

REVERED AND REVILED: IN SEARCH OF THE REAL BENJAMIN DISRAELI

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On 17th June 2024, during the doctoral seminar *Revered and Reviled: in Search of the Real Benjamin Disraeli*, we had the opportunity to delve into the figure of Benjamin Disraeli. The seminar was organised by Prof. Daniele Niedda and chaired by Prof. Danilo Breschi, Associate Professor of History of Political Doctrines at UNINT, University of International Studies of Rome, and it was attended by five professors and specialists from various international backgrounds with their respective contributions. The seminar was opened by Dr. Michel Pharand, former Director of the Disraeli Project at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and General Editor of the *Benjamin Disraeli Letters series*, published by the University of Toronto Press. Dr. Pharand's presentation was entitled *Benjamin Disraeli Orientalized, Racialized, Feminized* and it was followed by Prof. Luisa Villa's contribution *The Young Benjamin Disraeli and the Court Journal*. Prof. Villa is Professor of English literature at the University of Genoa. Her field of research is the 19th century and the early 20th century and over the years her interests have included major novelists such as George Eliot, Benjamin Disraeli, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, etc. The third presentation *Disraeli and Conservatism* was given by Dr. Emily Jones, lecturer in

Modern British History at the University of Manchester. She is currently completing a monograph entitled *One Nation: The Disraeli Myth and the Making of a Conservative Tradition* to be published with Princeton University Press. The following contribution *Interpreting Disraeli's Ideological Legacy: Competing Understandings of "Disraeli-ism" within the Conservative Party* came from Dr. David Jeffery, senior lecturer in British Politics at the University of Liverpool with a research focus on Conservative Party history. He is currently writing a chapter on the various interpretations of Disraelian political thought for an edited collection published in Les Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens. Finally, Prof. Daniele Niedda's presentation *The Novel of His Heart: Tancred and Orientalism* closed the seminar. Prof. Niedda is Associate Professor of English at UNINT, University of International Studies of Rome. His main fields of research are British literature and culture in the long 18th century, their reception in Italy – particularly Edmund Burke and William Beckford – and more recently Victorian Studies, with particular focus on Benjamin Disraeli. Prof. Niedda's most recent book is the Italian edition of Leslie Stephen's essay *Mr. Disraeli's Novels* (*I romanzi di Benjamin Disraeli*) published by Edizioni Croce.

First of all, who was Benjamin Disraeli? A British politician, novelist and *bon viveur*, Disraeli (1804-1881) was a man with many interests, but it was as a Conservative politician that he achieved lasting fame. Prime Minister of the United Kingdom for almost seven years, he initiated a wide range of legislation to improve educational opportunities and the life of working people. Benjamin Disraeli was the son of Isaac, a Jewish Italian writer, and had an Anglican upbringing after the age of 12. With Jews excluded from Parliament until 1858, this enabled Disraeli to follow a career that would otherwise have been denied him. He was Britain's first, and so far, only Jewish Prime Minister. In 1868, Queen Victoria invited Disraeli to become Prime Minister, and they soon struck up a remarkable rapport thanks to Disraeli's charm and skillful flattery.

After defeat by the Liberals at the next election, his position as Conservative

leader was at risk. Disraeli became Prime Minister for a second time in 1874, aged 70. This was a successful premiership, which saw the passing of a large amount of social legislation: the 1875 Climbing Boys Act reinforced the ban on employing juvenile chimney sweeps; the 1875 Artisans Dwelling Act allowed local authorities to destroy slums, though this was voluntary, and provided housing for the poor. In the same year, the Public Health Act provided sanitation such as running water and refuse disposal.

On being made Earl of Beaconsfield by Queen Victoria in 1879, Disraeli governed from the House of Lords. Foreign policy became increasingly important, especially the Eastern Question following Turkish atrocities against the Bulgarians. The 1880 election was lost to the Liberals, a narrow loss in terms of votes cast. Disraeli threw himself into the job of Opposition and was active until a month before his death from bronchitis in April 1881. On his deathbed, he is reported to have said: "I had rather live, but I am not afraid to die".

After this brief biographical digression, we will now focus on the topics covered during the speeches of the five professors and specialists, presented in the abstracts they provided. Dr. Michel Pharand's presentation *Benjamin Disraeli Orientalized, Racialized, Feminized* demonstrated that although Disraeli was twice Prime Minister at the height of the British Empire's global influence and a close confidant of Queen Victoria, he was also one of the most controversial political figures of his time. In fact, in many songs, poems, parodies and caricatures, Disraeli was mocked and taunted by detractors who continuously reminded him that, despite his political fame, he was an outsider.

Nevertheless, Disraeli resisted these constant attacks. Dr. Pharand's paper began by briefly presenting Disraeli's dual identity and his views on Judaism and Christianity – summarised in his novel *Sybil* as "Christianity is completed Judaism" – and then examined, through 33 illustrations, how his person was the subject of satire in the popular press, particularly in *Punch* and *Fun*. Dr. Pharand illustrated and accurately described 16 cartoons depicting Disraeli,

under the following three categories: *Orientalized Disraeli* (eight cartoons), *Racialized Disraeli* (four cartoons) and *Feminized Disraeli* (four cartoons).

Prof. Luisa Villa's contribution focused on a sequence of four short texts by Benjamin Disraeli, published in the *Court Journal* in 1829 as part of his long collaboration with Henry Colburn, probably the most dynamic British publisher of the Pre-Reform Bill era. Prof. Villa pointed out that although the biographical circumstances of Disraeli's involvement in the literary scene of the 1820s are well known, his views on its transitional character, the opportunities it offered and the innovative marketing strategies that emerged at the time, have rarely been the subject of a critical investigation. In this context, the boom of the daily press and the pervasive textualisation of everyday life that it produced, the resurgence of the so-called *roman-à-clef* with its blurring of the line between fact and fiction, the interplay between celebrity and anonymity, are interconnected issues, clearly present in Disraeli's early works.

In her presentation *Disraeli and Conservatism*, Dr. Emily Jones remarked that Benjamin Disraeli is often regarded as the "founder of modern conservatism". In particular, Disraeli is today widely placed at the head of a holistic and socially minded tradition of "One Nation Conservatism" which claims solidarity with social problems and seeks to promote social peace and national unity in order to preserve existing institutions and systems of power. Through her speech, Dr. Jones briefly outlined the political ideas of the historical Disraeli, i.e. the constitutional politics of a 19th century British Tory, and how in the years following his death Disraeli has been edited, adapted and promoted to fit a modern 20th century political agenda, increasingly focused on issues of welfare and economic management.

Mr. David Jeffery's contribution analysed the legacy of Benjamin Disraeli and the influence of his premiership, as well as his literary works on subsequent ideological projects within the Conservative Party. It also

examined the evolution of interpretations of Disraeli's ideological project, focusing on the contrast between the more muscular form of Tory Democracy, championed by early 20th century figures such as Randolph Churchill, Archibald Salvidge and Joseph Chamberlain, and the less aggressive post-war strand of One Nation, commonly associated with Disraeli by Harold Macmillan, Edward Heath and more recently David Cameron. Dr. Jeffery shed light on the areas of contestation between the various interpretations of Disraeli's ideological project, analysing the shifts within the Conservative Party, and the way his legacy has been used by the party figures.

Prof. Daniele Niedda concluded the seminar with his presentation on *Tancred* and *Orientalism*. Although *Tancred* was Disraeli's favourite novel – among those he wrote – critics still underestimate its value. In fact, it is the only book of the Young England trilogy which does not have a modern critical edition. Commonly considered as an orientalist exercise revealing the imperial myth of Disraeli, *Tancred* actually contradicts every British dream of domination over the East and contains a revolutionary idea entrusted to the Angel of Arabia. Prof. Niedda's contribution highlighted the fact that the "sublime and solacing doctrine of theocratic equality" is contrary to Sidonia's sycophantic dictum that "All is race" and challenges the principle of Jewish chosenness, i.e. the concept of the Jews as God's chosen people, thereby inviting to read Disraeli's novel with Edward Said, the author of *Freud and the Non-European* rather than *Orientalism*.

In conclusion, the doctoral seminar *Revered and Reviled: in Search of the Real Benjamin Disraeli* allowed us to frame the personality of Benjamin Disraeli, along with his multifaceted political and literary engagement, thanks to the enriching and thought-provoking contributions of the guests present, professors and specialists who generously shared their studies and experiences around a prominent and emblematic figure of 19th century British history.