Rediscovering democratic accountability: the history of an awful idea

CMS Conference, Manchester
July 2013

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Abstract

Accountability is a politically saturated term that has gained much utilisation over the past thirty years. It is central to the neoliberal restructuring of public services, both rhetorically and in practice. Yet, for many accountability is an expression of holding those in power to account. Thus, accountability as a concept contains a duality of managerialist reforms and democratic control. The neoliberal age has seen the managerialist reform side of this duality to the fore, with democratic forms of accountability under attack. Among academics and practitioners this has led to questioning whether a renewal of democratic accountability is possible and if so how.

This paper addresses these questions by looking at the history of accountability and in particular searching for an explanation of how democratic accountability relations were generated in the first place. This is achieved by firstly outlining the academic work on the history of accountability stretching back through the Middle Ages to ancient Athens. Secondly, an analysis of the struggle for accountable government, in 19th century Britain, is developed that illustrates the role of working people in pursuing such accountability. Thus, at its core accountability is shown to be contested by competing social forces with working people and the labour movement playing a central role in the establishment of democratic, accountable government.

The paper concludes with a discussion of the relevance of this history and analysis for studies of accountability in modern democratic societies.
Introduction

Accountability: n. The mother of caution.

"My accountability, bear in mind,"
Said the Grand Vizier: "Yes, yes,"
Said the Shah: "I do -- 'tis the only kind
Of ability you possess."

Joram Tate

Entry in The Devil's Dictionary by Ambrose Bierce (1911)

A central tenet of this paper is that accountability relations are not static but dynamic; and in a process of contestation and change. Moreover, accountability relations at any moment in time are derived from the socio-economic and historical context in which they operate. As Normanton argues ‘... accountability is not the same thing in all ages; it depends upon the nature of the state itself’ (Normanton, 1966: 3). This paper seeks to show how over different historical ages the nature and exercising of accountability has changed. Accountability relations have gone from ancient times with the people holding those who spend their money to account; through elite rulers holding their officers to account, to the current position where the concept of accountability is contested and fought over (Cooper and Johnston, 2012; Kamuf, 2007; Smyth, 2012). In modern societies, this contestation comes from a clash of democratic accountability relations with current neoliberal inspired managerialist forms of accountability (Law, 1999; Pollitt, 2003). Given the seemingly irresistible rise of neoliberal accountability (Kamuf, 2007; Ranson, 2003) some academics and commentators are questioning whether a renewal of democratic accountability is possible and if so where might it come from and how can it be achieved (Cooper and
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Johnston, 2012; Kamuf, 2007; Ranson, 2003). For example, Peggy Kamuf sees the need for: ‘A counter-institution of resistance to the irresistible logic of accountability’ (2007: 253). This paper seeks to locate Kamuf’s counter-institution by exploring the history of accountability and answering the question how were democratic accountability relations generated in the first place.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section critiques the current ideas and formulations of accountability in the accounting literature. Having found limitations in this work leading to the need for an alternative, interdisciplinary perspective on accountability, the following section briefly sets out the theoretical perspective and method adopted in the rest of the paper. The main body of the paper covers the historical episodes that have been central to the development of modern democratic accountability relations. This starts with accountability in ancient societies through to the Middle Ages, but concentrates on the struggle for accountable government in 19th century Britain, in the form to the right to vote. The paper concludes with a discussion that covers both how these alternative formulations of accountability were present before the neoliberal age and also what the implications are for current research that seeks to aid the renewal of democratic accountability.

The “awful idea of accountability”

McKernan and McPhail (2012) in their special issue on Accountability rely on the work of Hoskins (1996) to introduce two aspects of our current understanding of accountability. First, that Hoskin’s notes that accountability (the noun) only came into being around 1800¹. Second, that an early entry in Webster’s 1828 American

¹ To be precise Hoskin does not just see the noun being invented around 1800 but the whole concept of accountability: ‘... the invention of accountability is one sign of a profound transformation beginning from around 1800’ (Hoskins: 1996: 266), this is despite recognising in an end note that the ‘Oxford
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dictionary carries the following phrase as an example of its use: “the awful idea of accountability”, R. Hall. Hoskin’s (1996) work argues that the emergence of accountability is based on the development and fusion of accounting systems and discipline at that time (Hoskins and Macve, 1988; Hoskins, 1996): ‘For once discipline and accounting came thus together; they automatically found themselves producing a discourse of both financial and human accountability’ (Hoskins and Macve, 1988: 43). This fusion developed in the field of pedagogy specifically at West Point military academy and Glasgow University, where the father of classical bourgeois economics, Adam Smith was a teacher and developing his ideas about the self-examining self. Thus Hoskins argues:

Here, in one fell swoop, is the explanation why Smith came up with this new formulation – it was to hand for him in his everyday life, since he was in the Classroom world of Glasgow University a teacher who deployed examination as a practice for making students learn ... and the explanation why increasing numbers should have then internalized it – as they became subject to increasingly rigorous forms of this examination.


While it may be the case that either or both of these changes fed into the development of modern accountability, the roots of the concept are in ancient civilisations (Day and Klein, 1985; Normanton, 1966) and can also be seen in Medieval English society (Dubnick, 1998). Further, there are a multiple strands in the development of the modern conception of accountability, including religious based morality as illustrated by Robert Hall’s quote. The argument in this paper is that

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*English Dictionary* gives examples if the adjective ‘accountable’ dating from the sixteenth century ...’ (Hoskin, 1996: 280, n. 2).

*Robert Hall (1764-1831) was a Baptist minister from Leicestershire, England. The “awful idea” quote (Hall, 1802: 30) comes from a sermon of his published in 1802 entitled ‘Modern Infidelity Considered with respect to its influence on society’.*
Hoskin’s oversights are an expression of the one-sided thinking that has dominated the literature on accountability, especially in the accounting field, over the past quarter of a century.

A central concern of the accounting literature in this period has been to understand the changing nature of accountability relations in the public sector (Broadbent et al., 1996; Laughlin, 1996; Sinclair, 1995), starting with the nature of public accountability relations in the pre-neoliberal age before looking at rise of neoliberal inspired accountability over the past thirty years. A collection of essays published in 1971 (entitled The Dilemma of Accountability in Modern Government: Independence versus Control), based on a series of meetings facilitated by the Carnegie Corporation, between US and British academics, practitioners and politicians, investigated the terra incognita of accountability in modern democratic government (Smith and Hague, 1971). This exposition is significant on two fronts. First, in the UK context this period from the late 1960s into the early 1970s represents a tipping point in the development of ‘government by contract’ in the public services Pifer (1971: ix). This development was more advanced in the United States of America but was starting to become prevalent in the UK and was to be taken up as a key element of neoliberal reforms such as contracting-out and compulsory competitive tendering (CCT).

Second, what is striking about this collection of essays is the sense that accountability to parliament needs to be strengthened. There is no discussion of accountability to consumers or through market mechanisms. Instead the concern is over public money that is being expended through local government or the nationalised industries that is not overseen by parliament. This has changed
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fundamentally in the intervening period with the re-organisation of local government financing and the privatisation of the nationalised industries. However, the essays illustrate that there were and still are alternative ideas about what accountability is and how it should/could be exercised.

After the implementation of “government by contract” policies, Broadbent et al (1996) trace the links between ‘the economic theory of principal and agent relationships (PA)’ (Broadbent et al., 1996: 259) and changes in accountability relations in public services. The reforming of public services delivery has limited the scope of the professions and strengthen the power of the finance provider (“he who pays, plays the tune”) also changed the nature of accountability. Thus, where previously professional, democratic and bureaucratic forms of accountability dominated, following the neoliberal-inspired reforms (such as the financial management initiative) managerial, market and legal forms of accountability were instigated (Broadbent et al., 1996; Laughlin, 1996; Law, 1999; Pollitt, 2003). Broadbent et al. (1996), working at an abstract and theoretical level, identify the limitations of PA forms of accountability – including the difficulties where outcomes are indeterminate – that lead to the possibility of a conflict of values between those who deliver and who manage the services. In these circumstances they portray the new PA accountability relations as being imposed in a ‘seemingly inevitable and unquestioned march’ (Broadbent et al., 1996: 281). Here they are echoing the despondency among most academics that are critical of these policies. For example Kamuf (2007) describes the ‘irresistible logic of [neoliberal] accountability’; Ranson (2003) recognises the ‘increasing intensity’ of the ‘iron design type of neo-liberal corporate regulation’ as opposed to democratic accountability. Further, Cooper and Johnston (2012: 626) state that ‘taken as a whole the term accountability serves to
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maintain and enhance the positions of the most powerful …’ in our society, by serving as an opiate for the people, an immunization for the powerful and a system of performance metrics that individualises employees.

In part this despondency is a result of a one-sided approach to studying accountability, whether this is Roberts and Scapens (1985) hierarchical organisational settings or Sinclair’s (1995) interpretivist-influences focus on the impact of accountability on the individual manager. Thus, Cooper and Johnston (2012) point out that there are two dominant conceptions of accountability in the literature. The first equates accountability with accounting and holds that accountability is satisfied by account giving; this leads to calls for greater and more detailed forms of accounting and reporting. The second holds that accountability stretches beyond accounting. This conception has focused on the impact accountability has on the individual experiences predominantly of managers and officers (Day and Klein, 1987; Sinclair, 1995). Utilising this second conception Cooper and Johnston (2012) rely upon the work of Lacan, Bourdieu and psychoanalytic approaches to explore the vulgate³ of accountability. While they specifically state their work is not focused on the history of accountability, an appreciation of the historical processes in the struggle for accountable government is needed to overcome the present managerialist and individualist accountability which ‘presents some actors with delusions of mastery and control while at the same time rendering other actors individualised and stressed and the whole of society failing with a concept which promises much and delivers nothing’ (Cooper and Johnston, 2012: 603).

³ ‘The Vulgate is a Latin edition or translation of the Bible by Saint Jerome at the end of the fourth century. The signifier vulgate has come to mean the common speech of a people; the vernacular or a widely accepted text or version of a work’ (Cooper and Johnston, 2012: 627, n. 3).
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Despite the previous quote, there has been little appreciation of the idea of accountability in a wider societal context and how this would impact on accountability relations for organisations in the public, and also private, sectors. To overcome this narrow focus on accountability relations it is necessary look beyond the accounting literature and look at how others have developed definitions of accountability. Accountability is not just a socially-constructed, contested idea but is also dynamic and changing based on the actions and ideas of those involved with its execution. Thus accountability is more than accounting but not reducible to individual (or even simple aggregations of) experiences. The central elements of which are set out by Gray and Jenkins (1993):

In essence, accountability is an obligation to present an account of and answer for the execution of responsibilities to those who entrusted those responsibilities. On this obligation depends the allocation of praise and blame, reward and sanction so often seen as the hallmarks of accountability in action. [Emphasis added]

Gray and Jenkins (1993: 55)

Gray and Jenkins’ definition outlines key elements of an accountability relationship such as the delegation of responsibilities and an obligation to account for actions taken in pursuit of those responsibilities. However, the element that distinguishes it as an accountability relationship is the element of control ‘... praise and blame, reward and sanction ...’. Gray and Jenkins’ definition is essentially abstract and so needs to be contextualised in modern democratic societies. Thus, Mulgan states that:

‘Accountability’, the obligation to be called ‘to account’, is a method of keeping the public informed and the powerful in check. It implies a world which is at once complex, where experts are needed to perform specialised tasks, but still fundamentally democratic in aspiration, in that
members of the public assert their right to question the experts and exercise ultimate control over them.

(Mulgan, 2003: 1)

Here, Mulgan keeps the essential element of control, however he outlines specifically who the parties involved are ("the public" and the "powerful"/"experts") and the role of transparency ("keeping the public informed" and the "right to question"). Further, Mulgan recognises that due to the complexity of modern societies there is a need for specialisation (the use of experts) and that these experts can play powerful roles. It is the nature of democratic societies that the powerful are (to be) kept in check, hence the need for accountability relations.

While, the dictionaries record the first usage of the word accountability circa 1800, Dubnick points out that the 'Middle English terms related to accountability (e.g. acompte, aconte) can be traced to at least the early 14th century and there is no doubt these were derived from the Old French equivalents for comptes à rendre' (Dubnick, 1998: 70). This leads Dubnick to recognise that the idea of accountability was prevalent in those times. It is this "idea" of accountability and specifically its central role in the struggle for an accountable government in the form of the right to vote (Foot, 2005) that provides the alternative (counter) conception of accountability in this paper. Thus, there are (at least) two major conceptions of accountability one focused on managerialist control from those in positions of power and one that returns time and again from the time of the English Revolution (Foot, 2005; Hill, 1972; Manning, 1996) through the Chartist movement of the early nineteenth century (Saville, 1987) to the foundations of the welfare state (Charlton, 2000).
Finally, Laughlin (1996) extends the logic of the arguments in Broadbent et al. (1996) recognising ‘the possibility of ‘alternative’ rights: the conditions where the one who accounts and is held to account rejects or rebels against the seeming rightful authority of the ‘one who holds to account’ (Laughlin, 1996: 225). This is an important step in the development of the literature on accountability. The use of the verbs “rejects” and “rebels” brings agency to the fore and in the process creates the possibility of opposing the irresistible logic and increasing intensity of neoliberal accountability. Laughlin (1996) does not explore this research agenda, but calls for further research into these new possibilities. What follows in this paper seeks to answer Laughlin’s call directly but by expanding the view of accountability relations beyond the micro managerial, hierarchical forms prevalent in public services management and delivery, to include the nature of the macro democratic accountability relations that form the context for public services. This leads to the need for analysing the alternative rights of the public services workers and importantly the service users (i.e. the public). As in democratic societies, government legitimacy comes from being the elected representatives of the people. That legitimacy and the corresponding right to vote and hold the government accountable through the ballot was won through many centuries of struggle by the 97 per cent (Manning, 1996 – see below). It is those struggles that are analysed below with the aim of understanding how democratic accountability was first established and subsequently identifying the relevance of that history to present day circumstances.

**Methodology – history from below and historical materialism**

To develop this alternative understanding of accountability it is necessary to utilise an different theoretical approaches to historical analysis. While this paper’s research aim would appear to fit with a genealogy method associated with Nietzsche and
Foucault, the approach adopted in this paper has been influenced by Bhaskar’s ideas on emergence, structure and agency (Bhaskar, 1989) and more specifically historical materialism and history from below theoretical perspectives. History from below was developed by the Communist Party Historians’ Group4 between 1946 and 1956. Perry outlines how ‘... history from below, ennobled the resistance and non-conformity of bandits, peasants, artisans, industrial workers, poachers, religious millenarians and transportees’ (Perry, 2002: 88). Brian Manning, while exploring the role of the “middling sort” in the English revolution, justifies the history from below approach by criticising the histories focused solely on those at the top of society ‘... as if the other 97 per cent of the population did not exist or did not matter’ and goes on to state ‘... the people other than lords and squires did play parts worthy of investigation – for one thing they did most of the fighting and dying – and they did not always follow blindly the lead of their social superiors’ (Manning, 1996: 1). However, Perry (2002) also notes that taken to extremes this historical perspective has as much of a narrow focus (on those at the bottom of society) as the dominant theories it sought to challenge. It is therefore necessary to rely on “history from below” in conjunction with the classical Marxist method of historical materialism that has the Marxist dialectic at its core with an emphasis on change, contradiction (contestation) and totality (Rees, 1998). Both these historical perspectives have informed the analysis in this paper.

Accountability – ancient and medieval

The history of accountability is as old as governments of the ancient world (Day and Klein, 1985; Normanton, 1966). The ancient Greeks saw accountability as an

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4 This group produced such notable historians as EP Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville and Christopher Hill.
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essential counterpart to the spending of public money. According to Aristotle\(^5\) the constitution of classical Athens allowed for the people to elect their magistrates and hold them to account. Peter Bird explains how this accountability was exercised:

In Athens all public officials were subjected to monthly interim audits. Then at the end of their year in office they faced a two-part audit; first they had to pass an examination of their handling of public funds, and then a review procedure was set up at which any citizen could complain about any aspect of the official’s administration. 

(Bird, 1973: 17)

In line with Gray and Jenkins’ (1993) and Mulgan’s (2003) conception of accountability, it was only after successfully passing both audits that the official could be ‘... crowned or otherwise honoured’ (Bird, 1973: 17) (i.e. that reward or praise could be meted out). Interestingly Bird highlights that audit in ancient Athens went beyond just probity, and covered the actual performance of the public official, a theme in audit that was lost for many centuries (Bird, 1973) and only rediscovered slowly through the extension of the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C & AG) in the decades from its creation in 1860s (Normanton, 1966; 1980). Also the procedure in ancient Athens allowed any citizen to enact accountability processes, thus enabling a thoroughgoing form of democratic accountability. Bird (1973) goes on to show how the Athenian form of accountability was appropriate for a city state but that when it came to an empire the size of the Romans it broke down. With the rise of the Roman emperors, particularly Augustus in 1\(^{st}\) century BC, the emphasis on effective accountability to the people was replaced by the need for control by the first citizen (the emperor).

\(^5\) ‘Solon himself would seem to have given the people only the necessary minimum of power. He gave them simply the right of electing the magistrates and calling them to account’ Aristotle, *The Politics*, quoted in Bird (1973: 17). Solon was an Athenian statesman and lawmaker from 6\(^{th}\) century BC.
Dubnick (2002) locates the roots of the present day forms of accountability in the Norman conquest of Britain in the 11\textsuperscript{th} century. William I, having militarily conquered Britain in 1066, sought to consolidate his power through administrative means central to which was a survey of all property in his realm. This survey was included in the Domesday Books (Dubnick, 2002). The survey was carried out by the King's agents using centrally prescribed formats and units of measurement. In addition, in 1086 while the survey was being completed William I secured oaths of allegiance from ‘...all the people occupying land who were of any account over all England whosoever's vassals\textsuperscript{6} they might be ...’ (Douglas, 1964 quoted in Dubnick, 2002: 8).
This history leads Dubnick to conclude that these two acts – the survey and the oath of allegiance – ‘...was the first modern enactment of accountability as a foundation for governance’ (Dubnick, 2002: 8). However, Fukuyama (2011) initially portrays this period as more contradictory with forms of accountability including elements of both top-down and bottom-up relations, before concluding the same as Dubnick. Normanton (1966) argues that accountability was also prevalent from medieval times through to the emperors, monarchs and dictators of the Renaissance and Baroque age. Accountability in these state forms is hierarchical, secretive and constructed such that ‘The ruler must learn what his servants have been doing, so that he can promote or punish; private persons need know nothing of the secrets and the errors of administration ... Government is an authoritarian mystery.’ (Normaton, 1966: 3). Bird (1973) again shows how this form of holding officials to account operated through what was known as ‘judicial audits’. The focus here is on revenue raising rather than expenditure of public funds. Bird explains:

\textsuperscript{6} A person granted the use of land, in return for rendering homage, fealty, and usually military service or its equivalent to a lord or other superior; feudal tenant.
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The sheriff was ‘charged’ with the regular revenue levied on his county, plus any casual debts owed to the king in the country. He could earn his discharge by any combination of the following means: by paying in money, by producing a ‘tally’\(^7\) ..., by producing King’s writs directing him to make payments out of public funds he held or by producing acquittances under which the King had relieved a person of liability to all or selected taxes.

(Bird, 1973: 20-21)

Similar approaches to accountability existed in the relationship between feudal lords of the manor and their reeve, bailiff or other officers of the manor; and beyond in guilds, church organisations and towns (Bird, 1973). This form of accountability drives Dubnick (2002) to comment that in opposition to the ancient and modern conceptions of the people holding power to account, rulers in the Middle Ages were holding their people to account for taxes due.

Accountability – a history of contestation

The idea of an accountable government

At this point in the history of accountability, the main accounting texts jump forward several hundred years (Bird, 1973), or only start with the system of parliamentary accountability set-up under Gladstone in the 1860s (Normanton, 1971; 1980). For example Bird’s (1973) history diverts from medieval England to an outlining of merchant adventurers and the formation of registered companies before returning to consider parliamentary audit in the late nineteenth century. What is missing from these histories is the most important development in public accountability since the ancient Athenians, the struggle for accountable government through the extension of the popular franchise (Foot, 2005). According to the existing literature, as outlined

\(^7\) ‘... a notched stick acting as a receipt for payments on account made earlier...’ (Bird, 1973: 20).
above the idea of holding those in power to account, prevalent in ancient Athens, had been lost but was starting to be rediscovered by mid-way through 17\textsuperscript{th} century.

One historical episode that has produced significant contributions to the “history from below” is the English civil war and revolution. On several occasions from the collapse of the government after the Short Parliament in 1640 throughout the next two decades, there arose popular intervention in politics ‘... where the people, of their own accords, in a seeming tumultuous manner, do express their liking or dislike of matters in government ...’ (Manning, 1991; quoted in Manning, 1996: 28). One such expression occurred in the prelude to the civil war where the king (Charles I) sought to bolster his own position by raising an army to invade Scotland in 1640. This involved the need for extra taxation, but lacked popular support and was delayed by parliament, causing the king to dissolve it after just three weeks\(^8\). During the spring and summer months of 1640, the peers and gentry loyal to the king, under the advice and guidance of the earl of Strafford, raised an army and headed north only to be surprised by an invasion by the Scots in late August. The Scots went on to advance through a series of skirmishes to occupy Newcastle in the autumn. These events forced the king to recall parliament in November 1640 in an attempt to again finance the army and ill-fated war with the Scots. One of the first acts of the new parliament was to impeach Strafford for treason (Manning, 1996). However, this charge required a prosecution, where the House of Lords were to be the judges and was unlikely to be successful. In response the House of Commons issued a bill of attainder which meant that no trial was necessary, but required the consent of the Lords and the king for Strafford to be executed.

\(^8\) Hence the name the “Short Parliament” (Manning, 1996).
In May 1641 thousands blocked Westminster for two days calling for justice and the death of Strafford. It is likely that this helped to persuade the Lords and the king to consent to the bill of attainder.


On 12 May 1641 the earl of Strafford was held accountable in the ultimate manner (beheaded) for his previous actions. This is a brutal example of “reward or sanction” (liking or dislike) being exercised where the intervention of the people plays a crucial role.

Manning (1996) explores a range of these popular interventions through the course of the 1640s and 1650s including riots in London against the power of the bishops (1641), popular demonstrations in support of the Five Members of the Commons (1642) and the Clubmen rising against the civil war in 1645. The period after the surrender of the Royalists and the abolition of the Episcopacy in 1646, saw the development of an important accountability mechanism in the New Model Army. Having fought and won the war the soldiers in the New Model Army anticipated the ideals⁹ they had fought for would be implemented. Central to which was the relationship between the people, the parliament and the form of the state church. In addition, the soldiers also had concerns directly related to their own position including the receipt of pay arrears, forgiveness for actions taken during the war and the right not to be conscripted for future conflicts. While the soldiers were pressing parliament on these matters, parliament took the decision that divisions in the New Model Army would either be disbanded or sent to fight in Ireland. These actions were to spark a revolt among the ranks of the army with rank and file soldiers refusing to

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⁹ It should be noted that these ideals were not a single coherent and comprehensive set, as subsequent events showed there was a range of opinion across all parties on the parliamentarian side.
follow orders or being commanded by their own elected representatives, known as “agitators”. ‘Each troop ... each company ... chose representatives to a regimental committee, which in turn selected two of its number to speak for the whole regiment: they were called ‘agitators, which meant agents’ (Manning, 1996: 90). The agitators were subject to recall and replacement by other agents from the ranks of the soldiers (Hill, 1972). The form that this revolt took is an early example of rank and file movements that Hill (1972) states were not to reappear in a European army until the end of the World War I and the Russian revolution of 1917.

The English civil war and revolution did not just throw-up new mechanisms of democratic accountability. These actions were also the product and the stimulus of ideas about how society should be organised and governed. Following the revolt in the army that gave rise to the agitators, a fortnight long debate concerning the role of parliament, the King and universal suffrage was held (Foot, 2005; Manning, 1996). This event, in October and November 1647 became known as the Putney Debates. These debates were not about whether the king should be overthrown (although this was an outcome of the revolution), they were concerned with the functioning of parliament and whether the people (including the volunteers that made up the army) should comply with laws made by a body they had no control over. The kernel of the debates was put forward by colonel Rainsborough, a leader of the Levellers¹⁰:

For really I think that the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live, as the greatest he; and therefore truly, Sir, I think it’s clear, that every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government; and I do think that the poorest man in England is not at all bound in a strict sense to that government that he hath not had a voice to put himself under ...

¹⁰ A group or faction covering the rank and file soldiers and others who organised within the army and took part in the debates.
In practical terms, the Levellers advanced a series of demands the central one being that parliament had to be reformed to become more representative. The implications of this demand went far beyond the operations of parliament or even the extension of the vote and included free speech, the right to silence for prisoners, religious tolerance, fair taxation and reform of the hated tithes. These could all be achieved but only ‘... when the government of the country was truly representative ... was changed into a body in which everyone could feel confident and everyone could obey because everyone had taken part in voting for it’ (Foot, 2005: 9).

Rainsborough and the Levellers were not the only ones advocating an extension of the voting rights. To their left in the parliamentarian movement were Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers\textsuperscript{11}. In 1652 Winstanley published \textit{The Law of Freedom in a Platform}, with a plea to Oliver Cromwell\textsuperscript{12} to constitute the laws and rules within it. Winstanley starts by reminding Cromwell that even though he had state power in his own hands, he did not achieve that outcome by himself but thanks to actions of the oppressed commoners, before advancing the principle that must now follow:

\begin{quote}
That which is yet wanting on your part to be done is this, to see the oppressor’s power to be cast out with his person; and to see that the free possession of the land and liberties be put into the hands of the oppressed commoners of England.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
For the crown of honour cannot be yours, neither can those victories be called victories on your part, till the land and freedoms won be possessed by them who adventured person and purse for them.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11} Winstanley and his fellow political activists identified themselves as the True Levellers. It was their contemporaries that coined the term the Diggers to reflect their emphasis on land rights for commoners and an experimental commonwealth community during 1650.

\textsuperscript{12} Cromwell was at that time trying to galvanise the various factions in the Rump Parliament which had been in power since the execution of Charles I in 1649.
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(Winstanley, 1652).

*The Law of Freedom* concludes with a list of 62 laws that are needed to govern the new commonwealth of all England. These laws cover among other areas planting of the earth, treachery, foreign trade, coinage (which is to be banned domestically), buying and selling (also to be banned) and storehouses (which act as distribution centres for all produce and goods). Winstanley’s laws also contain conceptions of accountability to the people of those in power; for example, the call for annual parliaments (Hill, 1972), which was to also be the ultimate court, thus democratising the legal system. Officials of the parliament (overseers) were also to be chosen by the people annually, and:

> New overseers shall at their first entrance into their office look back upon the actions of the old overseers of the last year, to see if they have been faithful in their places, and consented to no breach of law, whereby kingly bondage should any ways be brought in.


Manning also notes that in the transitional period to this new commonwealth ‘... such officers might receive pay and maintenance allowances, in order to ensure that poor men served’ (Hill, 1972: 109). With this and the call for annual parliaments Winstanley is foreshadowing two of the demands of the Chartists’ movement two centuries later.

The English republic was short lived in the middle of 17th century and the monarchy was restored. Further, parliamentary reform was not to be raised as an issue of popular concern again until the end of the 18th century. However, the period covering the English civil war and revolution contained a range of radical ideas. These ideas sought to turn the world upside down (Hill, 1972), one strong element of which was to make those in power accountable to the people (the commoners). And importantly
it was through the actions of the people that the space and opportunity for such ideas to develop was generated in the first place.

**Accountability in 19th century Britain - the struggle for the vote**

Although, there were few popular campaigns for parliamentary reform during the 1700s there were significant developments in public accountability and accountable government. This century was dominated by a series of wars involving the major European powers as they competed for trade and territories. Britain emerged from this period as the dominant world power despite having a much smaller land mass and population than neighbouring France. John Brewer argues that this outcome was due in no small part to the British state’s more efficient ability to mobilise the financial resources available to it because:

> ...first, she was able to raise large sums of money without having to resort to the sale of offices; and secondly, the presence after 1688 of a standing House of Commons, eager to root out malfeasance and reluctant to disburse moneys without good reason, created a degree of public accountability that acted as a powerful constraint on administrative malpractice.  

(Brewer, 1989: 70).

By modern (and ancient) standards the House of Commons of 18th century could not convincingly be described as democratic, but the argument and evidence that Brewer develops again illustrates that the idea of accountability played an important role in the development of the British state, even if this was limited to the role and actions of the wealthy and propertied classes.

On the other hand, the nineteenth century saw a major extension of the right to vote and thereby the ability to hold the government of the day to account. However, this extension was driven not by enlightened leaders from the parliamentary parties but
by explosions of civil disobedience and campaigns organised by a growing movement of labour. The century was bookended by the Peterloo massacre in 1819 (McKeiver, 2009) and the New Unionism of the 1880s (Charlton, 1999; 2000). In between the rotten boroughs were abolished (Foot, 2006), municipal authorities established (Saville, 1987), two thirds of the male population had won the right to vote (Foot, 2006) and the conditions set for the establishing of the welfare reforms of 1906 (Charlton, 2000). These reforms and changes have both political and economic aspects to them that were often interlinked. For example, Saville (1987) illustrates how the Chartists movement of the 1830s and 1840s was able to gather other concerns under its leadership, such as the campaign for a ten-hour day. Yet Engels states, ‘this proposed law is the People’s Charter, which in form is purely political, and demands a democratic basis for the House of Commons’ (Engels, 1892: 228). While the economic and political motivations over-lapped the demands of the People’s Charter reflect the idea of accountability especially with the call for annual parliaments (the only one of the Charter’s six points where there has been no significant progress to date). These ideas will be explored below by looking briefly at three episodes during 19th century – the Peterloo massacre, the Chartists movement and the period Foot (2005) has described as the “leap in the dark”, covering the 1867 Reform Act.

The Peterloo Massacre

Around the time that Hoskins identifies accountability the word first appearing in English language dictionaries, the late eighteenth century also saw a revival of the ideas of extending suffrage and parliamentary reform, in Britain. Since the restoration of the monarchy following the English revolution, from the perspective of the majority in society, little had changed with regard to how the British parliament
and government was organised; McKeiver (2009) goes so far as to say that the parliament at the start of the 19th century was operating in the same manner as in the Middle Ages. This includes features such as rotten boroughs\(^{13}\) and large swathes of the population having no parliamentary representation:

By 1819 Manchester has grown into England’s second largest city, and the world’s first industrial city. Its status remained that of a medieval market town owned by the Mosley family. It had no Member for Parliament, and magistrates from the Counties Palatine of Lancaster and Chester were empowered to take control in times of unrest.

(Marlow, 1969 quoted in McKeiver, 2009: 16)

Over the previous two decades leading to the Peterloo massacre in 1819, Manchester as a city had grown exponentially becoming a world centre of the burgeoning cotton industry. While the industrial wage levels compared favourably to those in agriculture, the levels of poverty, exploitation and living conditions for the urban working poor were appalling. Added to this with the defeat of Napoleon at the battle of Waterloo in 1815, the British economy entered a period of economic crisis. Further the British military started to shrink, resulting in increasing numbers of soldiers returning to their communities and looking for work. In addition, the events of the French revolution of 1789 and the publication of Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man* were still reverberating through this period and would provide the inspiration for a re-ignition of the reform question from the 1790s onwards. This first occurred in Manchester in October 1790, when Thomas Walker a Unitarian manufacturer set up the Manchester Constitutional Society. ‘In May 1792, the Constitutional Society issued a declaration that Members of Parliament should owe their seats to the *free suffrage* of the people’ (McKeiver, 2009: 22 – emphasis in the original). The

\(^{13}\) Rotten boroughs would elect an MP to the House of Commons on a very small electorate in some cases of less than 100 hundred voters. A swathe of these boroughs were disenfranchised following the 1832 Reform Act.
Society’s activities did have support from around the Manchester area but was relatively easily suppressed by the state authorities in 1795. However, the ideas of parliamentary reform and an extension of suffrage were more difficult to control. In 1812 the first Hampden Club was formed in London by Major John Cartwright and the leader of the Radicals in the House of Commons, Sir Francis Burdett. Major Cartwright took to touring the country, with the aim of uniting middle-class moderates with working class radicals in pursuit of reform of the House Commons. These Hampden Clubs were replaced by Union Societies (McKeiver, 2009) and widened their demands to again inter-link the political and economic such that ‘... the working-classes in the towns were demanding a reform of Parliament universal male suffrage, lower taxation, and relief from their poverty’ (McKeiver, 2009: 32).

In these political and economic conditions, the Radical Reform movement took hold in Lancashire having been initiated by Henry Hunt ‘... to put pressure on the central government for constitutional reform, to include universal manhood suffrage\(^{14}\) annual parliaments and the ballot for all’ (Belchem, 1989: 9). Throughout 1816 and 1817 there were meetings of the Radical Reform movement including 5,000 people assembled in St Peter’s Field, Manchester on 4\(^{th}\) November, 1816. The agitation reached a pitch in the summer of 1819 with large demonstrations in Manchester in June, and in London, Leeds and Birmingham in July. All these events led to a huge demonstration again planned for St Peter’s Field in August 1819. McKiever summarises the events that became known as the Peterloo Massacre:

\[
... on 16\(^{th}\) August 1819, a massive crowd had gathered in St Peter's Field peacefully and carrying no weapons to put pressure on the government to bring about parliamentary reform. Yet in spite of these factors and on the orders of the Select Committee of Magistrates were
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\(^{14}\) Something Cartwright had abandoned under pressure from Burdett,
attacked by soldiers with sabres and bayonets, and by police with truncheons and staves. The outcome was at least 654 casualties, eighteen of whom died of their injuries. (McKiever, 2009: 106).

For the purpose of this paper these events are recalled, firstly to illustrate that at the same time that Hoskin notes accountability was developing in the world of pedagogy, the idea of another form of accountability was widespread among all sections of society (whether they were in favour or against this “awful idea”). Secondly, Peterloo and subsequent campaigns show that the reforms were not handed down by a group of benevolent, forward-looking or enlightened leaders in the parliament. Instead it was pressure from below, from working people in campaigns that was eventually to force enough pressure onto the Westminster government and result in the extension of the franchise. In this way, as noted previously, accountability is contested; in this case between those campaigning for an extension of the vote and those opposed to such reforms.

The Chartist Movement

Following the Peterloo massacre the reform movement and the call for an accountable parliament subsided during the 1820s. However, the 1832 Reform Act gave Manchester two Members of Parliament with municipal borough status following in 1837. Although the movement for reform may have been quiet the ideas of suffrage and parliamentary reform were to return, again taking inspiration from events in France in 1830, and this time accountability was to be overtly stated in the six-point People’s Charter of 1838. In 1837 a committee including MPs and representatives of the London Working Men’s Association was set-up to look at the
question of electoral reform. The following year, the committee produced The People’s Charter containing six points:

1. **A vote** for every man twenty one years of age, of sound mind, and not undergoing punishment for crime.

2. **The Ballot**, — To protect the elector in the exercise of his vote.

3. **No property qualification** for members of Parliament—thus enabling the constituencies to return the man of their choice, be he rich or poor.

4. **Payment of Members**, thus enabling an honest tradesman, working man, or other person, to serve a constituency, when taken from his business to attend to the interests of the country.

5. **Equal Constituencies** securing the same amount of representation for the same number of electors,—instead of allowing small constituencies to swamp the votes of larger ones.

6. **Annual Parliaments**, thus presenting the most effectual check to bribery and intimidation, since though a constituency might be bought once in seven years (even with the ballot), no purse could buy a constituency (under a system of universal suffrage) in each ensuing twelve month; and since members, when elected for a year only, would not be able to defy and betray their constituents as now.

While all six points of the Charter are clearly focused on extending the franchise in favour of the poor and working classes, the point that stands out most for this analysis is the last one, the call for annual parliaments. In particular the final clause, illustrates the idea of accountability being applied to the running of the parliament. Here the notion of control is to the fore, that the electorate be able to change their representative (in a similar manner to the Agitators), to mete out reward or sanction (Gray and Jenkins, 1993). Thereby, not just receiving an account from their elected

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representatives but, actually holding them to account for the promises made before any election and the subsequent actions taken after being elected.

Over the next decade the Chartist movement would gather huge support and rise to challenge the very existence of the British capitalist state on more than one occasion (Saville, 1994). In May 1839 the first Chartists petition containing over 1.2 million signatures was presented to parliament. Later that year the Newport Uprising ended with soldiers firing on the Chartist protesters, killing twenty. The leaders of the uprising were tried and sentenced to be hanged; however, following numerous protests the government changed the sentences to transportation to Australia. In 1842 the second petition with more than 3.2 million signatures was presented to parliament. The Charter was again rejected. Later that summer a general strike covering large areas of the north of England and Scotland broke-out; initially, caused by economic concerns, the strikers quickly generalised and adopted the demands of the Charter. The strike ended with leaders being arrested and sentenced to transportation. Finally, in 1848 following the outbreak of revolution in Paris, a third Chartist petition was presented to parliament. The Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor claimed over 5.6 million signatures but MPs claimed only 1.7 million, with many forgeries. In support of the third petition, a rally was organised on 10th April at Kennington Common, London which ended with a violent confrontation between protesters and state authorities. Although the rally drew tens of thousands, this was below the expected hundreds of thousands and emboldened the authorities to suppress the movement and carry out mass arrests including leaders such as Ernest Jones (imprisoned for 2 years) and William Cuffay (transported to Tasmania).

*The Leap in the Dark*
The next decade and a half saw the Tory and Whig parties bring forth parliamentary bills seeking reforms, usually on a finely balanced basis of a slight extension of the franchise on one hand but a bolstering of those with wealth and property by the use of multiple votes for an individual\textsuperscript{16}, on the other hand. Throughout this period the bills did not become law, falling at some stage in committee or being ruled out of time. It was however mass agitation, again sparked by international events [this time the proposal by the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, to intervene militarily on the side of the Southern states in the American civil war (Foot, 2005)], that was to eventually break the will of the propertied classes in parliament and force through the enfranchisement of two thirds of the male population in the 1867 Reform Act. A radical reform movement was born in March 1863, organising meetings around the country including in St James’ Hall the largest indoor meeting space in London. The movement though did not reach the same levels of intensity as the Chartists, in part due to a reform bill proceeding through the parliamentary stages. This allowed the Liberal middle-class elements of the campaign to call for patience as their bill progressed. However, as with all the previous reforms bills of this period, on \textsuperscript{18}th June 1866 the bill fell with the government losing a vote to extend its passage. At this point, working people frustrated that yet another act of reform had been stymied, flooded to support the reform movement. Throughout 1865 and 1866 there were protest meetings, rallies and demonstration across the country. However, it was the events of July 1866 surrounding a national demonstration in Hyde Park in London that were to prove a crucial turning point. The Tory government feared another confrontation along the lines of the Chartist rally in Kennington Common nearly twenty years earlier. The Home Secretary, Walpole, banned the use of the park for

\textsuperscript{16} These were known as “franchise fancies” (Foot, 2005).
such political purposes. In response the Reform League made a tactical decision to have a number of feeder processions coming together at Marble Arch, at which they would seek access to the park and if refused would march to Trafalgar Square instead. However, on the day (22\textsuperscript{nd} July) the turnout exceeded even the most optimistic estimates. As expected the leaders were refused access to Hyde Park and led the march down to Trafalgar Square. However, a significant number of protesters remained at Marble Arch and attempted to gain access to the park fighting with the police. This clash turned into a three day long battle.

The autumn months also saw huge protests across Britain, with 300,000 protesting in Manchester and 250,000 in Birmingham. The mismanagement of the Hyde Park protest eventually led to the resignation of the Home Secretary and set the context in which the Tory Prime Minister, Disraeli, accepted a small amendment to the 1867 Reform Bill that in effect quadrupled the number of enfranchised workers (Foot, 2005). The events of this period saw the radical reform movement suddenly gather major support at a time when there was a general disengagement among working people on both political and economic conditions. It is for these reasons that Foot has labelled the period “the Leap in the Dark” (Foot, 2005).

By the end of the Leap in the Dark period in the early 1880s two-thirds of adult males could vote; further reform bills in the 1870s would seek to equalise the constituency sizes (another key Chartist demand). This still left two-thirds of the population (including all women) without the vote (Foot, 2005). Thus the struggle for the vote was far from complete. The subsequent decades saw agitation around female suffrage continue and increase, as did working class struggles in the form of the New Unionism (Charlton, 1999; see also chapter 3 of Gallhofer and Haslam, 2003). The
New Unionism set the backdrop to the first moves towards a welfare state with the reforms introduced by the 1906 Liberal government (Charlton, 2000), even if these reforms were ‘... a series of gestures aimed largely at reshaping the working class to the perceived requirements of the capitalist economy’ (Charlton, 2000: 69). These struggles went on to result in universal suffrage being achieved by the second decade of the new century and a new arena for accountability to be contested in – local government, with the high profile case of Labour councillors’ revolt in the London borough of Poplar (Branson, 1979). It is interesting to note that by the early 1970s (in the pre-neoliberal era in Britain) policymakers, academics and practitioners were discussing (Pifer, 1971; Smith and Hague, 1971) the accountability relations in the public services and government that they had inherited from the Gladstonian conceptions of post facto financial accountability developed in the 1860s (Johnson, 1971; Normanton, 1980).

In summary, the historical episodes explored above, from the English revolution through to the 1867 Reform Act illustrate the two central points of this paper. First is the relevance of studying the action of working people as agents of social change. It was the actions of the 97 per cent (Manning, 1996) that created the context and applied the pressure on the remaining three per cent in power that forced the advances in the franchise and accountable governments. Second, the idea of accountability has deeper roots than the etymology of the word accountability; whether this is the idea of holding those in power to account, or those in power holding the people to account. The modern conception of holding those in power to account has roots that go back to Athenian democracy, but the intervening history shows that accountability relations are context specific and dynamic. The neoliberal age has seen a reform process attempting (and in large part succeeding) in
undermining the democratic and bureaucratic accountability relations put in place as part of the post-war consensus (Law, 1999; Pollitt, 2003). This process is not complete nor, as Laughlin (1996) identified, is it uncontested. The discussion below takes this as a starting point.

**Discussion**

The foregoing history of accountability (the idea of it and the struggle for its democratic form) illustrates the limited focus of Hoskin’s formulation that accountability only appeared circa 1800 (Hoskin, 1996). Although the dictionary appearance of the word accountability may stem from the late eighteenth, early nineteenth centuries, the idea of accountability has a history stretching back to ancient civilisations and includes the Norman occupation of England in the Middle Ages. The critique of Hoskin’s work in this paper is not that the impacts of practices at West Point and Glasgow University have no relationship to the development of accountability, but that it is a one-sided and limited view of the concept, and may only be a small contributory factor. As was shown above, from the 1790s onwards there was a renewal of the parliamentary reform question (i.e. suffrage) with the founding of the Constitutional Societies (1790-1792), Hampden Clubs (1812) and subsequent Union Societies (1818), the Radical Reform movement (1816) and the Luddite rebellion which once suppressed saw activists ‘...embrace popular radicalism as a way of looking for democratic control of the state and the economy ...’ (McKeiver, 2009: 26). It is highly unlikely that Smith was unaware of these events, or indeed of the arguments made during the Putney Debates a hundred and fifty years earlier.

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17 This position is contestable see for example Dubnick and Justice (2004) and Normanton (1971).
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The omission of the broader history of accountability in Hoskin and others’ formulations lie in the methodological approach they adopt; for example, following Adam Smith’s work, with the emphasis on the separation of the economic and political. This is a central strategic element of bourgeois rule that was extended and consolidated in the form of the capitalist state, throughout the 18th and 19th centuries (Saville, 1987; 1994). This is where the use of the historical materialist method (Perry, 2002) and Bhaskar’s (1989) model of social activity, enables an analysis that sees accountability not just as an awful idea but an arena of contestation, of competing social classes. Hoskin and others see accountability as management holding workers to account, disciplining the workforce and increasing efficiency; this can be described as accountability to the principal. Broadbent et al. (1996) and Laughlin (1996) critique this formulation, by recognising the inherent limitations and potential conflicts within the PA inspired accountability relations. Laughlin (1996) concludes there is the potential for the agent in caring professions to rebel against the imposition of neoliberal/managerial accountability.

This paper seeks to develop that idea further by illustrating how working people have fought for a different, democratic form of accountability. Thus, the English Revolution and Putney Debates, the period surrounding the Peterloo Massacre, the Chartist Movement and the Leap in the Dark in the latter half of 19th century all illustrate this other accountability – an accountability from below. These episodes also illustrate the manner in which the economic and political combine, with the aim of controlling the state so that this would lead to a change in the economic fortunes of the urban and rural working class and poor.
The foregoing has implications for accountability research today. The first point to make is that the battle for the vote that continued throughout the 1800s and the early part of the twentieth century has set the scene for concepts of accountability up to the present. This is reflected in the literature on accountability and new public management (Laughlin, 1996; Law, 1999; Pollitt, 2003) and in alternative conceptions of accountability (Kamuf, 2007) and critical public accountability (Smyth, 2012). The recent history of accountability has seen the post-war settlement of democratic and bureaucratic forms under attack and being replaced with market and managerial based forms (Law, 1999; Pollitt, 2003). Until recent years it has appeared that there was no alternative to the imposition neoliberal reforms. In these circumstances it is easy to forget that accountability is a two-way relationship; with accountability relations prevalent at any one point in time being the outcome of an on-going process of contestation.

Unfortunately much of the critical accounting literature on accountability appears to have forgotten the process of contestation; and as outlined earlier, draw depressing conclusions (Kamuf, 2007; Ranson, 2003) when analysing the dynamic of neoliberal accountability and the prospects for renewing democratic accountability. These depressing conclusions occur when our understanding of accountability is historicised from present practice. Further, if we do not identify, document and analyse existing episodes of accountability (Kamuf, 2007) the best future the accountability literature can present is a reproduction of the immediate past combined with the latest “McKinsey/managerial/hierarchical” (Cooper and Johnston, 2012: 609) accountability forms. The historical examples explored above were in part chosen to act as an antidote to despondency and in the hope they will inspire further
research into how the actions of working people can change societal accountability relations.

**Conclusion**

The above history and discussion are advanced not as a mutually exclusive alternative to Hoskins’s work, but as a complementary extension of the idea of accountability. In part an elaboration of the history of accountability already developed by those working within a political science paradigm; to this is added an illustration that since the time of the Putney Debates during the English revolution the idea of accountability is a contested one, and further that the contestation (and any related advances in the idea of an “accountable government”) has been driven by campaigns and movements from those at the bottom of society and the “middling sort” (Manning, 1996). As discussed above this point has further relevance today, in the manner in which we formulate our understanding of accountability.

In addition, there are gaps in this history and our current knowledge on the topic needs further refining. For example, Dubnick (2002) portrays the period of the Middle Ages and the Norman conquest of England as having a form of accountability of the people to the monarch (a top-down accountability); yet Fukuyama (2011) has a more subtle and complex view of this period. There is also a need to find clearer links (if they exist) between the ideas of accountability prevalent in ancient Athens and the formulations advanced during the Putney Debates in the English civil war. Here there is a need to explore and uncover the moral and religious history of the accountability. It was after all a Baptist minister that gave us the “awful idea of accountability”. It may also be that it is was the religious orders who acted as a the repositories of knowledge from the ancient world, that was then to surface as part of the milieu of
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ideas informing the English civil war and revolution. Further, although only noted above the development of accountability in the British state during the century of war in the 1700s is an element for future research.

The final point is to address a question raised by Ranson (2003). In his analysis of the changes in governance of schools and given the apparent iron-grip of neoliberal forms of accountability, where is the renewal of democratic accountability to come from? Ranson’s own answer goes part of the way by recognising that there are spaces (such as local education authorities, school governors’ boards) still available where a duality exists of both control by the national (neoliberal) state and also a democratic expression of the local community. Thus,

whatever the present duality of tension embodied in these spaces of governance, they are, nevertheless, constituted enough as local arenas of citizenship to enable local communities to appropriate and develop them as democratic spheres.

(Ranson, 2003: 476)

The arguments in this paper recognise Ranson’s position as a starting point but illustrate the need to go much further. It is not enough to only identify structural spaces or the theoretical “alternative rights” of the agent to rebel (Laughlin, 1996); there is also a need to study the occasions when the agents (the 97 per cent) engage with and ultimately transcend the existing social structures. This is where an appreciation of the history of accountability as a contested concept is relevant. Moreover, it is the often omitted accountability from below in the form of the Levellers, Diggers, Reform Unions, Chartists and others that are key to this process and to any future renewal of democratic accountability.

Acknowledgement:
“Rediscovering democratic accountability: the history of an awful idea”

The author thanks Denis Smyth, Melvin Dubnick and Margaret O’hOgartaigh for their comments and insights on earlier versions of this paper. Also, thanks goes to my colleagues Norma Menabney and Diarmuid Kennedy from the McClay Library at Queen’s University, Belfast for tracking down the original context of the “awful idea of accountability” quote. Any errors remain the sole responsibility of the author.
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