 30-1, and Hollis, 15-8.

¹⁸⁴ The pedagogic trope recurs in language of the League's propaganda and related literature. Harriet Martineau, a close friend of Cobden and the League, recalls in her history the League's response to Parliament's continued rejection of free trade in 1839: 'The delegates offered to instruct the house; the

These meetings ‘produced’ knowledge about the Corn Laws by serving three closely-related purposes: they identified relevant facts that proved the pernicious influence of protection on British prosperity; they eliminated the competing evidence for and arguments about the true extent and cause of the distress; and they showed to Parliament and the public that support for the League was undoubtedly national.¹⁸⁵ In other words, the meetings formed a geographically diffuse system of knowledge production that was the League’s means of creating authentic economic geographical knowledge: the effects of the Corn Laws in each part of Britain; the effects of the Corn Laws on each section of British society; and *so* the effects of the Corn Laws on the *national* condition. By gathering piecemeal evidence from multiple localities, the League sought to build a picture of the whole.

In this, the method of proof was ‘factual’. Testimonies about the condition of disparate locations were brought to meetings by witnesses who were either from those places, or who had travelled there.¹⁸⁶ These testimonies, when presented, could be confirmed or refuted by the League’s auditors, and once corroborated, either by active endorsement or the absence or failure of rebuttal, were pronounced as authentic facts that helped to build the broader truth that protection was destroying Britain’s financial health. Cobden’s own obsession with perceivable facts, and his valorisation of them as a privileged epistemic unit, is clear from his constant invocation of factual information during his public and parliamentary speeches, and his disparagement of an 1838 petition

house had refused to be instructed. The house must be instructed; and the way now contemplated was the grandest and most unexceptional and effectual – it was to be by instructing the nation.’ (Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 115-6). See also Ch. 10, ‘Educating a Nation’, in Longmate.

¹⁸⁵ On some occasions, the League even claimed that support was universal, rather than merely national.

¹⁸⁶ The significance of this will be explored in the next chapter.

by the politically impotent Manchester Chamber of Commerce, which, having failed to include ‘some of the facts that had been stated at the previous discussion’, would carry ‘no more weight, however ingeniously urged, than a thesis drawn up by some tyro in political economy at a university.’¹⁸⁷

Unfortunately, the sources I have consulted do not clearly indicate why Cobden and other Leaguers regarded facts as a legitimate basis for producing knowledge. For one, Leaguers did not use the term ‘fact’ consistently: in some instances it referred to observed particulars,¹⁸⁸ while in others it referred to general statements.¹⁸⁹ Sometimes, ‘a single fact ... comprises almost our main case’;¹⁹⁰ at other times, the term simply stood in for the word ‘true’.¹⁹¹ These inconsistencies suggest that the League did not possess a united or rigorous theory about how observed particulars related to broader statements, as some of their contemporaries did.¹⁹² Yet, the belief that facts were important for the

¹⁸⁷ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 84-5.

¹⁸⁸ For example, when Cobden spoke in Oxford on 13 September 1843, he attempted to prove that the Corn Law of 1815 never served the farmers by maintaining wheat prices at at least 80s. a quarter. Asking, ‘Now what is the fact?’, he pointed out that in 1822, seven years after the corn bill was enacted, wheat cost 42s. a quarter (Ashworth, 135-6).

¹⁸⁹ On 6 October 1842, Cobden refuted a claim by the Duke of Rutland that the price of meat had not fallen: ‘Now, we must set his grace right. There has been such a fall Look at the government contract; there cannot be a better test than that. The government contract for the supply of the army and navy with beef has been taken this year for 20 per cent. less than it was last year. (Hear, hear.) This is proof sufficient of the fact; and his grace ought not to mislead the farmers, by saying that there is not a great fall in the price of meat’ (quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 392).

¹⁹⁰ Cobden, quoted in Ashworth, 228. Having then stated the fact, an observation about the quantity of corn imports, Cobden then concluded, ‘Now, gentlemen, in that one fact is comprised our case.’

¹⁹¹ For instance, when League pamphleteer Anglus objected to the government’s insistence that protection was needed so Britain would not be dependent on other countries for its staples, Anglus reasoned: ‘Supposing that to be the fact,’ why has the government not sent labourers to the colonies to cultivate crops to maintain Britain’s independence? In this phrase, ‘the fact’ can be replaced with ‘true’ without losing meaning. See Anglus, *Artisans, Farmers and Labourers* (London: Ridgway, 1839), 17.

¹⁹² For an account of more nuanced approaches to the relation between facts and generalisations, particularly in relation to the putative popularity of Baconian induction in the 1800s, see, for example, Donald R. Benson, ‘Facts and Constructs: Victorian Humanists and Scientific Theorists on Scientific

production of knowledge and the improvement of society was pervasive in the early nineteenth century.¹⁹³ More specifically, facts may have appealed to the League because it understood them to be ‘objective’, as Prince Albert pointed out in 1859. Facts, he had said, ‘are ‘objective’ and belong to everybody – they remain the same facts at all times and under all circumstances.’¹⁹⁴

If facts remained the same ‘under all circumstances’, they could be used to arbitrate claims about the Corn Laws. As Cobden confessed in 1843, ‘I always like to go to facts and experience in preference to anybody’s authority whatever, and I take this experience as a much better guide in forming a judgment’ than what others have to say on a subject.¹⁹⁵ The danger of uncritically accepting others’ opinions without knowing the facts was that opinions could be corrupted by political interests and social milieu.¹⁹⁶ Thus, of Lord Shrewsbury’s appeal to religion to defend the Corn Laws, Daniel O’Connell replied: ‘Self-interest may delude a great man, here and there; associating with other Corn Law plunderers, he may familiarize his mind to the injustice’.¹⁹⁷ And when

Knowledge’, in *Victorian Science and Victorian Values: Literary Perspectives*, eds. James Paradis and Thomas Postlewait (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1981) and Richard Yeo, ‘An Idol of the Market-place: Baconianism in Nineteenth Century Britain’, *History of Science* 23 (1985).

¹⁹³ Samuel Smiles wrote that ‘Human knowledge is but an accumulation of small facts.’ See Samuel Smiles, *Self-help with Illustrations of Conduct & Perseverance* (London: John Murray, 1958 [1859]), 139.

¹⁹⁴ Quoted in Benson, 299.

¹⁹⁵ ‘Anti-Corn Law League: Election for the City of London’, *Times*, 13 October 1843, page 3.

¹⁹⁶ If Baconianism had influenced the Leaguers, as accounts of its pervasiveness would suggest (see Yeo, *passim* and Benson, *passim*), then the understanding that facts allowed freedom from political and economic biases represents another creative reworking of Bacon’s ideas, for Daston has pointed out that ‘What Baconian facts seemed to promise was neither consensus nor freedom from all bias, but simply freedom from theoretical bias.’ See Lorraine Daston, ‘Baconian Facts, Academic Civility, and the Prehistory of Objectivity’, *Annals of Scholarship* 8, no. 3-4 (1991): 337-63.

¹⁹⁷ Daniel O’Connell, *Observations on Corn Laws, on Political Pravity and Ingratitude, and on Clerical and Personal Slander, in the shape of a Meek and Modest Reply to the Second Letter of the Earl of Shrewsbury, Waterford, and Wexford* (Dublin: Samuel J. Machen, 1842), 18

Alexander Harvey wanted to determine if the laws were just, he urged that justice could only be served if ‘party interests and long cherished prejudices [were] laid aside, and the points in debate taken up with an honest desire to arrive at the truth’.¹⁹⁸ The force of facts was not lost even on Cobden’s main parliamentary foe: Peel, on 25 July 1842, had had to thank the Leaguers ‘for the testimony you have born, which I fear is incontestible [*sic*].’¹⁹⁹

Peel’s pronouncement was the result of a deputation by the League presenting evidence of the extent and cause of the manufacturing depression that had culminated from meetings held throughout that month to rouse Parliament to action. Incensed by the legislation of Peel’s new sliding scale on 29 April 1842, the Leaguers had convened some largely ineffectual meetings in June to awaken Parliament to ‘the deplorable condition of the country’, for ‘Parliament is dragging on, apparently in the utter forgetfulness that *multitudes are perishing* for want of food.’²⁰⁰ When these failed to move Parliament, the Leaguers organised another round of meetings in July, held at various hotels in London, to gather evidence of the distress in separate localities and to determine its cause. As the chair P. A. Taylor declared at the first meeting, the League was seeking ‘to bring before the nation, the legislature, and the government, details of the intense suffering and misery which were overwhelming a large portion of their fellow subjects’, and ‘to show that the

¹⁹⁸ Harvey, 3

¹⁹⁹ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 362; see also Longmate, 154. The weight Peel placed on facts is consonant with Irwin’s analysis that Peel referred to his own experience of economic events in deciding that wages did not vary directly with food prices, and that the crisis would therefore not resolve itself, rather than defer to abstract economic reasoning. See Douglas Irwin, ‘Political Economy and Peel’s repeal of the Corn Laws’, *Economics and Politics* 1 (Spring 1989): 41-59.

²⁰⁰ See Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 335 (original emphasis).

principal cause of these evils was the scarcity of food – a scarcity brought about by the operation of the Corn Laws.’²⁰¹

This chapter focuses on the events of July 1842, including the League’s meeting with Peel, as a means of understanding the process through which true knowledge about free trade and the Corn Laws was produced by the League, and the conditions required for securing that knowledge. How did the League turn piecemeal testimony about the suffering endured in specific locations and by specific social classes into a grand truth about national distress? How did the League authenticate accounts of crisis in order to admit them into the privileged epistemic category of truth? How did the League construct theories to explain the austerity, asserting that want of food was its ‘principle cause’? How did the League prove that the nation wanted repeal? And, finally, what was needed for knowledge to be thus constituted? Answers to these questions can be uncovered by tracing the manner in which the League attempted to prove its case in July 1842, an example typical of its general approach to knowledge production and public persuasion. So we return to 4 July 1842, to a room at Herbert’s Hotel, Palace Yard, crammed with deputies from numerous Anti-Corn Law Associations eager to present evidence of the distress in their localities. After the Chair’s pithy welcome speech, a presentation of ‘terrible statistics ... statistics harrowing to the heart of every man who had a heart who could feel’ unfolds.²⁰²

The first speaker was the prominent Leaguer John Bright. ‘The distress was universal.’ he said, ‘If they went to Scotland they found Forfar, Glasgow, Paisley, in desolation. If they

²⁰¹ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 337.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

came further south, they would hear from a delegate in Newcastle that almost the whole of the working population were out of employment, and were living on the charity given out by the town council.’²⁰³ A letter from Shields confirmed that ‘trade was almost annihilated’ there, and the case was much the same in Lancashire, Bolton, Stockport, Derbyshire, Manchester, and Ireland.²⁰⁴ ‘In Leeds it was still worse; there were 30 or 40,000 persons existing upon charity alone. If they went to Sheffield, he believed they would find that men were not possessed of one-quarter the comfort they had three years ago’.²⁰⁵ Bright was followed by Thomas Plint of Leeds, who told of the hardship endured there. The value of mill property had declined a startling 70 per cent. The price of meat had risen 40 per cent, while its consumption had fallen 25 per cent. The major losers in this case were the working classes, whose incomes had decreased more rapidly than the middle and upper classes.²⁰⁶

At Brown’s Hotel the next day, more testimonies of the same style were given. Rev. Bailey of Sheffield told the audience that he had issued a request to the working classes to send him their personal information if they were unemployed. ‘In the course of four or five days, he received 2,156 statements from working and unemployed men, who, with 150 exceptions, were all heads of families.’²⁰⁷ He also claimed that all sectors of trade in Sheffield had been affected by the distress, and to prove it, he showed that while the wages for working men in 1838 had been 20 to 30s. a week, they were now 5 to

²⁰³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 338.

²⁰⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 338-9.

²⁰⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 338.

²⁰⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 339-40.

²⁰⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 340.

10s.²⁰⁸ Mr. Bonner of Bilston testified that in Wolverhampton, half of the blast furnaces lay idle, and so 10,000 people had no work. The iron mills were losing revenue, which caused more unemployment, for millers could not afford as many workers as they had before. The workhouses were packed with men – ‘130 honest labouring men’ to be exact – doing nothing but ‘breaking stones’, and many inmates were made to sleep on the floor for want of space. Mothers were pawning their wedding rings out of desperation for money and food. These ‘were not pledged, but sold, because the parties had no hope of ever being able to redeem them.’²⁰⁹ In Bicester, families were found without clothes, and eating mouldy bread with water.²¹⁰ In Stockport, a fund set up to aid the poor was nearing exhaustion because there was too much poverty, and because the decline of trade was slowly turning middle class donors into paupers.²¹¹

When the delegation met Peel on 25 July, similar accounts were given.²¹² Edmund Grundy testified that distress had ‘overtaken’ Bury, and that ‘The state of the poor-rates would be forcible evidence of this. In 1839, a rate of 10d. in the pound was levied; in 1840, 2s.; and in 1841, 2s. 1d., leaving a debt owing by the township of nearly £3,000.’²¹³ Mr. Foster of Stockport asserted that the same indicators – climbing rates and the increased difficulties of procuring funds to aid the poor – proved the extent of the crisis

²⁰⁸ Quoted in *ibid.*, 340-1.

²⁰⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 341-2.

²¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, 343.

²¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*

²¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, 346.

²¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 357.

there.²¹⁴ And two religious ministers drew on their experience with the poor to present anecdotes about the destitution of labourers in their localities, which they claimed was driving the poor to crime and insurrection. As Rev. Lowe of Forfar put it,

Their furniture had vanished from their now cheerless homes, piece after piece; their clothes were going in tatters off their backs, and shame and nakedness characterised multitudes of their honest and industrious community. ... While in this state of starvation and misery, crime and moral degradation must necessarily increase. The rising generation, too, were growing up without the means of education, except in one branch, a most fearful branch of education indeed ... our youth were trained to curse those laws which stood between them and the bounties of heaven in that munificence which God gives them.²¹⁵

This manner of testimony, whereby detailed factual information about the extent and nature of the distress was presented, formed a key part of the League's epistemic strategy to produce true knowledge about the effects of the Corn Laws. As early as January 1839, barely months after the League's inception, a central board was formed to persuade Parliament to support free trade, a committee eager to impress 'upon all those local bodies [Anti-Corn Law Associations], the necessity of immediately collecting and arranging their evidence, and placing it at the disposal of the Central Board.'²¹⁶ Such evidence of the numbers of people affected, and the ways in which they suffered, was channelled by the League in the hope of galvanising Parliament into action. So in response to the question, 'Why should we hear of these details of distress?', raised at

²¹⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, 356.

²¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 361.

²¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 101.

Brown's Hotel on 5 July 1842, Taylor replied, '[For] London should know of it, and every part of the country, and every man in the country should know of it.'²¹⁷ His reply echoed a sentiment expressed two years ago at a banquet for working class Leaguers, where Anti-Corn Law Associations were called upon 'to send delegates to meet in London ... prepared with statements as to the actual condition of the people in his own locality, as proof of the necessity of instant repeal of a law which had involved the country in deep and constantly increasing distress.'²¹⁸

So beyond the events of July 1842, this pattern recurs. At a meeting in Birmingham on 3 January 1843, a deputation told 'of the existence of great distress in the different localities of the kingdom'.²¹⁹ Five months later, John Bright pointed out during a meeting in London, that 'There were 3,000,000 of people in Lancashire and Yorkshire who were no longer able to afford what was called "an effective consumption," and consequently the deluded farmer and the agricultural population generally were getting into a state of distress that was almost unparalleled in any country.'²²⁰ He then added that the decay of cotton would spell the end of national prosperity, for much employment and income was dependent on the cotton trade. According to the *Handbook of Science*, he said, 'in 1760, it [the cotton trade] employed 40,000 hands, and produced to the value of 600,000*l.*, while now it gave employment to 1,500,000 and produced annually to the

²¹⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, 342.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 150. The delegates met in London on 26 March that year to serve that purpose. Three years later, the League's aim was still the same. As League president George Wilson announced at a meeting in London on 8 May 1843, 'They had come into the city of London to lay their views before the inhabitants, and if they concurred in them, then they would ask for their cordial support to erase from the statute book an act of so heinous a character, that it was a disgrace to the bankers, merchants, and traders of so important a city as London to have allowed it to remain on it so long.' ('Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 9 May 1843, page 6)

²¹⁹ 'The Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 4 January 1843, page 5

²²⁰ 'Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 9 May 1843, page 6

amount of 31,000,000*l.* (Cheers.) In 1760 the average wages were 2*s.* a-week, in 1837 they were 8*s.* to 9*s.* a-week.²²¹ Through detailed factual accounts, the League sought to prove the extent and nature of distress: that many people were suffering in many unimaginable ways.

But the League was not concerned merely with the nature and extent of the crisis. As mentioned earlier, it also wanted to prove its cause. Thus, at the meeting with Peel, Mr. Ridgway of the Staffordshire Potteries gave an account of the increased hardship borne by everyone there: ‘The traders and shopkeepers, for want of business, were, many of them, unable to meet their engagements and to maintain their stations; and the working classes, an intelligent and industrious class, were suffering under severe and unexampled distress.’ Then he pointed to its cause, the decline of trade: ‘The manufacturers, unable to sell their goods, were driven to lower their prices, to limit their work, and reduce their wages. The working men had to contend with all this – with a high price of food, and with privations without a ray of hope.’²²² Likewise, John Brooks, a calico-printer from Lancashire with extensive experience in the business, spoke of the lack of demand at home diverting goods to other countries where markets could be found, and the collapse of the value of 27 inch printing cloth, costing 9*s.* 6*d.* in 1834, but only 4*s.* 9*d.* now, spelling doom for the weavers of Manchester.²²³ Consumption was falling off due to rampant poverty in Leeds, ruining many of its ‘principal shops’,²²⁴ and Sheffield’s trade

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 349

²²³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 351-3.

²²⁴ Mr. Whitehead of Leeds, quoted in *ibid.*, 359.

with America, which accounted for over half of its total trade, was endangered, for ‘our refusal to take [American] grain had well nigh destroyed that great trade.’²²⁵

Here, Leaguers were voicing multiple economic theories at once. Their arguments were variously based on the beliefs, as discussed previously, that high food prices lowered domestic demand for manufactures; that the Corn Laws restricting the purchase of foreign corn decimated foreign demand for British manufactures; that the ensuing reduction in British receipts on manufactured products led to falling profits, wages, and work; and that the poor were given the rawest deal, for they now had to pay for dearer food with lower incomes.²²⁶ These messages bore the implication that protection was detrimental to Britain, for it lowered wages and hence consumption by depressing trade, and were widely broadcast to the public at League meetings. At a banquet in Liverpool on 1 February 1843, guests were fed ‘elaborate statistical calculations, to show the effects of high prices of grain upon our imports and exports’;²²⁷ at a meeting in the Hall of Commerce, London, three months later, auditors were shown ‘that they had been compelled to pay, above the natural price of sugar in the world’s market, the sum of 3,500,000*l.*’ owing to the monopoly on sugar;²²⁸ and in January the next year, an audience in London was told that imports of cheese to the West of Scotland had declined ‘Because when the labouring classes were well to do they were able to buy this article,

²²⁵ W. Ibbotson of Sheffield, quoted in *ibid.*, 353.

²²⁶ For an overview of the League’s economic arguments, see Grampp, especially Ch. 5.

²²⁷ ‘Great Anti-Corn Law League Dinner’, *Times*, 2 February 1843, page 3

²²⁸ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 9 May 1843, page 6

and when out of employment they had not the means, and the farmer was therefore unable to sell his cheese.²²⁹

Presenting evidence on the nature, extent, and causes of economic misery was an important first step in the League's epistemic struggle to produce knowledge about the effects of the Corn Laws. However, presentation itself was insufficient to secure the creation of *true* knowledge, a category that required the further step of authentication. For the League, testimonies about the Corn Laws could only be understood as true after they were authenticated. At its most basic level, this required accounts to be supported or unchallenged by other speakers or auditors. So Thomas Plint's speech about the situation of Leeds on 4 July 1842, for example, was 'corroborated' by 'Three other delegates from Leeds', while Rev. Bailey's claims the next day were 'corroborated' by Mr. Ibbotson, also from Sheffield.²³⁰ And when 'no just corrections came to hand' after 'readers who found any erroneous statements' in a report had been asked to 'oblige us with corrections', League follower Henry Ashworth pronounced the report 'authentic'.²³¹

To be credible, these confirmations, whether positive or negative, had to *appear* spontaneous, the earnest contributions of impartial participants in free discussion. Thus, when a meeting was savagely interrupted by the League's Chartist opponents in 1839, Cobden rebuked the perpetrators, for 'There is nothing I like so much as free discussion, and settling the truth by reason and argument.'²³² Three years later, the chairman of a

²²⁹ 'Meeting of the Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 26 January 1844, page 6

²³⁰ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 340, 341

²³¹ Ashworth, 52

²³² Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 118

public meeting vouched ‘to give every man a hearing, whether he had his working dress on or his Sunday suit.’²³³ The League, it would seem, subscribed to the epistemology Mr. Erskine had touted to Lady Agatha’s indifferent dinner guests. ‘Well,’ he had said, ‘the way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test Reality we must see it on the tight-rope. When the Verities become acrobats we can judge them.’²³⁴ It was by presenting evidence in a forum whose openness made claims susceptible to both corroboration and contradiction that true, that is, supported and unchallenged, knowledge about the Corn Laws could emerge. And it was in doing so that participants exercised independent thought, formulated opinions using bare facts rather than preconceived ideas poisoned by political interests, and agreed or disagreed with the claims others had made. But what everyone had freely agreed on was what everyone had perceived, what everyone had understood. This had to be true.

So the League struggled to ensure unanimity while stressing the freeness of its discussions, its meetings a technology for producing assent, a quality it needed to make its knowledge credible. At the London conference in 1839, ‘many witnesses were found, examined and primed, and the free traders were confident that they had ample evidence of the harm done by the Corn Laws to every section of the community’.²³⁵ The same techniques were applied at the conference accompanying the two banquets of January 1840,²³⁶ and at a meeting in the Corn Exchange in June the next year, a lecture was given

²³³ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 15 December 1842, page 3. After Chartists repeatedly attacked its meetings in 1839 and 1840, the League evolved ticketing as a means of enlarging the proportion of supporters in their audiences. As a *Times* reporter observes about this meeting, ‘For the purpose of insuring unanimity in the proceedings, care was taken that none but those presenting tickets should be admitted’.

²³⁴ Oscar Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1993 [1891]), 29

²³⁵ McCord, 49

‘to an audience admitted by ticket, which bound them to be obedient to the chairman, and not to interrupt the speaker.’²³⁷ Two months later at a meeting of religious ministers, ‘the League prepared the evidence and primed the witnesses who appeared before the conference, and even the membership of the conference was tampered with by the League’.²³⁸ Of this, the Congregationalist Dr. Halley said, ‘the thing never came to a Conference at all, but only a convocation. There was no discussion. The Committee took care to provide resolutions that were moved and seconded, and then to receive information. The room being crowded with spectators checked discussion Besides, the feeling was so generally in favour of the extreme view – no “protection”, no “fixed duty” – that no person on the other side would have any chance.’²³⁹

Nevertheless, the League openly bragged about its ‘free’ discussions, emphasising the legitimacy of its epistemic strategy to safeguard the veracity of its claims. So on 28 September 1843, Wilson pointed out to a cheering audience that ‘in order to test the correctness of this statement’ – that the agriculturists did not support the League – ‘Mr. Cobden went among the agriculturists an entire stranger to them, except in name; the meetings he called together were *bonâ fide* public meetings of farmers, county meetings, open-air meetings, most, if not all, of them being open to all who chose to attend them’.²⁴⁰ And Cobden, he triumphantly declared, had met with much success. This

²³⁶ Ibid., 72

²³⁷ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 218

²³⁸ McCord, 104-5

²³⁹ Quoted in McCord, 106.

²⁴⁰ Ashworth, 152 (original emphasis)

proved that the agriculturists did in fact support the League, for, if otherwise, contrary opinions, according to the League's logic, would surely have been expressed.

But the League's presentation of its discussions as 'free' never fooled its enemies, who quickly pointed to how the League had dishonestly stage-managed its meetings to discredit it. Latching onto a particularly dramatic scuffle during a meeting in London on 1 December 1842 in which two men perceived to be hostile to the League's motions were promptly and violently quieted, a scathing pamphlet tellingly entitled 'Do as we bid you!' was published anonymously mocking the League's pretence to 'free discussion'. Recounting the incident in great detail, the writer admonished the League for putting down a Mr. Blackmore, who had been seconded by a Mr. Ridley in accordance with the meeting's decorum: 'the Chairman thought proper to decide that Mr. Blackmore's amendment was disorderly, and refused to permit it to be seconded; and proceeded, according to the *preconcerted* routine, to call on Mr. Ewart, M.P., to propose the next resolution'.²⁴¹ To Mr. Ewart's regrets that 'the *free discussion of political questions* [on free trade] *by Englishmen*' had been obstructed, the writer rejoined:

Mr. Ewart ... has a very short memory, and forgot it seems, that not ten minutes before his own friends and associates *had pitched one Englishman over neck and crop*, and given another a *black eye*, only for putting in their claim to a *free discussion of political opinions* at an advertised public meeting.²⁴²

Alas, despite the League's best efforts to quash dissent, a Mr. Spurr 'Protested against the meeting as a *one-sided meeting*'. He was instantly shut down by the chairman, earning the League the sarcastically derisive assessment that 'the *freedom of discussion* was so

²⁴¹ *Do as we bid you! Or, League Freedom of Discussion* ([s.l.: s.n.], [1843]), 2 (original emphasis)

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 3 (original emphasis)

completely established, that all the “*great Anti-Corn Law Resolutions*” were passed with the usual *unanimity*, by the ... LONDON BRANCH OF THE LEAGUE, – AND SO MUCH FOR THE LEAGUE TOLERANCE OF FREEDOM OF DISCUSSION.’²⁴³

To refer to unanimity here was to use the words of Sir D. L. Evans, present at the meeting, who, notwithstanding its absurd conduct, had spoken of the audience’s consensus, revealing the League’s relentless desire to present its meetings as truly open, and therefore creditable.²⁴⁴ So when its meetings were criticised for not being genuinely free, League members jumped to its rescue. After two persons were silenced at a meeting in London on 14 December 1842, a League supporter defended the decision to do so by claiming it was legitimate to restrict the ‘freedom’ of debate to the topic the participants had intended to discuss. ‘[T]he principles of free discussion,’ he ventured to a mixture of ‘Cheers and uproar’, ‘had been violated by persons who wished to introduce the doctrines of the Charter, for the discussion of which they were not met. Free discussion was this, for those who differed to listen to what was said, carry it home, and turn it over in their minds, but not to try to thrust their opinions down the throats of others.’²⁴⁵ An equally flimsy defence was offered by League president George Wilson at the Covent Garden Theatre on 7 August 1844 against complaints that ‘the meetings at Covent-garden were not thrown open to the public generally.’ ‘[B]ut the answer was,’ he said plainly to a cheering crowd, ‘that they had not sufficient room for the members of the League.’²⁴⁶ To authenticate its knowledge as true, the League defended its process of knowledge

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 4 (original emphasis)

²⁴⁴ ‘The Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 2 December 1842, page 3

²⁴⁵ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 15 December 1842, page 3

²⁴⁶ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 8 August 1844, page 3

production as open and *therefore* legitimate while occasionally justifying why complete openness was impossible, and pointed to the ‘spontaneous’ confirmations of its supporters, and the alleged lack of conflicting evidence, as marks of its epistemic validity.

Beyond corroboration and contradiction, the League took its epistemic strategy one step further. Although it feared its enemies’ rebuttals, it did not frequently fail to falsify their claims, indicating that it recognised falsification to be an important element of the authentication process. For falsification could dispel claims as erroneous and untrue, so the League took every opportunity to disprove claims that any other reason but the scarcity of food was causing the crisis. Thus, in response to the pervasive perception that machinery caused the distress, Laurence Heyworth said in the meeting with Peel: ‘The Corn Laws operated most fatally on those trades which were not carried on by machinery. There was evidence of this even in London itself.’ He then recounted the testimony of a shoe manufacturer from Southwark who had had to reduce the wages he paid his workers after the Corn Laws were introduced, adding, ‘Talk of machinery reducing the rate of wages indeed! What machinery was employed in making shirts and shoes? Or where was the steam power applied to the manufacture of trousers and waistcoats?’²⁴⁷ Barely a month ago, exactly this point had been made of Sheffield: ‘It should be observed that the decline in the trade of Sheffield was not owing to the introduction of machinery, because the manufacturers there employed very little machinery now, which had not been in use fifty years ago.’²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 354. Heyworth’s first name is usually spelt ‘Lawrence’.

²⁴⁸ Rev. Bailey, quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 341

Similar arguments were made by Cobden on 8 December 1841, when speaking to the manufacturers of Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire:

Why, gentlemen, you have the whole case in your own hands. We, in Lancashire ... are told ... that our distress arises from improvement in machinery. But this does not apply to your case; for I am told that the stocking frame has remained nearly the same as when it issued from the hands of the inventors, two centuries ago Then, we are met in Manchester again with the cry that over-production is the cause of all the distress. But I have heard to-day that your production is declining, that the number of frames in motion is diminishing, instead of increasing, especially in Leicestershire. It is, therefore, not over-production, it is not machinery that is doing the mischief for you. ... You, therefore, have the case in your own hands. The whole of the fallacies of our opponents, as applied to Manchester, are answered in your case.²⁴⁹

And in response to the workers' strike of August 1842, League supporter Archibald Prentice pointed out that no damage had been done to the machinery, proving that the workers had not found that to be at fault in their misery.²⁵⁰

Leaguers also disputed claims that the Corn Laws protected British interests, and that free trade would harm it. After all, it was only when 'men of wealth and education contend[ed] that the indulgence of an appetite for big loaves was fraught with consequences no less serious than the ruin of the landowner, the farmer, the labourer and ultimately the nation', that 'lectures like these became necessary to show that absurdity

²⁴⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 278-9. I have omitted one other argument Cobden refuted: 'But what do you hear also in Lancashire? That joint-stock banks have produced all the distress. But here, I find that no great mischief has been produced by joint-stock banks.'

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 381-2

and fallacy of such assertions.²⁵¹ Thus, at a meeting at the Mechanics' Institute in London in December 1842, the League's parliamentary ally Charles Villiers said:

It had been said that the corn laws were essential for the good of the agricultural districts, that labourers would be retained in their employment at their usual wages, and that the profits of the farmers would be steady and certain. What was the fact? The union-houses were filled and overflowing with agricultural labourers, the farmers were complaining of exorbitant rents which the prices of their produce would not enable them to pay, and, wonderful to say, their landlords were reproaching them for their want of skill and intelligence in husbandry.²⁵²

And when the League's opponent in the 1844 Huntingdon election asserted that 'the importation of foreign corn would be seriously detrimental to the farming class of this country, and that every quarter of corn brought from abroad would displace a quarter of home-grown corn', it was contended that 'Free trade would cause the extension of commerce, the extension of commerce would give the people increased means, and with increased means 10,000,000 quarters of corn, would be consumed, more than were at present, by the people of Great Britain and Ireland.'²⁵³ The speaker then went on to demolish the claim put forth by the protectionist Society for the Protection of Agriculture that free trade in silk had injured that trade. In all the history of the silk trade, he said, 'in periods of Legislative restriction upon importation the silk trade was most depressed, and never so flourishing as when restrictions were fewest.'²⁵⁴

²⁵¹ J. B. Smith, on 25 October 1838, quoted in Longmate, 19.

²⁵² 'The Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 2 December 1842, page 3

²⁵³ 'Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 25 April 1844, page 7

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

The list goes on. On 3 January 1843, Bright spoke ‘from experience’ to show that the prices of manufactures did not increase with the price of food, so that, contrary to the monopolists’ beliefs, employers could not raise wages, and workers remained caught between low pay and dear food. He then used a logical thought experiment to show that as expensive food ate up the household budget and reduced the demand for manufactured goods, there was no way for manufacturing incomes to rise.²⁵⁵ Over a year later, Cobden questioned the Ricardian wisdom that wages would fall as food prices fell. ‘Did any man present find that wages rose in the dear years of 1835 and 1836?’ he asked rhetorically, ‘Did the shoemaker, the tailor, the carpenter, or any other artizan [*sic*] receive higher pay for his wages? (“No.”) It was a scandalous misstatement’, he resolved.²⁵⁶ And in January 1845, both Cobden and the Suffolk landowner Thomas Milner Gibson denied commonplace concerns that free trade would hurt the farmers, the landowners, and the church, that falling prices would hurt wages, and that increased imports of corn would spell lower prices. As Cobden pointed out in relation to wool, ‘Last year 20,000,000 pounds weight more than the former year of foreign and colonial wool had been imported; yet the farmer had been getting from 20 to 30 per cent. more wool grown in this country than he did the year before.’²⁵⁷ Falsification of competing claims thus became an important component in the League’s strategy to authenticate its knowledge of free trade. For if its enemies’ arguments were untrue, its claims, opposed to those fallacious arguments, had to be true.

²⁵⁵ ‘The Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 4 January 1843, page 5

²⁵⁶ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 4 July 1844, page 7

²⁵⁷ ‘The Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 16 January 1845, page 6

The League's epistemic system thus comprised several crucial elements – presentation and authentication, including corroboration, and (one-sided) falsification – aimed at producing assent – commonly held and *therefore* true knowledge – on the question of free trade. In this system, perceivable factual information, whether numerical or anecdotal, were the privileged building blocks of the grand truth the League sought. Such 'facts and evidence' were best unembellished by the speaker: they were persuasive and creditable only if raw and unmediated. Thus, to defend his invocation of a sensational story about a misguided labourer who tried to raise wages by burning corn, Cobden asked his audience 'not [to] suppose that he ... was making up a story for the occasion. There was not in his account any addition of facts to those which appeared in the papers.'²⁵⁸

So the League put 'facts and evidence', plain and unadorned, to work, sometimes with surprising effect. As one journalist lamented of a meeting in Northumberland, 'the respective addresses of the members of the deputation were so unusually protracted, and involved so many intricate and ingenious statistical details adduced in illustration and support of their views ... that to give them at length would occupy a much greater portion of your paper than I can suppose you are able to devote to it.'²⁵⁹ Tiresome as these facts may have been,²⁶⁰ the League's audience lapped it up. Thus, when the *Times* declared the League as 'a great fact' in 1843, it recognised that 'experience set at nought – advice derided – warnings neglected – these brought the League into existence – these gave it

²⁵⁸ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 225.

²⁵⁹ 'The Anti-Corn Law League in Northumberland', *Times*, 11 July 1843, page 7. Thankfully, other reporters did in fact record some of the detailed argumentation of the League, preserving some sense of the League's attempt at presenting thorough-going analyses.

²⁶⁰ The narrator of Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray* would have been more critical: "'When America was discovered,' said the Radical member, and he began to give some wearisome facts. Like all people who try to exhaust a subject, he exhausted his listeners.' See Wilde, 28.

power and motion, and vital energy – these gave it an easy and unresisted [*sic*] ingress into the very sanctuaries of our domestic life’.²⁶¹ Two years later, Lord John Russell declared, ‘I used to be of opinion that corn was an exception to the general rules of political economy; but observation and experience have convinced me that we ought to abstain from all interference with the supply of food.’²⁶² Mr. Gradgrind would have been so proud.²⁶³

The beauty of this – at least on the surface of it – was that ‘facts and experience’ were available to everyone. In principle, the League was espousing a democratic system of knowledge production in which it found the public competent to both retrieve and receive facts in the production of truth. Thus, in 1844, Cobden said of the League: ‘It had to teach two generations ... not merely by arguments and general facts, but by their own experience’.²⁶⁴ And thus the numerous speeches that appealed to the audience’s experience that, for instance, Britons were better off when bread was cheap;²⁶⁵ that the midland manufacturers were facing a depression;²⁶⁶ that the suffering was borne by everyone;²⁶⁷ and that the agricultural labourers were too poor to afford foreign

²⁶¹ ‘London, Saturday, November 18, 1843’, *Times*, 17 November 1843, page 4

²⁶² Quoted in Longmate, 211.

²⁶³ That is, the Gradgrind before Louisa’s breakdown, although see D. W. Jefferson, ‘Mr Gradgrind’s Facts’, *Essays in Criticism* XXXV (July 1985) for a critical response to popular readings of Gradgrind and Victorian facticity.

²⁶⁴ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 137-8.

²⁶⁵ Cobden at a meeting in November 1840; see *ibid.*, 169.

²⁶⁶ At a meeting in Nottingham on 14 December 1842, Mr. Wakefield had dismissed the need for ‘detailed statements’ for the depression was far too obvious; see ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 15 December 1842, page 3.

²⁶⁷ In March 1843, Villiers followed his assertion that ‘You are well aware of all the sufferings which surround you’ with rhetorical questions on the plight of the working classes; see ‘The council of the Anti-Corn Law League have,’ *Times*, 27 March 1843, page 6.

products.²⁶⁸ In marshalling facts, commonly known or at least verifiable, to their aid, and showing these facts to be consistent with their claims about free trade – that, for example, wages did not fall in line with prices; that increased imports of corn did not mean an equal reduction of local demand for it; and so on – the League hoped to dispel from every Briton the ‘falsehoods’ of the protectionists, and supplant those beliefs with truths of their own making.

The League’s truth-making project was geographic: we saw in the last chapter how its lecturers perambulated the country and how its publications traversed the nation to conquer ignorance with truth. As Prentice remarked of the League’s printed propaganda, which served the same ends as its meetings, ‘These silent missionaries, the tracts, would silently work their way. They would speak truths to the sight, and truths that would prevail.’²⁶⁹ In this sentence is a sense that truth, once brought to light, would convert the disbelieving and endure through time, so we return to Cobden’s indignation at Peel’s sliding scale, a sign of fallacies re-infecting Parliament. But there is also a sense that the League felt it necessary to convince the public to support its cause by agreeing on the truths of the Corn Laws, a belief motivating its wildly extravagant efforts to organise meetings and propaganda, and a belief motivated by the League’s marginality in Parliament, the only site whose decision about the Corn Laws was legitimate, and thus the only site that mattered.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ Bright at a meeting in May 1843; see ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 9 May 1843, page 6.

²⁶⁹ Longmate, 96; Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 21

²⁷⁰ So McCord has called it the ‘decisive theatre’ (Ch. 8). But for the historiographic implications of this characterisation, see Howe, 28-9; Pickering and Tyrrell, 5.

As I argued previously, the League was rejected consistently by Parliament early on in its campaign, so it turned to persuading the public that free trade favoured them to impress upon Parliament that its mandate was the will of the people and therefore politically valid. It was the League, not Parliament, that spoke for the people, the common interest.²⁷¹ Such a sentiment remained throughout the League's campaign. As late as December 1842, Villiers, concurring with other Leaguers about the necessity of applying external pressure on Parliament, 'affirmed that the present agitation was enforced upon them by conduct of the Legislature and of the present Government', adding that 'From that conduct it must be inferred that they would do nothing unless acted upon by pressure from without.'²⁷² Similarly, at a Liverpool banquet in February the next year, it was noted that 'only by acting on public opinion without the house that they could create that moral power which was essential to the success of every agitation, and more especially that of the corn laws.'²⁷³

The League had set its sights on unanimity on the question of the Corn Laws at a national level, and not once did it forgo a chance to show this, whether in speech or in print. Just as Taylor emphasised in July 1842 how the numbers gathered before Peel reflected the broad constituency of the League, a leading repealer celebrated in 1838 how the crowd he was facing reflected 'the increasing interest which was manifesting itself on this question'.²⁷⁴ Likewise, while Sir H. G. Ward, M.P. for Sheffield, noted on 17 April 1844 that 'The continued and crowded attendance at the meetings of the League, and the

²⁷¹ Hollis, 3

²⁷² 'The Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 2 December 1842, page 3

²⁷³ 'Great Anti-Corn Law League Dinner', *Times*, 2 February 1843, page 3

²⁷⁴ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 76. The speaker was J. B. Smith.

attention with which the old arguments with new illustrations were heard, were proofs of no common interest in no common cause',²⁷⁵ Cobden observed on 3 July 1844 that 'There was no greater proof of the progress of the cause than that such crowds assembled in that theatre week after week to share in the proceedings, whilst so many attractions lay around them throughout the metropolis.'²⁷⁶ One month later, Milner Gibson maintained the League's triumphant rhetoric by congratulating 'the meeting on the numbers in which they collected ..., as it was the fullest proof that the cause of free trade was progressing.'²⁷⁷

On occasion, money also stood in for strength. On 5 November 1842, Cobden related that he had received a donation from a gentleman, with the cryptic message, 'It is a money question, and the money speaks for itself'.²⁷⁸ And in October the next year, Bright referred to the League's abundant followers and successful fundraising to defend its decision to contest an election: '[D]id their opponents mean to say that an association which had filled Covent-garden Theatre as it was filled last week – an association to which the public had voluntarily subscribed 50,000*l.* last year, and which had the audacity now to ask for 100,000*l.*, had no right to rise in opposition to a man of the name of Baring ...?'²⁷⁹

Crude numbers of support at meetings, however, whether in terms of people or money, were not the most ingenious element of the League's rhetoric of strength. More

²⁷⁵ 'Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 18 April 1844, page 6

²⁷⁶ 'Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 4 July 1844, page 7

²⁷⁷ 'Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 8 August 1844, page 3

²⁷⁸ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 396.

²⁷⁹ 'The Anti-Corn Law League and the Electors of Farringdon Without', *Times*, 5 October 1843, page 3

prominently, the League flaunted the support it had received in different locations and from distinct social groups. So in December 1842, Bright told a Manchester audience, ‘I merely mention these things [the numerous towns the League had canvassed and the enormous donations it had received] in order that you may not suppose that you are doing all the work. (Hear, hear.) There are many towns who are as zealous as Manchester.’²⁸⁰ And while the speeches to Peel in 1842, like many of the League’s other deputations, had been organised by geographic location, so was the 1845 National Anti-Corn Law League Bazaar, which, being ‘by far the most decisive sign ... of the extent and thoroughness with which Free Trade principles had leavened the public mind’, and which, having been designed to mark ‘the breadth, depth, and force of public conviction’ on the question of free trade,²⁸¹ had sorted stalls by locality. Thus, each stall bore ‘the inscription of nearly every important town and neighbourhood in the kingdom’.²⁸² Bolton, Bradford, Bristol, Carlisle, Halifax, Leeds, Newcastle, Northampton, Stockport, Swansea, Manchester (of course), and so forth.²⁸³ The bazaar gazette, anxious to refresh visitors’ memories of what they had seen, to direct them to what they ‘ought to observe’, and to relay to distant friends the exciting events,²⁸⁴ also repeated the geographic structure of the bazaar by

²⁸⁰ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 403.

²⁸¹ *Morning Chronicle*, quoted in *National Anti-Corn-Law League Bazaar Gazette* (London: John Gadsby, 1845), No. 16, page 1. The *Chronicle*’s opinion was repeated by the *Illuminated Magazine*, which ‘never witnessed so much and such widely-spread conviction in any other’ (quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 340).

²⁸² *Economist*, quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 340.

²⁸³ Except Manchester, which was undoubtedly at the meeting, this sample comes from *Bazaar Gazette*, No. 1, page 2-3. Other issues refer to other localities.

²⁸⁴ On the purpose of the gazette, see *ibid.*, No. 1, page 1.

organising its narrative around the localities represented there. Leeds, for example, was ‘well represented by a splendid variety of woollen goods.’²⁸⁵

Apart from geographic locations, the bazaar also represented sections of society, as the *Douglas Jerrold’s Magazine* explicated:

Within a spacious area were collected innumerable triumphs of industry and skill – a mute parliament of labour. And these thousand objects imagined by ingenuity – created by toil – pleaded in all the eloquence of silence for the rights of those who fashioned them. The workman was represented by his handicraft; the toiling city was shadowed forth by rich stuffs, or glancing metals²⁸⁶

In a similar fashion, the gazette spoke against monopoly on behalf of various social groups: it published such poems as ‘The Voice of Labour: A Contribution from a Working Man’ which decried the hardship protection had brought upon the working classes,²⁸⁷ and it told of ‘proofs that the British artisan spares not the sweat of his brow, but our statute-book continues disgraced by laws which restrict the promised remuneration, and withhold the eating of bread.’²⁸⁸ As on other occasions, the League was eager to boast the extensive support it received from workers, manufacturers, farmers, landlords, religious ministers, parliamentarians, and women. So while a numerously attended working class banquet in 1840 ‘proved the gross falsehood of the assertion, that they [the working class] regarded with indifference the efforts of other

²⁸⁵ Ibid., No. 2, page 2. See the brochure for more examples where the notion of representation is implied.

²⁸⁶ Quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 339.

²⁸⁷ *Bazaar Gazette*, No. 4, pages 6-8

²⁸⁸ Ibid., No. 17, page 2

classes of society [to repeal the Corn Laws]’,²⁸⁹ time spent with farmers and conversations made with landlords proved they supported total and immediate repeal,²⁹⁰ as did meetings attended by ministers and women.²⁹¹

In appealing to the support of these places and classes for free trade, the League hoped to buttress its claims to national representation and political legitimacy, and so revealed its national imagination. For the League, geographic localities and social classes constituted the units from which the nation was built. Securing knowledge of the nation meant amalgamating the knowledge gained from disparate sites and social groups. So the League proceeded to gather information from these spatial and social units to construct a knowledge about the whole, a knowledge about the nation’s spatial and social geography of economics.

But the League did not just ‘gather’ knowledge, as if harvested from some external reality. It had acted to produce knowledge by organising meetings to compel national assent on the Corn Laws and free trade, thereby authenticating its knowledge as true. League meetings were sites for the production of true knowledge about the nation, spaces for the presentation, confirmation, and amalgamation of piecemeal evidence about

²⁸⁹ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 149-50

²⁹⁰ On 8 May 1843, Cobden said that ‘He had of late been much amongst farmers, and whenever they became of opinion that the corn laws were injurious alike to them as to the country generally, he always found they became converts’ (‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 9 May 1843, page 6). Earlier that year, Cobden had ‘proceeded to enumerate the names of Lords Ducie and Radnor, and the landed proprietors who were in favour of a repeal of the corn laws’ (‘The Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 4 January 1843, page 5).

²⁹¹ Of a conference of religious ministers in 1842, Prentice said, ‘It was not a little remarkable that not one member out of the 494 expressed an opinion in favour of the existing Corn Laws. ... Not one minister stated that a majority of his congregation approved of these laws’ (Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 290). And of the women, Milner Gibson said: ‘The ladies even attended their meetings, for they knew that by supporting the Anti-Corn Law League movement they were recognizing the most striking feature of the Christian religion – of that universal human brotherhood which could only spring from unrestrained commercial freedom.’ (‘The Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 6 April 1843, page 5). On support from the parliamentarians, see ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 4 July 1844, page 7.

the economic condition of the country's geographic and social units. Knowledge the nation had judged to be true had to be true knowledge about the nation. Further, support shown by different social classes had an epistemic advantage over support shown by different places,²⁹² for it was assumed that because the interests of manufacturers was opposed to that of workers, farmers, farm labourers, and landlords, support from these latter groups was more truthful: surely they could not be speaking against their own interests.²⁹³ Thus, mass unanimity, the consensus of masses, places, and classes, presented to the public in the League's rhetoric of strength, stood in not only for political legitimacy, but also epistemic authority: authenticity, correctness, and, ultimately, truth.

So when the League's credibility was wounded by poorly attended meetings and accusations that it lacked support,²⁹⁴ League members leapt to its defence. As early as

²⁹² It is tempting to infer from the evidence that different social groups mapped neatly onto space, that, for example, manufacturing was concentrated in the north of England, while farming was concentrated in the south. After all, the League had divided the country into 12 districts in order to facilitate its propaganda and registration movement (see McCord, 179). However, broad social categories were more imagined than real: social distinctions were far more nuanced, and unevenly distributed over space. See, for instance, Philip Howell, 'Industry and identity: the North-South divide and the geography of belonging, 1830-1918', in *Geographies of England: The North-South Divide, Material and Imagined*, eds. Alan R. H. Baker and Mark Billinge (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), 64-87, and Stobart, especially Ch. 3. To believe the League's categories were held unproblematically by Britons may be to mistake performative representation for social reality. See Patrick Joyce, *Democratic Subject: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), especially his Introduction for a conceptual overview.

²⁹³ So when Viscount Howick tried to prove that the corn law reduced the sale of corn and depressed its price, he referred to a report by the Agricultural Committee of 1833 on the state of British agriculture, claiming that 'I am convinced that this statement of the Committee is correct; indeed, when we remember, that their Report was drawn up by the Right Hon. Baronet, the Member for Pembroke (Sir J. Graham), one of the ablest advocates in this House of the existing law, it is very little likely that any such statement should have been adopted upon insufficient grounds, or that any conclusion, making against the present system, should have received the sanction of his authority, unless it had been most clearly and satisfactorily established.' See Henry George Grey, *Substance of the Speech of Viscount Howick on the Corn Laws* (London: Ridgway, 1839), 36. This point will receive more attention in the next chapter.

²⁹⁴ For example, the *Times* mocked the League when its fundraising efforts at a tea-party in Nottingham in December 1842 had met with a lacklustre response; of the few that donated, it remarked, 'Fools and their money are soon parted.' ('Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 15 December 1842, page 3). A same attack was launched on a meeting in Birmingham the next year: 'The announcement of the collecting card had a most awful effect. The assembly dissipated like morning dew immediately the begging box was announced.' ('The Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 4 January 1843, page 5).

1838, League lecturer Abraham Paulton assured his audience that having ‘addressed upwards of 80,000 persons’, he had found ‘that the alleged unwillingness of the working classes to join in the movement, was not borne out by facts.’²⁹⁵ And in February 1844, Milner Gibson reasoned that ‘though the attendance was not as great as on the last occasion, it was quite sufficient to show what deep root the question had taken in the public mind, when at much inconvenience and some expense people left their homes in the deep winter to aid in propagating the doctrine’.²⁹⁶ Four months later, ‘Mr. Wilson proceeded to meet the assertions of their opponents, that the League was declining in funds, in numbers, in ardour of action, and in political influence. So far from such being the fact,’ he claimed, ‘their prospects were every day growing more and more prosperous.’²⁹⁷

Beyond these defensive tactics, the League also struck its foes with similar strokes. On 7 August 1844, Milner Gibson observed how ‘The efforts of the protectionists had proved utterly abortive’ for ‘the numbers of the petitioners had greatly decreased’,²⁹⁸ while in January the next year, Wilson noted the ‘retrograde direction’ in which public opinion on protection was moving.²⁹⁹ Likewise, the League pointed to its enemy’s growing reticence towards the end of its campaign as a mark of their error: when Cobden visited the agricultural districts in 1843 and found that his opponents ‘shrank

²⁹⁵ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 103

²⁹⁶ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 29 February 1844, page 5

²⁹⁷ ‘The Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 6 June 1844, page 7. To these allegations, Wilson replied that if funds were low, the League still had more than the protectionists ever collected; that increases in the number of supporters, especially among the League’s foes, indicated the strength of the campaign; that if the League was not strong politically, it was stronger than the Liberals had ever been.

²⁹⁸ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 8 August 1844, page 3

²⁹⁹ ‘The Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 16 January 1845, page 6

from meeting him in a place like Reading,' he concluded that 'it might be that they felt convinced that their cause was a bad one, and that they could not maintain it.'³⁰⁰ Two years later, Bright, in a mood for Shakespeare, proclaimed that 'Argument on the question was now at an end. It was difficult even to catch a fallacy. Sir Robert Peel had admitted that the time was gone by when any one could insist that this country was independent of other countries for the supply of food. The plea of special burdens on the land was abandoned, and all the old arguments were gone to the tomb of the Capulets.'³⁰¹

Where possible, the League even cited converted foes. From Sir Evans, who, on 1 December 1842, 'rejoiced to find ... that some of the landed proprietors were beginning to see their mistake; among others was Mr. Escott, who was a *protégé* of the [deeply protectionist] Duke of Buckingham',³⁰² to Wilson, who, at the end of the month, admitted the 'proofs of conversions having been effected ... in several quarters, where before we were met with open hostility',³⁰³ Leaguers paraded new converts, just as the emperor did his new clothes. 'The dissension amongst the protectionists,' after all, 'was one of the best proofs of the progress of the cause.'³⁰⁴ The monopolists' daily conversions, like their silence, marked their growing inability to dispute truth. This was a sign that truth had finally triumphed over falsehood: everywhere people agreed that the Corn Laws were detrimental, and free trade, necessary. In an epistemic system of its own making that privileged the use of facts, whether numerical or anecdotal, to corroborate and falsify

³⁰⁰ Ashworth, 135

³⁰¹ 'Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 19 June 1845, page 6

³⁰² 'The Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 2 December 1842, page 3

³⁰³ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 402

³⁰⁴ 'The Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 6 June 1844, page 7

claims about free trade in free discussion, the League had come full circle: having formulated a legitimate process for the production of truth, a tight-rope of Reality, and having identified its stage hands, the conditions for securing truth – presence and travel, communication and open debate, it now revealed the face of its acrobat, the form truth would take, and thus its rhetorical voucher: mass and growing assent.

IV Mapping

We have seen that the League considered national consensus to be of persuasive value, and that it tried to display the assent its ideas received on many occasions. However, the League was not always able to achieve assent, and so, was not always able to show it, especially in venues dominated by protectionists.³⁰⁵ In Chapter II, we saw that protectionists possessed good reasons to believe that free trade would harm the nation, and to support the preservation of the Corn Laws. In many situations, therefore, they rebelled against the League's knowledge by challenging it publicly, upsetting the League's careful attempts at presenting its audiences with the image of consensus. In response, the League depicted protectionists as unreliable sources of information to undermine their influence. In what sense did the League consider protectionists to be unreliable?

This chapter will explore how the League portrayed its enemies as unreliable by examining a parliamentary debate that began on 1 July 1842 about the relationship between protection and the economic depression that had not quite abated. The focus will be on how Cobden engaged the claims of ministers who contended, in line with the protectionist arguments set out in Chapter II, that the crisis was not as serious as the League had claimed; that the distress was not caused by the Corn Laws; and that

³⁰⁵ In what follows, I concentrate on objections to the League's arguments in Parliament. However, the League encountered numerous objections at its meetings too, and also in print. Thus, while the *Times* contended that 'It is seldom possible to read through a column of anti-corn law agitation, without meeting with a confident statement or prediction from one speaker, and an equally confident (and generally much more honest) contradiction or refutation of it from another', a pamphlet published in 1844 repeated, among other things, the popular argument that repeal would lead to unemployment in agriculture: 'The average consumption of Wheat is about 19,000,000 quarters annually, of which 4,000,000 odd is imported; and every quarter introduced supersedes just as much labour as would be required to produce it at home' ('London, Wednesday, June 2, 1841', *Times*, 2 June 1841, page 4; *Facts are Stubborn Things*, 1).

repealing the laws would worsen the situation.³⁰⁶ In particular, I am interested in the arguments of Sir Robert Peel and Lord Stanley, since Cobden seems to have responded to them most directly.

Peel believed that the depression was not as bad as the Leaguers contended. He argued that cotton consumption would have fallen if the distress was great. Yet, comparing the quantity of cotton consumed in the first half of 1841 and the first half of 1842, Peel had found an increase of 74,000 bales.³⁰⁷ This meant that trade could not be doing too poorly. Further, Peel continued, the distress was caused not by the Corn Laws, but by the introduction of new machines and technologies of production into manufacturing. ‘The command of capital induces men,’ he explained, ‘even during periods of severe distress, to construct new mills, and to fill them with new machinery.’ When such machines – machines more efficient than the old ones, and machines that could do the work of several labourers – were introduced, ‘ultimately labour would be thrown out of employment’. For Peel, distress was the inevitable outcome of a capitalist system: it was ‘impossible’, he said, ‘To resist the progress of these improvements’.³⁰⁸

In a similar way, Lord Stanley argued that the distress was caused not by the Corn Laws, but by natural, climatic factors, and, partly, the excessive monetary speculation in the United States which had depressed its economy. To Stanley, the misery Britain faced

³⁰⁶ For the purpose of this chapter, I have chosen to focus on these arguments and have omitted many others presented during this debate. For example, Disraeli believed that repeal would not revive Britain’s trade because foreign countries may not reciprocate such a unilateral liberalisation of trade. Instead, he advocated for commercial treaties to be negotiated with other countries, because ‘foreign powers would not be induced by any measures, however liberal, of ours, immediately to ameliorate their commercial policy’ (‘House of Commons, Friday, July 1’, *Times*, 2 July 1842, page 3; see Chapter II). Readers interested in such other arguments should refer to the *Times* report.

³⁰⁷ Peel, quoted in *ibid.*

³⁰⁸ Peel, quoted in *ibid.*

was the result of ‘very deficient harvests’, ‘a failure in the productions of nature’, over which the government had no control. And while he ‘was willing to admit that to some extent the pecuniary difficulties by which America was affected must have the effect of depriving us of one of our best customers’, he felt that ‘The evil ... did not arise from our refusing to take their commodities,’ as the Leaguers were arguing in relation to corn, ‘but it arose from their inability to take ours.’ America was to blame because monetary speculation there had reduced its capacity to buy British goods. ‘During the last three years’, Stanley noted, ‘our exports to the United States of America had sunk to one-half, while our imports had remained stationary, and now our imports greatly exceeded the value of our exports. (Hear, hear.)’³⁰⁹

For Stanley, the crisis was not the fault of the British government, which was powerless to stop it. Having attributed the cause of the crisis to nature and America, ‘He admitted ... with a firm conviction of its truth, that in the cause of the distress of the country there was much that was beyond the means of human legislation.’ The only viable solution was to wait for a better harvest, and in this respect, Stanley was sanguine: ‘he thought they had every reason to hope for and anticipate with confidence, namely, a harvest much more abundant and satisfactory than any of late years. (Hear.)’³¹⁰ As Peel had done, Stanley argued that the League had misdiagnosed the reason for the failure of trade, so its solution, repeal, was not appropriate.

Repeal might even worsen the situation, for the unprotected agricultural sector would make losses and shed workers, aggravating the degree of unemployment in the

³⁰⁹ ‘Parliamentary Intelligence: House of Commons, Wednesday, July 6’, Lord Stanley, quoted in *Times*, 7 July 1842, page 2

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

country. Echoing the sentiment of many other politicians, Peel said, ‘I conceive, indeed, that by too precipitate a change of such a nature [a repeal of the Corn Laws], you would involve the agricultural population in distress, and thus add immeasurably to that suffering which already prevails to a lamentable extent among the commercial classes. (Hear, hear.)’³¹¹ Repeal was not simply a mistaken solution, but one that would make things worse.

Such objections deeply troubled the League’s project of knowledge production and public persuasion: where assent was hard to secure, it was still more difficult for prospective supporters to perceive the League’s knowledge as true. In response to this problem of knowledge, the League devised a secondary strategy that could potentially remove the threat of the objections it received. Through this strategy, the League portrayed its enemies as unreliable sources of information the public could not trust by ascribing to them particular epistemic qualities that indicated their ignorance about the economy or their likelihood to lie about it. These qualities related to various assumptions about knowledge and its relation to its holder. As we shall see, Leaguers presumed in many cases that one could not properly know a subject matter if one had not engaged it physically and practically, or if one had not thoroughly investigated the secondary material related to it. Leaguers also mistrusted those who spoke on subjects they had incentives to lie about. Such incentives, they assumed, would lead naturally to deceit and falsehood.

Leaguers further supposed that epistemic qualities could be easily identified in speakers because they corresponded closely to those speakers’ social identities: one could detect epistemic qualities by knowing who the speaker was. It was as if the Leaguers

³¹¹ Peel, quoted in ‘House of Commons, Friday, July 1’, *Times*, 2 July 1842, page 2

were following a map that had indicated to them the social regions in which one could find credible persons, a map its audiences and contemporaries must have shared for it to have been effective. In other words, the League's depiction of protectionists as unreliable knowers depended for its success upon assumptions that society shared generally about the kinds of qualities that compelled belief, and the types of persons one could trust,³¹² assumptions that composed what we can call a map of credibility.

What, then, did this map look like, and *where* could one find truth? Who were the people who told truths; what qualities did they possess; and which social markers warranted belief? Keeping in mind how any attempt at recovering such a map must be fraught, for the Leaguers had multiple and complex ideas about who deserved trust, some of which were ad hoc, others contradictory, and still others unexplained, this chapter proposes to *begin* the work of reconstruction by examining the way Cobden engaged and portrayed in Parliament the anti-free traders Stanley and Peel whose arguments I described above.³¹³

³¹² It is noteworthy that the Anti-Corn Law League departed from more 'professional' political economists in their enthusiasm for epistemic authority. For at about the time of the anti-Corn Law campaign, many political economists expressed uncertainty about the place of authority in their science. Within the work of Robert Torrens, for example, 'reference to the highest authorities [was made] only for the purpose of removing the preliminary reluctance to the consideration of my views' because questions of science and economy could only 'be decided, not by authority, but upon their own intrinsic evidence.' Yet, Torrens also admitted that 'On intricate questions, requiring long and patient investigation, ... principles are received upon trust, doctrines become creeds, authority is implicitly followed, and blind leaders are enabled to assume the guidance of the blind.' Where such assertions of authority were made, it is also intriguing that these political economists tended to use criteria different from those used by the League. Thomas de Quincey, for instance, 'maintained that his own reasoning was superior to Ricardo's because he was himself trained in "scholastic logic,"' (A. W. Coats, 'The Role of Authority in the Development of British Economics', *Journal of Law and Economics* 7 (October 1964): 91, 93)

³¹³ In what follows I will be using two versions of Cobden's speech, one published in the *Times* on 9 July 1842, and another, likely to have been published later that year by the League, which was sold to the public as a pamphlet for a penny each. While the two versions are broadly similar, there is one major difference, documented in footnote 342 below.

To be sure, the League's map of credibility was not perfect, and neither was it indisputable: as we shall see, many of the attributes the Leaguers did not consider deserving of trust applied also to themselves, and their portrayals of protectionists as unreliable and repealers as trustworthy were often resisted, contested, and compromised.³¹⁴ The task, therefore, is not to describe a fool-proof strategy of the League in locating trustworthy witnesses and in actually using them to produce true knowledge about the Corn Laws, but to search and to read the League's descriptions of its allies and foes for an understanding of what 'true knowledge' may have meant to its audiences, and what social attributes may have merited their belief. It is in the interests of simplicity and in defiance of chronology that we first explore how Cobden depicted Stanley.³¹⁵

Stanley had argued that part of the problem for Britain was that America's poor financial health had shrunk its capacity to buy British goods. As a result, the level of America's exports to Britain had remained, but the amount of British exports to America had fallen. In his speech to the House of Commons on 8 July 1842, Cobden seems to have regarded Stanley's remark as a dissatisfaction with the unequal trade between Britain and the United States, a complaint that because America was buying less than it sold Britain, it was leaching wealth from Britain, and so benefiting more than Britain was. This showed Stanley to be repeating what Cobden considered the erroneous mercantilist belief that wealth was properly secured by expanding sales to, and restricting purchases from,

³¹⁴ Thus, for Gieryn, 'Epistemic authority does not exist as an omnipresent ether, but rather is enacted as people debate (and ultimately decide) where to locate the legitimate jurisdiction over facts. ... The cultural space of science is a vessel for authority, but what it holds inside can only be known after the contest ends, when trust and credibility have been located here but not there.' See Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries*, 15.

³¹⁵ In the parliamentary session, Peel had spoken before Stanley. Cobden had also referred to Peel before Stanley.

foreign countries. Mercantilists held the view that a country could only gain wealth by selling more than it bought, a view whose credibility had been undermined, as I have argued, since Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

That Stanley held such a view showed him to be 'profoundly ignorant' about matters of trade. 'The fact was, that the noble lord's whole line of reasoning went to prove that he understood nothing whatever of the ruling principle, that all trades must be conducted on a system of barter.'³¹⁶ For Cobden, America had no means to purchase British goods because Britain had refused to take corn from it. If Britain would buy American grain, America would have the money to buy British goods; repeal would reverse the fortunes of both countries: 'The representative of North Lancashire [Stanley] ought certainly to understand', said Cobden, 'that the Americans could purchase from us if we would let them, by supplying us with food in return for the products of our labour; and he would tell the noble lord and the house this – that that labour now so fearfully depressed would find instant relief if they repealed this law. (Hear, hear.)'³¹⁷

What accounted for Stanley's ignorance and his 'exceedingly embarrassing' views about commerce?³¹⁸ For Cobden, Stanley was ignorant because, as a politician and a landlord, he lacked, and did not actively seek out, direct experience with commercial trade. Thus, Cobden 'wished before he [Stanley] came down to that house again he would condescend to make himself acquainted with some of those practical commercial questions which, however distasteful to noble lords and hon. gentlemen, were the leading

³¹⁶ Cobden, quoted in 'House of Commons, Friday, July 8', *Times*, 9 July 1842, page 3

³¹⁷ Cobden, quoted in *ibid.*

³¹⁸ Cobden, quoted in *ibid.*

topics of the discussion of the day. (Hear.)'³¹⁹ But since Stanley had not done so, his views on the matter held little weight: 'At present he [Cobden] certainly could not say much for the noble lord's information on those points.'³²⁰ In effect, Cobden was disqualifying Stanley's ideas about trade because Stanley had never been directly involved in it: he lacked immediate and physical engagement with trade, so his information on the subject was inaccurate. Implicit in this was the sense that people learned by doing: that it was in trading that one could properly come to know about trade.

As such, Cobden's opinion on the matter was authoritative because he was a manufacturer and had been a commercial traveller. He was familiar with the practice of trade, and had obtained knowledge of it by doing it:

From an acquaintance with the trade on both sides of the water, I may state, as my firm belief, that when a repeal of the corn laws does take place, the tidings of such a happy event will be instantly followed by a revival of trade. It would at least be the beginning of a new era in which employment would be found for the people. I know no other means for producing such a result³²¹

Here, Cobden was displaying his credibility to the House, showing his knowledge to be reliable because his physical and practical engagement in trade was a good reason to believe he knew about it. Because of his experience with trade, Cobden, unlike Stanley, possessed one quality that warranted the trust of others: the quality of knowing.

³¹⁹ Cobden, quoted in *ibid.*

³²⁰ Cobden, quoted in *ibid.*

³²¹ Richard Cobden, *Alarming distress. Speech of Richd. Cobden, Esq. in the House of Commons on Friday evening, July 8, 1842* (Manchester: J. Gadsby, [1842]), 6

Although the practical experience of a speaker in the subject he was speaking of was in some instances a crucial sign that that speaker knew about it, it was not the only one. As Cobden had hinted in relation to Stanley, a person who had no practical acquaintance with a subject could still be a credible source of information on it if he had made an effort to learn about it. Such learning took two forms, one more formal than the next. First, one could learn about a subject through ‘careful study’, a phrase I will use to collect what seemed like the disparate practices of an amorphous process of knowing, a process which involved, at the highest level, a person paying keen attention to the extensive range of available information regarding a topic, and analysing that information meticulously and logically, often over long periods of time, in coming to indisputable conclusions about it. Thus, when Viscount Howick argued at the nomination for north Northumberland on 6 July 1841 that farmers were also suffering from the general distress afflicting the country, he invoked the numerous ‘petitions from the owners and occupiers of land’ which ‘had been referred by the House of Commons to a committee on which had served many of the most distinguished persons on both sides of the house.’ ‘This committee’, Howick continued, ‘had inquired very minutely into the state of the landed interest, and he must read to them their description of the state of the farmer at that time.’³²² Here, it seems that Howick found the committee’s conclusions convincing because its ruthlessly detailed inquiry satisfied his standards of ‘careful study’.

Likewise, when Rev. Wriothesley Noel refuted the commonplace assertion that repeal would cause unemployment in the agricultural sector, he chose to cite the authority of McCulloch, who ‘takes a dispassionate and able view of the case in question’ and ‘looks at it calmly, and reasons upon it closely and deliberately’, Mr. Porter, ‘whose

³²² ‘General Election’, *Times*, 8 July 1841, page 3

intelligent and assiduous researches into the progress of the nation are so well known', Mr. Woolrych Whitmore, 'who ... has reflected many years upon the subject, and writes with equal calmness and sense', and Lord Fitzwilliam, who possessed 'an excellent understanding to judge of its [repeal's] probable effects'.³²³ For Noel, such persons were believable by virtue of their careful study of agriculture. But here, as elsewhere, the accolade went beyond a narrow understanding of 'careful study', and referred also to traits that might predispose a person to epistemic care: intelligence and cleverness, calm and ability, traits that speckled the League's propaganda describing its supporters. With persons of such high credentials endorsing repeal, 'there seems little reason to apprehend that any lands would be thrown out of cultivation.'³²⁴

Second, one could learn about a subject by travelling to observe it. Thus, when League supporter Peronett Thompson wrote to the *Sun* in January 1842 describing the suffering he witnessed at Bolton, he referred repeatedly to the fact that he had travelled there. 'I have been at the siege of Bolton', he declared, asking 'And is it not a siege? Not carried on perhaps by an enemy within the gun-shot, but by one working on a wider radius, and making his blockade by sea upon the means of life.' 'Many sights it has been my chance to see', he continued. 'I think I know what is the minimum help by which horse, ass, dog, hog, or monkey, can sustain existence ... But anything like the squalid

³²³ W[riothsley] Noel, *Corn Laws: Selections from a Plea for the Poor* (Manchester: J. Gadsby, [c.1842]), 4

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 4. Interestingly, detractors of the League also agreed that careful study could lead to knowledge. On a separate occasion, Lord Stanley had cited the authority of John Ramsay McCulloch, whose 'opinion coincides with that of another gentleman, Mr. W. Whitmore, who has also inquired very minutely into this entire subject. I won't fatigue you by going through the details by which these two gentlemen arrive at the same result. I have examined their calculations minutely. I put their conclusions [that the government should keep a moderate tax on corn] forward not as mine but theirs. Both gentlemen are generally known to be most careful in making their statistical inquiries' ('General Election', *Times*, 8 July 1841, page 3). Here, Stanley was establishing credibility on three fronts: the agreement between McCulloch and Whitmore; their rigorous analyses of the subject matter; and his cautious study of their work.

misery ... it never befell my eyes to behold, or my imagination to conceive.'³²⁵ Here, the narrative of travel supplements Thompson's visual experience, showing how his imagined reality was supplanted by the actual reality he witnessed as a consequence of his travels. In this case it is direct sensory experience that guarantees true knowledge, and that induces the trust of the reader. So when John Bowring attempted to confirm Cobden's remark a year later that some persons in Accrington were so poor they 'had eaten animals which had died of disease, and been disinterred after being buried some days', he based his knowledge of that statement's truth on having recently been there.³²⁶

The League's association of travelling and observing, and, indeed, practical acquaintance, with the quality of knowing, was a variant on the affinity it perceived between a person's direct, even embodied, experience with a subject and that person's knowledge of it. For in cases where the travelling to, or the practical experience of situations in, particular localities were impossible, the League relied on the testimonies of persons from those places. As we have seen, the League conducted most of its meetings by summoning witnesses to speak about the suffering experienced *where they were from*. When it was impossible to produce witnesses from those localities, the written testimonies of persons from there sufficed. Thus, to persuade Parliament that the poor were 'subsisting in one place upon boiled nettles', and, in Burnley, on rotting animals, that the distress was in fact as serious as he had claimed, Cobden gave 'his authority for stating' that:

When the matter was reported to him, he wrote to a schoolmaster at Burnley, and requested to be correctly informed as to the facts, and he also requested him to get

³²⁵ Ashworth, 36-7

³²⁶ 'Anti-Corn Law League', *Times*, 12 January 1843, page 5

some of the most respectable persons in the neighbourhood to accredit his account. The reply was, the statement as he had given it to the house, accredited by six gentlemen besides the schoolmaster he referred to³²⁷

Here, Cobden's credibility was not based solely on his scepticism about the report he had received, which can be considered an aspect of 'careful study'. Nor was the truth of his statement based simply on the agreement of several 'respectable persons in the neighbourhood', which, as discussed previously, could vouch for truth. The fact that Cobden's informants came from that neighbourhood was equally important. These people knew by being there; their corporal presence authorised their claims.

For the League, then, a person could effectively know a subject matter by engaging with it practically, by studying it carefully, by observing it through travelling, or by being close to it. These were the signs of the quality of knowing. Yet, this quality was not sufficient grounds for trust. As League follower Henry Ashworth observed, even though he had brought 'Lord John Manners and Hon. Mr. Smythe, two members of Parliament who were well known Protectionists ... to the same places' Thompson had gone to, he regretted 'to remark that I did not observe the same deep sympathy that the old soldier [Thompson] had exhibited, nor do I remember the same sort of alms-giving'³²⁸ Even though Manners and Smythe had travelled to the same places as Thompson, they did not agree with him on how severe the crisis was. Equally, Peel's comments in the parliamentary debate described above showed that he had considered the statistics on the cotton trade, but that he had found the trade in better shape than he had expected. His

³²⁷ Cobden, quoted in 'House of Commons, Friday, July 8', *Times*, 9 July 1842, page 3

³²⁸ Ashworth, 38

remarks on machinery being the cause of the crisis also seemed well-reasoned and well-founded. How did Cobden go about disqualifying these statements, statements that again threatened the League's truths?

In many ways, Cobden's response to Peel was more elaborate than his reply to Stanley. After all, Peel had shown he possessed the basic requirement for knowledge, the quality of knowing. Yet, his statements were still inaccurate. Although it was true that cotton consumption had grown from the first half of last year to the first half this year,

but if the right honourable baronet [Peel] had instituted a comparison between the first half of this year with the last half of last year, he would have found that there had been a diminution of 145,000 bales; or if he had made a comparison between the first half of this year and the two half years of 1840, he would have found a deficiency of 105,000 bales; or if he had established a comparison between the first half year of this year, with the average of the last ten half years, he would have found a diminution of 35,000 bales.³²⁹

Cobden's argument was complex: he stated evidence to contradict Peel's claim that the distress was not so severe, revealing that he recognised the rhetorical value of disagreeing with his opponents; he cited more evidence than Peel, showing that his examination of the cotton trade had been more thorough, that he was therefore more qualified to speak on the matter than Peel; and he revealed that Peel had been selective in his evidence, that because the facts adduced by Peel were insufficient for the conclusion he had drawn, Peel's conclusion was not compelling. Moreover, cotton consumption had only grown because cotton manufacturers were unwilling to let their looms lay idle, and

³²⁹ Cobden, *Alarming distress*, 2

so had employed them in ‘spinning ... the coarsest description of yarn.’³³⁰ And although the looms were employed, the spinning did not help wages or employment much. ‘[D]id this give relief to the people?’ Cobden asked rhetorically, ‘Did it give wages to the country?’³³¹ For Cobden, the momentary increase in cotton consumption did not mean that the general distress was improving.

Peel had also been wrong blaming machinery for the crisis, and Cobden ‘denied ... that machinery threw great bodies of people out of employment.’³³² New machines, Cobden noted, was introduced at an extremely slow rate, because it was costly for capitalists to replace old ones. Appealing to the authority of both acquaintance and assent, he said, ‘It was well known to those who were acquainted with machinery that new inventions were slow in being introduced; the patentees of new inventions knew how difficult to get the manufacturers to adopt their improvements’.³³³ And because ‘It took a long time to bring them into work, and their introduction was so occasional and gradual, ... they never could have the effect which the right honourable baronet had attributed to them.’³³⁴

If anything, new machinery served the country by increasing employment. ‘Arkwright’s [spinning] machine was invented ... in 1767,’ Cobden pointed out, ‘and only 30,000 persons were engaged in the cotton manufacture’. But now, ‘more than a

³³⁰ Ibid.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Cobden, quoted in ‘House of Commons, Friday, July 8’, *Times*, 9 July 1842 (page 3)

³³⁴ Cobden, *Alarming distress*, 2

million and a half subsisted by it.’³³⁵ By contrast, Cobden said to loud laughter, farmers ‘In many parts of the country ... still used the plough Cincinnatus followed’, but the agricultural sector did not generate employment, it ‘annually sent thousands to the towns where machinery was in use’ instead.³³⁶ Moreover, the towns most deeply distressed were those that had experienced no technical change over the years. In Nottingham, ‘where there are no tall chimneys, no change of modes of working, but where they pursue the plan pursued 240 years ago’,³³⁷ in Macclesfield, where they ‘work with the same machine which was in use in the reign of the Pharaohs’, and in the mines of Staffordshire, where ‘there has been no great improvement of machinery in them’, the situation was ‘cheerless’ and ‘hopeless’.³³⁸ But ‘If there be one part of the country better off than another, it is where the best machinery is in use; I mean Lancashire, where the working classes have, for several years, been living at the expense of their employers.’³³⁹ The incidence of machinery did not coincide with the incidence of poverty, so machinery did not cause depression.

If the crisis was in fact as severe as Cobden had described, and if the crisis was in reality not caused by machinery, why did Peel deny this? Cobden attributed Peel’s denial to his political interests. He implied that Peel knew the truth, but had deceived because the lies comforted his supporters and maintained their support for him: his ‘honied phrases’ were ‘delusive consolation’ ‘very satisfactory to those who are sitting behind

³³⁵ Ibid., 3

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Ibid., 4

³³⁸ Ibid., 5

³³⁹ Ibid.

him’,³⁴⁰ and fallacies that pandered ‘to the prejudices of the working classes’, working class men and women, who, like the Luddites, mistook machines as the cause of their suffering.³⁴¹ Peel denied the truths about the Corn Laws because he was vested in maintaining political support for himself. Since he possessed this incentive to lie, he had deceived Parliament and the public. Cobden understood the opposition’s reluctance to speak on the subject of distress too as politically motivated. ‘The silence that had been preserved so carefully by hon. members opposite he could only interpret to mean,’ he resolved, ‘either that they did not believe in the existence of distress, or that they agreed to hush it up for party purposes (hear, hear), and he must say he thought that the Government lent themselves to this device.’³⁴² Although Peel and his ministers might have possessed the quality of knowing, they did not hold the quality of honesty. As such, they were not trustworthy.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 3. The reference to the Luddites, and Peel’s alleged misinterpretation of their attacks on machinery, can be found on page 2-3.

³⁴² Cobden, quoted in ‘House of Commons, Friday, July 8’, *Times*, 9 July 1842, page 3. In the other version of Cobden’s speech, Cobden is recorded having said ‘Why was it left to members on the opposition benches to carry on this debate? He could account for it on one ground only – either they did not believe in the existence of the distress, or, though believing it, they were willing to hush up all the facts connected with it for the sake of party purposes; (hear, hear;) and he must say that he thought her Majesty’s government had in some degree lent themselves to the first persuasion; for he had not heard from the right hon. bart. any sufficient acknowledge of the general distress of the country’, which is different from how I have here interpreted the *Times*’ vaguer report, that Cobden was attributing his enemies’ duplicity to their political interests (Cobden, *Alarming distress*, 1). However, even in this second version, as I go on to show, Cobden repeatedly accuses the ministerialists of distorting the truth because of their vested interests, and this message seems consonant with my interpretation. If Cobden did in fact claim that the ministerialists were silent because they were ignorant of the true extent of the distress, he might have done so because it was impolite to accuse them of dishonesty. Cobden may have wanted to extend goodwill to his opponents, just as Howick had done in 1839 by admitting that ‘I do think that the gentlemen connected with the landed interest have great right to complain of the manner in which, out of doors, they have been represented, as resisting any change in the Corn Law, from the most sordid and selfish motives; as obstinately maintaining a system which they are well aware as deeply injurious to the nation at large, for the sake of their own personal advantage; totally regardless of the sufferings they thus impose on others’, or as Lord Morpeth did in 1840, by claiming he ‘did not want to introduce any cant or bigotry into the discussion of this question, or to convey imputations upon any class of the community’ (see Grey, 3-4; ‘House of Commons, Thursday, April 2’, *Times*, 3 April 1840, page 4). But given Cobden’s temperament, his generally impatient, even disdainful attitude towards the aristocracy, this seems unlikely.

If Peel and his supporters were unreliable because of their political interests, Cobden was dependable precisely because he was free of such interests. As he admitted to the House of Commons, Cobden had voted against the motions of his party's leader, Lord John Russell, in four out of five divisions.³⁴³ In saying this, Cobden was showing how less interested he was in supporting his party simply for political reasons than in supporting the party that would devise effective measures to help the poor, regardless of who its leader was. Cobden put it this way: 'I say this [that he did not always support Russell] to show that I am actuated by no party spirit. I will take measures of relief from the right honourable baronet, as well as from the noble lord; but upon some measures of relief I will insist.'³⁴⁴ Earlier in his speech, Cobden had even gone so far as to feign independence from what others might have perceived to be non-negotiable to the leader of the League: corn law repeal. 'I do not wish to mix up the corn laws with this question', he proclaimed, adding that 'I care nothing for the corn laws, if you can provide me with a better remedy.'³⁴⁵ Unlike his enemies, Cobden claimed he possessed the qualities of knowing, and of honesty. And as Cobden was honest, so he was credible.

Such a discourse of honesty, in which independence from political interests was asserted to gain trust, surfaces elsewhere in the League's rhetoric. At a meeting of religious ministers in support of the League in August 1841, for example, Earl Ducie told his listeners that although 'discussions on the corn laws, and on the general principles of freedom of commerce, are looked upon by many as a merely political, or rather, I should say, an entirely party question', Ducie claimed 'to look on the question in a very different

³⁴³ Cobden, *Alarming distress*, 7-8

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5

point of view.’ For Ducie, the question ‘deeply [involved] the morality of the population’, for he believed that repeal would intensify education in the country, and increase ‘morality and the spread of religious instruction throughout the land.’³⁴⁶ And in response to Rev. Spencer’s earlier speech, Ducie reinforced the Reverend’s depiction of Lord Radnor and Earl Fitzwilliam as independent supporters of the League. Radnor, claimed Ducie, ‘with Earl Fitzwilliam (cheers), is not actuated by party spirit. Their support of the Ministerial project is founded on the purest grounds.’³⁴⁷ The implication was that such pure intentions could only deserve trust.

Elsewhere, the idea of pure intent extended beyond the political, and Leaguers disavowed monetary, personal, and class interests as well. Thus, while J. B. Smith, who was to become the League’s first president, reminded an audience at an Anti-Corn Law meeting in 1838 that their lecturer, A. W. Paulton, was giving the lectures ‘gratuitously’, and so ‘was actuated by no mercenary motives’;³⁴⁸ and while Rev. Spencer in 1843 authorised his assessment of the League’s moral conduct by positioning himself as ‘an independent witness between the two contending parties – the manufacturing and the landed interests of the country’ who ‘had nothing personally to do with either’;³⁴⁹ Cobden appealed to the absence of both political and class interests at the religious meeting of 1841 to strengthen his assertion that the Corn Laws were unjust. ‘They had entered on that inquiry without reference to party considerations, to expediency, or to class

³⁴⁶ ‘The Conference of Political Preachers. – Singular Religious Proceedings’, *Times*, 19 August 1841, page 6

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁸ Prentice I, 76. On a separate occasion, a League follower tried to discredit the pamphlet John Almack wrote defaming the League by claiming ‘That man [Almack] is paid to tell lies’ (see Barnes, 255). I refer to Almack’s pamphlet below.

³⁴⁹ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 27 April 1843, page 8

interests;' he said, 'and they had come to the conclusion that no tax imposed upon the food of the people could be just.'³⁵⁰

Here, Cobden was defending the League against an accusation its enemies frequently made: that the League was interested in repeal because free trade would benefit the middle-class manufacturers, many of whom belonged to the League, and many of whom depended for their livelihoods on trade. As Captain Fitzmaurice had said of the League to an applauding Conservative audience on 23 January 1844, 'If a mirror were placed against the hearts of its members, it would reflect back 'self-interest.''³⁵¹ And to some degree, this had been true. As Cobden himself admitted on 20 October 1843,

I am afraid, if we must confess the truth, that we most of us [*sic*] entered upon this struggle with the belief that we had some distinct class interest in the question, and that we should carry it by a manifestation of our will in this district against the will and consent of the community.³⁵²

Yet, Cobden hastened to add, 'If there is one thing which more than another has elevated and dignified and ennobled this agitation, it is that ... we have found ... that every interest and every object, which every part of the community can justly seek, harmonises perfectly with the views of the Anti-Corn Law League.'³⁵³ It did not matter that the manufacturers might have been interested, for its interests coincided with the

³⁵⁰ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 239. Doubtless, the League's attempts to remain non-partisan comprised a strategy to appeal to members and supporters from both sides of the parliamentary divide. I am suggesting that, beyond this, however, the League's neutrality had epistemic value.

³⁵¹ 'Buckingham Conservative Dinner', *Times*, 24 January 1844, page 5

³⁵² 'Great Free-Trade Meeting at Manchester', *League*, 21 October 1843, page 52

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

interests of all, the interests of the British nation. Like John Dillon had said at a meeting in Guildhall, London, on 1 June 1841, even though they had ‘wanted markets for our manufacturers’, the League had also ‘wished an alteration in the corn laws because they wanted bread for the people (cheers); they wanted employment for the people’.³⁵⁴

But while ‘Happy it is when the interest of a class [the manufacturing class] is the interest of the whole community!’, ‘The ... owners of land from which corn is produced – wished, for their own profit, to tax the whole of the consumers, agricultural as well as commercial and manufacturing.’ It was to this class, according to Archibald Prentice, that ‘the charge of selfishness may fairly be applied.’³⁵⁵ Those who opposed repeal were the ones who were self-interested; the League was identifying the interests of its enemies, especially the landlords, as a way of impugning their credibility. Thus, as Mr. Brotherton had pointed out early on at a League meeting in Manchester, the landlords would readily agree that the Corn Laws had effectively stabilised the price of corn, ‘but such was not the fact. Old Hobbes, the philosopher of Malmesbury, had said that mathematical truths would be denied, if it were in the interest of man.’³⁵⁶

And for the Leaguers, the landlords were interested indeed, for by keeping up the price of corn, they could charge corn growers higher rents. Thus, when Lord John Russell stood in the House of Commons two years later, he repeated a message similar to Brotherton’s. Russell found that he could not ‘admit that [the landlords’] possession of property does not bias their views of the corn question, as the views of others have been

³⁵⁴ ‘The Corn Laws: Meeting in the City’, *Times*, 2 June 1841. page 5

³⁵⁵ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 94

³⁵⁶ ‘Dinner of the Manchester Anti-Corn Law Association’, *Times*, 25 January 1839, page 3. The meeting was held two days before this report, on 23 January 1839.

biased [*sic*] in proportion as their interests have been affected.’³⁵⁷ Still two years later, Captain Layard pointed out that because ‘the main-spring of all actions, either private or public, was self-interest’, those of the agricultural class who had a deep interest in keeping up the price of corn were not ‘a fair jury on such a question’.³⁵⁸ The Leaguers clearly believed that ‘The landholders had legislated on the principle that they were the country, and that every one else should enjoy just as much of the conveniences of life as might suit their interests.’ For these Leaguers, one could not believe the landlords’ claims about the Corn Laws, because the landlords were vested in maintaining them.

In the main, however, most Leaguers held a more nuanced attitude towards the landlords, in part to show that the League was truly pan-British in its interests, and in part as strategic deference to the landlord’s symbolic power. The Leaguers were keen to show that the ‘nation’ they sought to benefit by abolishing protection was not simply the majority of Britons, namely, the agricultural and manufacturing classes: it included *all* the classes of the country, even the aristocracy. At a meeting in London on 28 September 1843, therefore, the League orator Rev. W. J. Fox explained that ‘all classes [had] an interest in this matter, even ... the landlord class.’ Fox reasoned that Corn Law repeal would not only enrich the manufacturers and farmers, but the landlords as well, ‘For what has made England the paradise of landowners, but its being the workshop of the world?’ According to Fox, repeal would extend industry in Britain and enrich manufacturing and farming, benefiting the landlords in several ways. First, the gentry could expect to ‘gain

³⁵⁷ ‘Parliamentary Intelligence: House of Commons, Friday, Sept. 17’, *Times*, 18 September 1841, page 3. The parliamentary debate was held the previous day, on 17 September 1841.

³⁵⁸ ‘House of Commons, Monday, May 15’, *Times*, 16 May 1843, page 2. This comment was made in the House of Commons on 15 May 1843.

by the rich and flourishing community arising around them'.³⁵⁹ Second, the growth of manufacturing was related to the development of railroads, 'which [would] enhance the worth of their [the landlords'] property'. And third, the landlords 'would be gaining the goodwill and gratitude of their fellow countrymen', sparing themselves 'the execration that now pursues their class' for continuing the monopoly that was intensifying Britain's plight.³⁶⁰ The claim that the League was disinterested (and therefore honest) was reinforced by its inclusion of the aristocracy's interests in its cause.

More importantly, the League's balanced attitude towards the aristocracy sprung from the fact that landowners possessed social prestige and influence, which could help the campaign for repeal. As Cobden conceded to Samuel Smiles in 1841, 'Unhappily we are not fit to run alone without the guidance of [the aristocracy]'. In this, Cobden was only affirming Joseph Parkes' earlier advice that the League could not 'do without Lords'.³⁶¹ Thus, the League carefully distinguished the aristocratic adherents from the aristocratic rivals of its cause, portraying only the latter as selfishly interested in maintaining the Corn Laws, and therefore unworthy of protection and of people's support. In June 1840, for example, Earl Fitzwilliam observed how 'there was the least desire for' the Corn Laws 'in those districts where the landlords and occupiers were most intelligent, and where the greatest amount of practical science and knowledge had been brought to bear on agriculture', where cultivation, in other words, had been most successful and lucrative. 'If they looked to the petitions on the subject,' said he, 'it would

³⁵⁹ Fox does not explain what he means here.

³⁶⁰ Quoted in Ashworth, 170

³⁶¹ Pickering and Tyrrell, 180

appear that the great mass of those who were against alteration of the corn laws came from those parts of the country which were in the worst state of cultivation.’³⁶²

Two years later, Cobden extended this argument at a meeting in Sheffield. ‘Our battle is not with the whole body of the landed aristocracy’, he said. ‘We are principally opposed by the more impoverished section of the aristocracy’, a section ‘which had vast advantages during the war, and received wealth untold into their coffers’, but was ‘now embarrassed’ because of its ‘extravagance and wasteful improvidence.’³⁶³ The League’s aristocratic enemies were hostile because they had mismanaged their fortunes, and had placed mortgages on their lands. ‘They fear, therefore, lest by the repeal of the corn law the rents of the land may fall, that the [remaining] one-fifth [of their properties that were not mortgaged] might pass away from them, and that the remainder should become the property of the mortgagees. That’, Cobden concluded stentorian, ‘is the whole secret of the opposition on the part of the aristocracy I am speaking of.’³⁶⁴ For the Leaguers, it was the landlords who had neglected their fields and who were in danger of losing them that desired protection. And while it was their irresponsibility that had made them undeserving of support, it was their interest in the matter of the Corn Laws that had made them unworthy of trust and belief.

Even with these exceptions, credibility, for Cobden and other Leaguers, mapped closely onto social distinctions: reliability was an attribute distributed unevenly across social

³⁶² ‘Parliamentary Intelligence: House of Lords, Thursday, June 11’, *Times*, 12 June 1840 (page 3). This remark was made in the House of Lords on 11 June 1840.

³⁶³ Richard Cobden, *Speech of R. Cobden, Esq., M.P., at Sheffield, November 23, 1842, showing the true character of the opponents of the League* (Manchester: J. Gadsby, 1842), 4-5

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5

space, an attribute whose presence in a person one could discern simply by knowing what social group that person was from, and which epistemic qualities of knowing and of honesty persons from that group were likely to have in relation to the question posed. Persons from social groups perceived to be interested in the Corn Laws were seen to be unreliable sources of information on it. Thus, just as the League had said of the allegedly self-interested landlords, the Established Church was a poor source of knowledge on the Corn Laws because the clergy were interested in keeping up the price of grain. As a Rev. Mr. Greene had observed at a League meeting in London on 22 May 1844, ‘the nature of the Tithe Commutation Act’, an act passed in 1836 that fixed the income of clergymen to a predetermined quantity of corn, ‘rendered the hierarchy and church establishment of the land more hostile to the principles of free trade than they were formerly.’³⁶⁵ Since the clergymen now received for their income a fixed amount of corn, the higher the price of corn, the higher the monetary value of their wage, and so the clergy was reluctant for repeal to reduce their incomes. As League supporter Thomas Milner Gibson added cynically the next year, ‘a clergyman had told him he would be converted to the League if he could be convinced that abolition would not lessen the price of corn; which reminded him of the answer of a black slave in one of Sheridan’s plays, who, when he was asked, “Can you be honest?” replied, “What will you give me?”’³⁶⁶

Although one could not trust the men of the Established Church, one could still depend on those of other religious affiliations: such were those who had spent much time with the poor, who possessed the quality of knowing, and who could therefore tell about their plight. So, when Earl Ducie attended the meeting of religious ministers of August

³⁶⁵ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 23 May 1844, page 6

³⁶⁶ ‘Anti-Corn Law League’, *Times*, 19 January 1845, page 6

1841, he declared his objective thus: 'I had come here for the purpose of learning, and not of teaching. I came to hear from the mouths of those who may be supposed to be the best judges, because they have seen most of the misery of the labouring population.'³⁶⁷ And at another conference of religious ministers three months later, it was proclaimed that 'We are surrounded by, and, in the discharge of our avocations, come into daily contact with, multitudes who depend on industry for their honest maintenance; we witness their struggles, and sympathize with them in their sorrows and privations.'³⁶⁸ On both occasions, truth was warranted by knowledge, the knowledge of a particular social group.

Similar ideas were expressed by foes of the League, which suggests that the League's cartography of credibility and social identity had wider purchase. League enemies, for instance, doubted the veracity of testimony provided by ministers of other religious affiliations by acknowledging they were Dissenters, who, because they were opposed to the Established Church, were interested in abolishing the Corn Laws to reduce the higher incomes the laws gave the clergy.³⁶⁹ But the clearest indication that Corn Law advocates shared the League's strategy can be found in 'Character, Motives, and Proceedings of the Anti-Corn Law Leaguers', a pamphlet written by the self-proclaimed 'back-bone' Tory John Almack and published in 1843 that venomously attacked the putative hypocrisy of the League.³⁷⁰ In this pamphlet, Almack warned his readers against the League's duplicity. The League, Almack charged, was less, as the League had

³⁶⁷ 'The Conference of Political Preachers. – Singular Religious Proceedings', *Times*, 19 August 1841, page 6. The comment was made the day before, on 18 August 1841.

³⁶⁸ Prentice, *History*, vol. 1, 277

³⁶⁹ 'A Ministerial paper informs us that an important', *Times*, 19 August 1841, page 4

³⁷⁰ See John Almack, *Character, Motives, and Proceedings of the Anti-Corn Law Leaguers, with a few general remarks on the Consequences that would result from a Free Trade in Corn* (London, John Ollivier, 1843). The reference to Almack's political affiliation can be found on page 99 of his pamphlet.

portrayed themselves to be, a ‘disinterested’ and ‘patriotic band’ of free traders inspired by ‘a high and moral religious feeling’ towards the poor, and more a pack of swindlers and oppressors that desired repeal so they could lower wages and exploit workers further.³⁷¹

To demonstrate the Leaguers’ oppressive nature, Almack spoke of how manufacturers, many of whom were Leaguers, had exploited children in their factories, factories in which children were made, Almack claimed, to work long hours in harsh conditions with hardly any time for a break or meal. In this, he quoted the testimony of a Mr. Sadler, ‘one who was bred, educated, and who spent nearly all his life in one of the largest manufacturing towns, and who had consequently gained a most intimate and extensive knowledge of all the lights and shadows of manufacturing life, by having been an every day observer of it.’³⁷² Sadler was trustworthy because he had come from a manufacturing town, and was able to observe it directly. He possessed the quality of knowing. Sadler seems to himself have used this quality to vouch for the truths he spoke. In one of his speeches to the House of Commons quoted by Almack, he ‘*assure[d] the House from my own knowledge, that the allegations in the [Huddersfield] petitions [that child labourers were being severely mistreated] are strictly true.*’³⁷³

Unlike Sadler, the Leaguers themselves, for Almack, were not to be trusted, for they held an interest in repealing the corn laws: the Leaguers wanted the corn laws repealed and bread prices depressed, so they could lower their workers’ wages. Almack’s belief that lower bread prices would lead to lower wages was based on David Ricardo’s

³⁷¹ Ibid., 3

³⁷² Ibid, 9

³⁷³ Ibid. (original emphasis)

contention that wages in the long term would adjust to the level of subsistence. When living costs were high, wages rose and eroded the profits of the manufacturers. As Ricardo had put it, the Corn Laws ‘have tended to *raise the price of sustenance*, and that has *raised the price of labour*, which of course *diminishes the profit on capital*.’³⁷⁴ But if living costs were lowered with repeal, wages would necessarily fall, so manufacturers could augment their profits. This showed that the manufacturers were interested in repeal: ‘Now, labour being the principal thing the manufacturers have to purchase, they of course adopt every scheme and contrivance to buy it as cheap as they can.’³⁷⁵

But obviously the League could not admit this. ‘[I]t would be as unwise, as it would be indecent, if the manufacturers, now that they are leagued to procure a measure by *pressure from without*, were frankly to declare that the measure they are seeking, is to reduce the wages of the very tools they are making use of to procure it.’³⁷⁶ How could the Leaguers tell the public that they were going to exploit it if they wanted its support? Thus, the League ‘would never be so foolish as to make such a declaration [about trying to lower wages] openly. When they are endeavouring to effect an object by public agitation,’ Almack resolved, ‘we cannot expect to find in their publications even an admission that they are actuated by selfish, or dishonest motives.’³⁷⁷

Taking Almack’s account of the Leaguers’ exploitative nature, however, one could not justifiably believe the League. ‘After all we have seen of the party, – after all we know of their previous declarations,’ said Almack, ‘– if every leaguering millocrat in

³⁷⁴ Ricardo, quoted in *ibid.*, 46 (original emphasis)

³⁷⁵ Almack, 30

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 31 (original emphasis)

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

England were to prostrate himself before us, and swear in the most solemn language, that his object was, *not* to reduce the cost of labour, we could not, neither could any person, of common sense, in our position, say other than this: “We do not believe you, – we *cannot* believe you!”³⁷⁸ Like the author of *Facts are Stubborn Things*, a pamphlet released a year after Almack’s, Almack subscribed to the idea that ‘All information derived from the statements made by the League should be suspected; the truth is, in almost every case, perverted to serve its end, and the most wilful misstatements are made to delude the unwary and unsuspecting.’³⁷⁹ For Almack and the other opponents of repeal, the Leaguers did not possess the quality of honesty: their vested interest in repeal had induced them to lie about the Corn Laws.

Although Almack would not trust the Leaguers, there were, however, manufacturers he believed. In fact, Almack used the testimonies of these manufacturers to strengthen his case against the Leaguers. Having adduced ‘numerous extracts’ of Lord Ashley’s and Mr. Sadler’s words showing the widespread mistreatment of children in manufactories, Almack found it ‘scarcely necessary to confirm Lord Ashley’s and Mr. Sadler’s statements by adding more.’³⁸⁰ Yet, Almack still found it in him to reproduce the testimonies of two others, testimonies that, ‘when it is considered whose they are’, he observed, ‘will be deemed amply sufficient’.³⁸¹ For these testimonies were ‘from men who have been through the mill themselves and therefore know what it is; who are both

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 43

³⁷⁹ *Facts are Stubborn Things*, 2

³⁸⁰ Almack, 18-9

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 19

extensive manufacturers, and have no interest in making mis-statements of this kind; who are both Corn-law repealers, therefore we must not doubt their veracity.’³⁸²

In this, Almack was not simply repeating that a manufacturer was truthful because he possessed the qualities of knowing and honesty. Rather, Almack found these manufacturers truthful because they were speaking *against* what one would ordinarily expect manufacturers to say. These manufacturers were providing evidence that children *were* being mistreated in factories; they were going against other manufacturers and accusing their own class of child exploitation. For Almack, a person who told an unexpected narrative, a story that went against the general opinion of his social group, seemed a truthful one. Thus, to build his case against the League, Almack felt also that it was ‘necessary’, having quoted Mr. Sadler, a known Tory, ‘to give a few confirmations of his [Sadler’s] statements from the Radical party; they shall therefore, be radical enough, and Corn-law repealers as well.’³⁸³

With this the League agreed. Like Almack, it prized testimonies in its favour which were given by members from social groups generally opposed to it, as revealed by its constant invocation of such testimonies in its printed propaganda. In ‘Facts for farmers’, a pamphlet summarising why farmers should support repeal, for instance, the credibility of the assertion that the landlords pocketed all the profits derived from the corn laws rested upon a landlord’s endorsement of that claim. ‘As a landlord,’ wrote the pamphleteer, ‘Earl Fitzwilliam tells his brother landlords that they are guilty of all the evils, crimes, miseries, and physical and moral deterioration which are inflicted upon the

³⁸² Ibid.

³⁸³ Ibid., 13

people by the corn laws.’³⁸⁴ The League’s affiliation with particular members of the aristocracy did not lend it only social prestige and influence, but credibility as well.

Likewise, while the three prize essays published by the League that were directed towards farmers, and that pertained to the question ‘whether the whole system of PROTECTION has not been contrived solely for the short-sighted gain of the landlords’, were recommended to farmers because ‘the writer of one of the Essays being a farmer, and therefore identified in interest with yourselves, you will, doubtless, give his opinions all the attention due to a practical agriculturist’,³⁸⁵ the League declared in 1843 that ‘It is one of the most triumphant evidences of the truth of the principles of the League, that the men most distinguished above all others as scientific and practical agriculturists, are either members or supporters of the League.’³⁸⁶

At meetings, League members also appealed to their interests in non-manufacturing activities to anchor their credibility. Thus, while Howick claimed in 1839 that ‘in advocating a change of the existing [Corn] law, I at least cannot be suspected of any views of feelings hostile to the landed interest’ because he represented ‘the Northern District of Northumberland, a district exclusively agricultural’,³⁸⁷ and while the Marquis of Clarincede ‘advocated the measure [of repeal] because’, rather than in spite of, the

³⁸⁴ *Facts for farmers* (Manchester: J. Gadsby, [c.1842]), 4

³⁸⁵ Preface to *The Three Prize Essays on Agriculture and the Corn Law* (Manchester: J. Gadsby, 1843), unpaginated (page 68 in the reprint)

³⁸⁶ ‘Landowners’ Dread of Anti-Corn Law Secretaries to Agricultural Associations’, *League*, 14 October 1843, page 34

³⁸⁷ Grey, 5

fact ‘that he held considerable property in land’,³⁸⁸ a pamphlet written by a farmer to farmers was prefaced by the comment that

You may, therefore, suppose that I should regret to see you suffer any injustice to your interest; and that my conviction that the Corn Laws is injurious to your interest, arises from no prejudice against the class of men from whom I have sprung, and with whom I hope again to be associated ere I descend to the grave.³⁸⁹

To the League, as was to Almack, testimonies that favoured its cause from members of ordinarily hostile social groups were more truthful because their contrariness revealed their speaker’s disinterest, their speaker’s possession of the quality of honesty. As Almack had said of the manufacturers he trusted, it was because they had ‘*no interest* in making mis-statements of this kind’ that he could believe them.³⁹⁰ Moreover, such speakers also knew about their subject matter by virtue of their social location; they therefore also possessed the quality of knowing. Thus, to receive adherents from those social groups that were normally understood to be antagonistic towards it benefited the League’s campaign for credibility, a campaign secondary, but quite integral, to its main strategy of compelling assent. In portraying its enemies as wanting in the two epistemic qualities necessary for truth – knowing and honesty, and in displaying the support of those persons from social groups usually opposed to it, the League was utilising a map of credibility that it shared with many of its contemporaries. Such was a map that located true, reliable knowledge in a manufacturing class interested not only in themselves, but

³⁸⁸ ‘Parliamentary Intelligence: House of Lords, Tuesday, August 24’, *Times*, 25 August 1841, page 1. The comment was made in the House of Lords on 24 August 1841.

³⁸⁹ A farmer’s son, *An Address to Farmers, on the Way in which their Families are to be Provided for* (Manchester: J. Gadsby, [1842-3?]), 1

³⁹⁰ Almack, 19, as quoted above, with emphasis added.

also in the nation, and a map which privileged the knowledges of friends from the fringes of distant, even oppositional, groups – a map, in short, that returns us to the speech that opened Chapter II, where Peel enlarged repeal’s validity by conveying Cobden’s ‘pure and disinterested motives’.³⁹¹

³⁹¹ Peel, quoted in Prentice, *History*, vol. 2, 439-40, and as quoted above.

V Conclusion

In his book *Putting Science in its Place*, geographer David Livingstone outlined three geographical themes which are useful in understanding scientific practice, and which I have drawn upon throughout this thesis: site, region, and circulation.³⁹² We can appreciate how these ideas illuminate the workings of science by referring to the case of Robert Boyle, as described in the Introduction.

For Livingstone, *site* refers to the venue in which scientific knowledge is produced. For Boyle, this was the laboratory, typically located in the homes of gentlemen, where experiments were carried out. In Boyle's home laboratory, experiments were set up and their results observed. In this setting, the machine functioned as a boundary between nature and its human observers, separating the two and allowing 'nature' to be objectively perceived, that is, to be observed without human interference. Thus, when witnesses concurred regarding experimental results, their observations could be endorsed as 'matters of fact', or true, objective, knowledge about 'nature'.³⁹³

The fact that Boyle's knowledge was produced in a particular site seems at first hard to reconcile with the widespread view that science is universal. In this case, that Boyle's experimental method and results around air pressure were accepted everywhere. Boyle's method and findings gained influence, however, only by *circulating* spatially, that is, his knowledge moved outside his laboratory, gaining authority throughout the

³⁹² David N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003)

³⁹³ Of course, the spatial arrangement within Boyle's experimental sites also indicated other features of his science, including its social division of labour. See *ibid.*, 23-4.

world.³⁹⁴ But how was Boyle's knowledge authoritative for those who were not direct witnesses of his experiments? Those unable to directly witness Boyle's experiments often had to take the word of those that did on trust. By recognising that Boyle's knowledge had to circulate to gain currency, we discovered a social attribute necessary for knowledge diffusion; that most scientific knowledge is accepted on the belief that those who produce and witness experiments are telling the truth.

In the case of Boyle's experiments, his witnesses were trustworthy because they were gentlemen, who, in principle, were least likely to lie. Gentlemen were economically independent and unlikely to distort truth for financial gain. They also belonged to a culture of honesty in which deceit received severe disapprobation, occasionally in the form of assault which could result in death. For these reasons, gentlemen were credible witnesses in Boyle's experiments. Such understandings of gentility were peculiar to Restoration England, so its efficacy as a cultural solution to problems of trust was specific to that time and place.

This last point goes to the third of Livingstone's geographies of science. Gentility was part of a *regional* culture that considered it a sign of trustworthiness.³⁹⁵ The use of the term 'region' in reference to England might seem odd. But for Livingstone, the term applies to 'every scale of analysis from the continental to the provincial', every scale of

³⁹⁴ Which is why science flows like blood, says Bruno Latour, philosopher of science: 'By following the ways in which facts circulate, we will be able to reconstruct, blood vessel after blood vessel, the whole circulatory system of science. The notion of a science isolated from the rest of society will become as meaningless as the idea of a system of arteries disconnected from the system of veins' (80). See Latour, Ch. 2 and 3. For an application of this idea within geography, see, for example, Trevor J. Barnes, 'The rise (and decline) of American regional science: lessons for the new economic geography?', *Journal of Economic Geography* 4, no. 2 (2004).

³⁹⁵ See Livingstone, 92

analysis beyond the site.³⁹⁶ Thus, it becomes possible to speak of ‘Chinese science under the Sung emperors, Arabic science under the patronage of Abassid caliph al-Mansur,’ even “‘London science” in the early Victorian period’.³⁹⁷

The discussion of the Anti-Corn Law campaign in the preceding chapters addressed each of these geographical themes.³⁹⁸ In Chapter II, the focus was the region and the circulation of knowledge. We saw how the campaign emerged and developed in Manchester, the leading city of British industrialisation, where many manufacturers and merchants who preferred greater liberalisation of trade and politics worked and lived. These industrialists advocated the repeal of the Corn Laws because they believed protection caused economic depression in trade, and Conservative dominance in government. Two regional cultures were implicated here. First, there was the regional economic culture of industrial production, concentrated in the north of England, and especially Manchester. Then, there was the national political culture which pitted radicals against Conservatives. These regional conditions shaped the meanings Anti-Corn Law campaigners and their rivals attached to the Corn Laws.

Chapter II also argued that Leaguers found it necessary to circulate their knowledge spatially for a successful campaign. League lecturers perambulated the country, holding public meetings in remote locations where the League aspired to gain

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 89. Though see below regarding the neighbourhood as another scale of analysis.

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

³⁹⁸ Readers should note that although the themes site, region, and circulation can in principle be considered separately for the purposes of analysis, they overlap and intersect in the messy practice of science. Even though each chapter has focused on particular themes, traces of others can be found in them. In Chapter II, for example, a better picture of how Anti-Corn Law knowledge was circulated through tracts and lecturers was gained by considering Newall’s Buildings, a site which produced the knowledge and organised its circulation. And while the exploration of League meetings in Chapter III presupposed circulation (the movements of speakers and audiences), the examination of credibility in Chapter IV was underpinned by understandings of class peculiar to Britain (a ‘region’).

support. Tracts were written and published from Newall's Buildings in Manchester, and distributed throughout the country to persuade the public of the value of free trade.

The speeches and pamphlets were not, however, by themselves compelling; the League's persuasion relied upon the epistemic ideals of consensus and credibility. Such was the conclusion drawn in Chapters III and IV which attended to the sites in which the League produced knowledge, its public meetings. In Chapter III, we saw that witnesses were asked by the League to present testimony regarding the influence of the Corn Laws in particular localities, and that other witnesses, including audience members, were relied upon to corroborate or contradict those statements. When confirmations were obtained, or when contradictions were absent, statements were pronounced authentic. Economic knowledge was produced through the achievement of mass assent, which functioned also as a rhetorical voucher of truth.

In Chapter IV, we saw that in situations of disagreement, the League portrayed its own witnesses as reliable sources of information, while depicting its enemies' witnesses as poor producers of knowledge. The League's portrayals constituted a form of boundary-work which traded on assumptions society held about what counted as knowledge and honesty, and which consequently gave it credibility. The League associated its witnesses with knowledge by stressing their direct observation or experience of trade, or their rigorous study of it. It also identified its witnesses as honest by asserting they had no direct interests in repealing the Corn Laws, or that their interests coincided with the interests of the nation. Conversely, the League suggested that their enemies did not know about trade, or, if they did, that they were too interested in protection to speak truthfully about it. For the League, consensus and credibility were

epistemic ideals that conveyed truth independent of its content. Or, to use Ted Porter's phrase, consensus and credibility functioned as 'technologies of trust' for the League, signs by which the League's audiences could take its knowledge on faith.³⁹⁹

Though attending to the 'regions', movements, and sites of the League's campaign has yielded an understanding of how the League produced knowledge and what it meant by 'truth' – 'true' statements received assent, or were made by trustworthy persons – this thesis offers another way science can be thought of as 'geographical'. This should not be surprising as even Livingstone admits that site, region, and circulation do not exhaust the breadth of what can be called 'geographies of science'.⁴⁰⁰ Thus, other scholars have added interpretations to the phrase 'geographies of science', enriching the conceptual toolbox we can use to apprehend science, and enlivening debates on the subject. Richard Powell, for instance, has noted the geographical sensibilities of what he calls postcolonial science studies, a normative branch of the field which proposes that knowledge production be 'conducted in *third space*, a specially constructed knowledge space where ontological assumptions and power relations in knowledge traditions are made evident'.⁴⁰¹ Advocates of such an approach to knowledge hope that such a space would level the privileges accorded to certain types of knowledge, and enable the articulation of knowledges that have hitherto been marginalised.

Likewise, Steven Shapin has shown that examining the neighbourhood – a scale of analysis that falls into neither of Livingstone's categories of site or region – may help

³⁹⁹ Theodore M. Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 15

⁴⁰⁰ Livingstone, 16

⁴⁰¹ Richard Powell, 'Geographies of science: histories, localities, practices, futures', *Progress in Human Geography* 31, no. 3 (2007): 320 (original emphasis)

us understand scientific works. Shapin observed that Boyle's home in Pall Mall was surrounded by residences frequented by influential members of London's High Society, some of whom were directly connected to Boyle.⁴⁰² Many of these sites, Shapin noted, were 'dens of iniquity', hotbeds of Restoration scandal. The house of Nell Gwyn, mistress to Charles II, in particular, was 'one of the most louche and licentious sites of Restoration debauchery – and at the very highest social levels.'⁴⁰³ With this social context in mind, Shapin suggests that Boyle's texts may have contained oblique critiques of such behaviour: though Boyle did not complain directly of his neighbours' activities, he still offered 'general indictments of immoral tendencies in his society.'⁴⁰⁴ For Shapin, the neighbourhood becomes an important scale of analysis in understanding the content of Boyle's work.

In similar spirit, this thesis has tried to elaborate another interpretation of the geographies of science that is close to what Simon Naylor has called cartographies of science. 'How, for instance,' Naylor asks, 'has science embodied different spatial preconceptions in its work? ... How have particular spaces and spatialities impacted upon the formulation of scientific theories?'⁴⁰⁵ Naylor applies these questions to Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Darwin, and Alfred Russell Wallace, showing that their 'scientific practices embody spatial presuppositions'.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰² To be precise, the Pall Mall residence belonged to Boyle's sister, Katherine, Lady Ranelagh. Boyle had moved into the house in 1668. See Shapin, 'House of Experiment', 380.

⁴⁰³ Steven Shapin, 'Placing the view from nowhere: historical and sociological problems in the location of science', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 23, no. 1 (1998): 9

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Simon Naylor, 'Introduction: historical geographies of science – places, contexts, cartographies', *British Journal for the History of Science* 38, no. 1 (2005): 9

What Naylor means by this becomes clearer if we consider some of Darwin's work. From the late 1830s, Darwin puzzled over the diversity of mammals in East India, and how this contradicted evolutionary theory. 'From an evolutionary point of view, a naturalist would not expect an archipelago of physically similar islands to be populated with strikingly different animals on its western and eastern ends', especially if there were no clear obstacles to animal migration.⁴⁰⁷ To reconcile the fact of East Indian ecological diversity with his theory, Darwin sought to locate a 'faunal boundary' separating 'the Asian and Australian faunal regions'.⁴⁰⁸ That such faunal regions – or, more generally, biological regions – existed was assumed by Darwin; he had inherited the concept of biological regions unquestioningly from other Victorian scientists, including Robert Chambers, Charles Lyell, James Cowles Prichard, and William Swainson, who, in turn, drew on Humboldt.⁴⁰⁹ In Darwin's work, therefore, 'regional ... thinking appears as an instrument of thought rather than an end in itself'.⁴¹⁰ Darwin did not seek to demonstrate the existence of biological regions; he assumed them and proceeded to demarcate a boundary that would reconcile the faunal diversity of the East Indies with his theory of evolution.⁴¹¹ For Naylor, then, geographical sensibilities conditioned the *content* of Darwin's science.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 10

⁴⁰⁷ Jane R. Camerini, 'Evolution, Biogeography, and Maps: An Early History of Wallace's Line', *Isis* 84, no. 4 (1993): 709

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 704-6

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 709

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 709-10

Similarly, this thesis has shown that geographical sensibilities affected the *conduct* of the League's production of knowledge. In particular, geographies were implicated in the League's attempts to represent the epistemic ideals of consensus and credibility, which were necessary for the League to convey its knowledge as true. The League's national imaginaries shaped its image of mass assent, while its depiction of witnesses as trustworthy relied on cultural maps (or social geographies) that indicated which social identities were more likely to be truthful. In short, the manner in which the League sought to make truths embodied particular preconceptions of space, specifically, geographical imaginations that defined what a nation and a society comprised. These forms of the geography of science hitherto have been neglected in the literature, although this thesis has recognised them explicitly. In the production of scientific knowledge, it is not just the real, tangible, geographies of site, region, and circulation that matter. Imagined geographies matter too.

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