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Chapter 14

Radical Popular Attitudes to the Monarchy in Britain during the French Revolution

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In September 1794 two members of the radical London Corresponding Society (LCS) were arrested for plotting to assassinate George III with a poisoned arrow from an air-gun disguised as a walking stick. Much was made of this so-called ‘Pop-Gun Plot’ in the loyalist press, but confusion ensued as to the truth of the allegations and the intentions of the alleged perpetrators, two artisans – Peter Lemaitre and George Higgins. Had they ‘imagined the king’s death’ and thus committed treason, or did no such conspiracy exist?1 The evidence was unclear and confused and the truth of the event obscured by the murky manoeuvrings of the government, in the famous Treason Trials of 1794.2 This episode and the context of loyalist and government fear and paranoia within which it may be set illustrate the difficulties for both contemporaries and historians in establishing popular attitudes to the monarchy during the turmoil of the French Revolution. It is also not easy to gain a sense of the people, from what appears to be ‘a multitude of individuals with a multitude of experiences’ and political views.3 That 1790s radicalism was a diverse movement with a fragmented ideology has been argued by John Dinwiddy, Mark Philp and others. Neither radicals nor loyalists adhered to clear and consistent ideologies.4 Radicalism reflected a variety of views about what was wrong with the

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British state and what should be done about it. Moreover, anti-monarchist sentiment may or may not have reflected a desire for regicide and the establishment of a republic. Indeed, radicals who called for reform of government may still have remained loyal to the monarch, or at least indifferent.

Nevertheless, during the 1790s and into the nineteenth century monarchy was to varying degrees a focus of radical attention both in popular writing and actions and also within the pamphlets of radical political thinkers. Historians have primarily argued that radicals portrayed two positions: republicanism and constitutionalism. This chapter first explores the republicanism which invited revolution, anti-monarchist rhetoric and, possibly, regicide – a strand of republican thinking particularly common in popular radicalism. The second focus is a universalism evolving from the French Revolution and promoting universal rights and freedoms for all mankind, and a ‘world of revolutions’. Finally, radical constitutionalism is explored, that formulated proposals for practical reform within which monarchy was less prominent than in the republican agitation. Also apparent here were certain forms of ‘constitutionalist action’ that were familiar to the people and attracted popular support.

It is the contention of this chapter that while some radicals explored and promoted the possibilities of republicanism and universalism, the majority of reform proposals for Britain focused increasingly on the existing constitution. This constitutionalism ensured that reform remained within the framework of the existing mixed constitution of which the monarchy was an essential component. Corruption in government, the domination of government by an elite ‘aristocracy’ as Thomas Paine labelled it, that was seen as

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5 Radicalism as used here incorporates all those promoting revolution or reform of government. And loyalism refers to those who supported the political status quo and Britain against France, often declaring themselves for ‘church and king’ or ‘king and constitution’.


7 Epstein, Radical Expression, p. 11.
 retaining rights and riches for the few, meant that ‘aristocracy’ remained at the forefront of radical criticism rather than monarchy. Thus, within radical constitutionalism and related popular action continuities may be identified in radical attitudes to monarchy.

I

Turning first to relevant contextual debates, historians have emphasized that despite the limitations placed on the monarchy at the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689 and the Act of Succession (1701) the Hanoverian monarchs still retained considerable power. Of course it was not always expedient to use such power; nor did it ensure popular respect or support. The continuing popular acceptance of monarchy through the turbulent years of the later eighteenth century was by no means guaranteed. Indeed, there has been much debate about attitudes to monarchy and how far the survival through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth was due to the skills and hard work of the monarch, an ‘invented tradition’, a mythologizing of monarchy or to the ‘institutional conservatism’ of the English people. Hannah Smith noted a sustained loyalism and a hitherto ‘unrealized degree of popularity’ for George I and II. Linda Colley and Marilyn

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8 See Amanda Goodrich, *Debating England’s Aristocracy in the 1790s: Pamphlets, Polemics and Political Ideas* (Woodbridge, 2005).


Morris both identified something of an apotheosis of George III during the later years of the eighteenth
century; describing a dramatic rise in the popularity of the king.\textsuperscript{13}

For Colley this apotheosis was about promoting a favourable nationalistic royal image rather than
a resurgence of royal power in political terms. Indeed, she argued that after the American War the political
influence of the king declined considerably and the elite rather than the king were held responsible for the
loss of the American colonies.\textsuperscript{14} Peter Jupp has also noted a significant shift in power away from monarchy
and towards government from the 1780s due to the growth in the administration and increasing
independence of ministers.\textsuperscript{15} And, John Cannon argued that George III survived the upheaval of the French
Revolution and gained the support of the majority by reinventing himself as the ‘bastion of conservative
patriotism’, a ‘patriot king’ above party and ‘father to his people’.\textsuperscript{16} Morris noted that the British monarchy
was a ‘focal point in political argument’ in the 1790s, and came under intense ‘vulgar scrutiny’ by radicals
such as Paine. Yet, this did not have a detrimental effect in the long run but served to ‘humanize’ the
monarchy and to pave the way for the newly important role it came to play as head of the social hierarchy.\textsuperscript{17}
Certainly, later in his reign George III was lampooned for his parsimony, domesticity and interest in farming
rather than his involvement in politics.\textsuperscript{18} Such interpretations provide useful insights into reasons for the
survival of the institution of monarchy through the turbulent Georgian period, and beyond.

\textsuperscript{13} Colley, \textit{Britons}, ch. 5; ead., ‘The Apotheosis of George III: Loyalty, Royalty and the British Nation 1760–1820’, \textit{Past and
Present}, 102 (1984), pp. 94–129; Morris, \textit{British Monarchy}. But, as Colley in particular related, some considerable effort to
promote the king, by the establishment and the authorities, was needed to achieve this.

\textsuperscript{14} Colley, \textit{Britons}, pp. 212, 148.


pp. 149–50.

\textsuperscript{17} Morris, \textit{British Monarchy}, pp. 11–12.

II

It was a radical focus on republicanism that brought monarchy into the forefront of debate. The declaration of France as a republic in 1792 and the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793 clearly influenced radical thinkers in Britain. In 1790s popular radical ideology a republic was a form of government without a monarch, and republicanism was ‘straightforwardly anti-monarchical’.19 Epstein noted ‘an angry raw republicanism’ in the streets and taverns of Britain during 1793–1795;20 and Iain McCalman identified a small group of ‘ultra-radicals’, forming a ‘revolutionary-republican underground’ movement from the mid 1790s to early Chartism that condemned monarchy ‘loudly and lewdly’.21 A profusion of printed material from pamphlets to broadsides, handbills, squibs, songs and prints that aimed to attract popular attention provides plenty of examples. Many promoted regicide, such as Richard ‘Citizen’ Lee’s pamphlets *The Happy Reign of George the Last* and *King Killing* (both 1795), and his poem *A Cure for National Grievances. Citizen Guillotine, A New Shaving Machine*. In *King Killing* Lee declared that ‘tyrants … are all alike; their fraternity consists in a partnership of prey and rapine … united, to torment and destroy mankind’. He called on the people to ‘destroy this huge Colussus’ of monarchy.22 A Norwich pamphleteer declared in 1795: ‘Off with the King’s head! And a REPUBLIC in Great Britain!’23 Daniel Eaton’s *Hog’s Wash, Pig’s Meat* and *Politics for the People: or, a Salmagundi for Swine* (1794) provided many examples of anti-monarchist sentiment, such as ‘The Land of the Apes – A Fable’ which included much criticism of the king of the apes and his corrupt and dissipated court.24 One famous squib that was read out at Thomas Hardy’s trial for treason in 1794 advertised: ‘At the Federation Theatre in Equality

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23 Ibid., p. 96.

Square … a new and entertaining farce La Guillotine! Or George’s Head in the Basket! … The whole to conclude with a grand decapitation of placemen, pensioners and German leeches.’

Much theatricality can be detected in such writings and in the radical toasts reportedly made, damning the king in taverns and alehouses. The well-known orator John Thelwall allegedly ‘blew the head off his pot of porter and declared, “Thus I would serve all Kings”’. One John Nuttal toasted: ‘Here’s Damnation to the King and the Constitution.’ Edward Swift declared: ‘Damn the King and Queen, they ought to be put to death the same as the King and Queen of France … Damn and bugger the King … Damnation and blast the king, I would as soon shoot the king as a mad dog.’ As John Barrell has pointed out, however, it is uncertain how many of such verbal outbursts were accurately reported or fabricated by witnesses or spies in the frenzy of loyalist alarmism about radicalism and treason. The British Club of radicals in Paris at a dinner in November 1792 to celebrate the Revolution made thirteen toasts, including those for the French Republic founded on the rights of man and for a union of France, Britain and many other nations sharing the same revolutionary sentiments. Albert Goodwin described the toasts drunk at the dinner as ‘chivalrous, egalitarian and treasonable’. Such republican enthusiasm can also be identified later in 1797–1798 among those hoping for a French invasion and a revolution in Britain. The revolutionary radicals of the United Englishmen and United Scotsmen began underground meetings in 1797 and were in

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26 Morris, British Monarchy, p. 93.

27 Epstein, Radical Expression, pp. 8–9. See also Barrell, Imagining the King’s Death, p. 102.


29 Barrell, Imagining the King’s Death, pp. 102–3.


contact with the United Irishmen who were plotting the 1798 insurrection.\textsuperscript{32} One contemporary print states that it is ‘[i]ntended to convey the Army of England from the Gallic Shore, for the purpose of exchanging French Liberty! For English happiness!’ and claims to be ‘[a]ccurately copied from a plan presented to the Executive Directory’ in France.\textsuperscript{33} Radical action such as the Pop-Gun Plot, attacks on the king’s coach in 1795 and 1817 and Colonel Despard’s conspiracy to blow up the king in 1802 drew alarmist loyalist reaction. Evidence at the Treason Trials of radical societies, particularly in Sheffield and Manchester, arming to march on London to incite an uprising, also suggested a consistent and widespread republicanism.\textsuperscript{34} It was alleged that pikes, as used in France, were being manufactured in Sheffield and sold for 10d a piece, although this was never proven.\textsuperscript{35} Nevertheless, no concerted and sustained radical physical resistance to the monarch was actually carried out, despite the rumours, threats and rhetoric.\textsuperscript{36}

Such popular republicanism did not for the most part reflect on the complexities of political analysis based on concepts of classical republicanism that had a long tradition in eighteenth-century political thought.\textsuperscript{37} A few radical pamphleteers did engage with such issues, Thomas Spence providing one example. In his periodical, \textit{One Pennyworth of Pig’s Meat} (1793), Spence discussed the history of republicanism from the classical world, French and American concepts of republicanism and advocated for Britain, along

\begin{footnotes}
\item[33] [Citizen Monge], \textit{The Grand Republican Balloon} (1798), at http://www.britishmuseum.org.
\item[34] For evidence from the treason trials see e.g. the trials of Thomas Hardy and Henry Redhead Yorke in Thomas Bayly Howell and Thomas Jones Howell, eds, \textit{A Complete Collection of State Trials and Proceedings for High Treason}, 34 vols (London, 1816–1828), XXIV and XXV.
\item[36] Poole, \textit{Politics of Regicide}, p. 15.
\item[37] See Philp, ‘English Republicanism’, p. 240.
\end{footnotes}
with agrarian reform, a ‘beautiful and powerful New Republic’ with a national assembly.38 Yet, J.G.A. Pocock and others have questioned the extent to which significant numbers of radicals in the debate on the French Revolution in Britain can be identified as truly republican.39

Certainly radicals expressed admiration for the American and French systems, but concrete plans for a republic in Britain were notably absent from radical writings.40 Even Paine did not provide such a blueprint in Rights of Man (1791–1792), despite his later claim that ‘I have always considered the present Constitution of the French Republic the best organized system … yet produced.’41 A broad and often vague set of ideas were proposed to follow the advocated abolition of the monarchy and government, including some form of direct democracy, agrarian collective or new anarchic society.42

III

38 Thomas Spence, One Pennyworth of Pig’s Meat; Or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude, 3 vols (London, 1793), I.


Moreover, in the writings of radical thinkers such republicanism is less common than a strong universalism that celebrated revolution and republicanism generally but not directly for Britain.\(^{43}\) This more subtle ideology also often implied rather than expressed republican ideas within a dramatic rhetoric. In the early stages of the French Revolution, in particular, a number of English radicals followed Paine and adopted much of the new universalist vocabulary of France, promoting universal rights of man, freedom from despotism and tyrannical oppression, and focusing on all people in Europe or the world as a whole.\(^{44}\) One pamphleteer, ‘Citizen Randol’, celebrated the French for waving ‘the celestial banners of the rights of man, over the tottering bastiles of Europe; to break the shackles of despotism from the ankles of millions, and destroy those yokes of oppression, vainly reserved by the impious ministers of misguided monarchs’.\(^{45}\) The LCS’s joint Address to the French National Convention of September 1792 reflected such universalism\(^{46}\) and the Address of the Derby Society for Constitutional Information expressed aims of ‘universal liberty’ and declared: ‘By the fall of Despotism, you have reared the drooping head of suffering nations; and given to Tyrants an awful example.’ The ‘gallant … French citizens … contended not for France alone but the whole human race.’\(^{47}\) And Thomas Cooper condemned all hereditary rule, including ‘hereditary Monarchy’, claiming that ‘TYRANNY IS THE SURE OFFSPRING OF HEREDITARY OFFICE’.\(^{48}\) Central here was the concept of tyranny and despotism, associated particularly with absolute rulers, and

\(^{44}\) See Epstein, Radical Expression, p. 9. \\
\(^{45}\) [Citizen Randol, of Ostend], A Political Catechism of Man (London, 1795), p. 8. \\
\(^{46}\) London Corresponding Society, ‘Joint Address’ (1792), in Goodwin, Friends of Liberty, p. 503. This was a joint address of the London Corresponding Society, Manchester Constitutional Society, Manchester Reformation Society, Norwich Revolution Society and others. \\
\(^{48}\) Thomas Cooper, A Reply to Mr. Burke’s Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt (London, 1792), p. 17.
much of this rhetoric was focused on France or the wider world and represented a cosmopolitan idealism. Indeed, in the mid 1790s, John Thelwall called on radicals to be ‘citizens of the world!’ for ‘[t]he happiness of the human species is the only object virtue has in contemplation’.49

. Some pamphleteers clumped together a collection of ‘hereditary rulers’ for their condemnation. Eaton’s Politics for the People, for example, accused ‘Kings, Princes, Courtiers and Pharisaical Priests’ of corruption.50 And an anonymous pamphleteer condemned ‘HEREDITARY KINGS AND GOVERNORS’.51 But, as I have argued elsewhere, within the texts of the French Revolution debate in England anti-aristocratic rhetoric became dominant.52 Paine started this trend in Rights of Man by declaring that in England the House of Lords was ‘beyond the control of the nation’; it was an ‘aristocracy’ more powerful than that in France before the Revolution. This aristocracy was at the root of corruption and all that was wrong with the English government.53 He also identified aristocracy as a class or caste unacceptable for its hereditary nature, excessive wealth and social privileges.54 Until this moment the term ‘aristocracy’ had in Britain retained a largely neutral meaning within political philosophy, reflecting ancient Greek, of ‘government by the few’.55 Paine had taken the term and imbued it with broader negative meaning and brought it into common usage. ‘Aristocracy’ then became a term of abuse and a highly charged rhetorical device in radical literature and popular language. According to radicals, ‘aristocracy’ plundered the wealth of the nation and was keeping ordinary people from their rights, their share in the democracy.


50 Eaton, Politics for the People, I, p. 3.


54 Goodrich, Debating England’s Aristocracy, pp. 61–2.

The term also conflated a hereditary class with government as a whole. As radicalism increasingly focused on economic inequalities, particularly after the outbreak of war with France in 1792, it was an all-embracing ‘aristocracy’ that prevented greater political, economic and social equality in Britain. Of course, accusations of corruption against the crown and government were common during much of the eighteenth century, but in the 1790s, and thereafter until at least the demise of Chartism, a class of ‘aristocracy’, rather more than monarchy became the focus of broad radical condemnation.

IV

A further strand in radical discourse identified constitutional reform as the solution to Britain’s political ills. Here radicals claimed the historically universally revered central feature of the English government system, much defended by loyalists, and made it their own. They advocated reform of the constitution generally in terms of an end to corruption in parliament, annual parliaments, universal male suffrage and a fairer representation. Such proposals for reform within the established constitutional structure and law were often the only concrete plans to be found in radical writings. Moderate radicals, such as Major Cartwright, had consistently proposed constitutional reform, in his case since 1776; and in 1795 he claimed that ‘to restore the constitution at home’ was the only way to ‘contend with republican France’. Many called for the restoration of a true balanced English constitution, as one pamphlet stated: ‘not a breach, but a renovation of our constitution’. Most notably such reform proposals rarely focused on monarchy but on ‘aristocracy’. Morris has noted that Pitt and his ministers came under greater attack than George III, as


57 See Goodrich, Debating England’s Aristocracy, ch. 4; Epstein, Radial Expression, ch. 1.


political caricatures from the time illustrate. The target was not so much the mixed government with a monarchy and two houses of parliament, but corruption in government and the hegemony of an oppressive ‘aristocracy’ who exploited the people and suppressed the democratic components of government.

Thus radical writings incorporated a seemingly uncomfortable combination of republican or universalist statements, vitriolic anti-aristocratic rhetoric and pragmatic constitutional reform for Britain. Correspondingly, one radical or radical society can be found promoting universalism at one moment and reform of the English constitution at another, or together in one pamphlet. The Society for Constitutional Information and the LCS, who had also embraced universalism if not republicanism, increasingly promoted for Britain peaceful reform not revolution. John Thelwall, whilst lauding ‘the brave republic of France’, advocated for England ‘annual parliaments and universal suffrage; by which, and which alone, plenty and happiness can ever be extended to the majority of the people of this country’. Similarly, an anonymous pamphleteer celebrated the republics in France, Holland, Switzerland and America but promoted reform of the existing government in England. The British Convention at Edinburgh, having provocatively modelled itself on the French convention, claimed in its Address that it wished only for ‘[t]he restoration of annual parliaments and universal suffrage. We go no further.’

V

As mentioned above, this inconsistency in ideology has generally been explained as a symptom of the times: the 1790s identified as a ‘decade of ideological diversity, experimentation and flux’ as Epstein put it; a

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time when views were frequently altered and political allegiances changed; when outside factors such as
government action and loyalist competing propaganda pushed radicalism in one direction or another and
reinterpreted and misinterpreted its aims and ideology. Philp has pointed to ‘diversity and division’ among
radicals and the complex relationship between ‘radicals’ aspirations, their commitments and their
rhetoric’.66 Certainly, the juxtaposing in one pamphlet of universalist rhetoric with constitutionalist
proposals for reform in Britain often renders it difficult to understand the ideological position of the writer.
Epstein and Karr have explained such a dual position as enacting a ‘Jacobin performance’ which involved
adopting the ‘styles and ultra-radical codes of speech’ of French revolutionaries, together with English
constitutionalism.67 Such performance reflected a desire to explore how far radicals could ‘play outside
the lines of safe formality’.68 Whilst promoting a genuine constitutionalism, many also wished to engage
with the ‘political desires of a moment that appeared to hold extraordinary democratic promise’.69

Another common explanation for such inconsistencies is the repression of radicals during Pitt’s
‘reign of Terror’ of 1794–1795 and the government’s introduction of the crime of ‘figurative treason’, of
‘imagining the king’s death’, which meant that radicals were at greater risk of being convicted, in particular,
for anti-monarchical rhetoric.70 Moreover, the rhetoric of popular loyalism indiscriminately condemned all
reformers as Jacobin levellers and republicans with regicidal tendencies. Even classical republican
discourse was no longer a topic for open discussion now that it was linked directly to regicide, tyranny and
anarchy; it was the casualty of the repression of radicalism.71 As one pamphlet put it, ‘Republican, a word

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67 Epstein and Karr are suggesting a ‘mood’ or ‘temper’ here rather than the existence of ‘real’ or ‘fully fledged Jacobins’. See
69 Ibid., p. 530.
70 Barrell, Imagining the King’s Death, pp. 29–36.
… which to an enlightened head and an honest heart, was wont to convey every generous and manly sentiment, is now made to signify all that is abominable and wicked.” This, it is argued, resulted in a need for greater caution, and ingenuity, among radicals and their societies. It became expedient to obscure one’s true meaning if it ran the risk of incurring a criminal charge. Many, including radical societies, responded by promoting only constitutional reform in their later writings, and others had fallen silent by 1796.

While there is no disagreement here with these contentions, there is also an argument for consistency. Whether or not radicals took part in a ‘Jacobin performance’ or adopted universalist rhetoric, the majority, for whatever reason, promoted in their writings constitutional reform for Britain. And such reform proposals were largely consistent in content. Moreover, in arguing not just for reform but also restoration of the constitution many radicals sought evidence of the true English constitution in a familiar narrative of English history. They invoked Magna Carta and/or the reign of King Alfred as a time when true English liberty and rights since lost could be found, and thus restored. Many adopted ideas expressed in influential pamphlets such as the anonymous *Historical Essay on the English Constitution* (1771), Cartwright’s *Take Your Choice* and Paine’s *Common Sense* (both published in 1776). The *Historical Essay* claimed that the ‘Saxon form of government … was founded on the common rights of man’, with all the ‘elective power constitutionally placed in the people of England’; but this was destroyed by the Norman Conquest when tyranny was imposed. In *Rights of Man*, Paine claimed that at the Norman Conquest tyrannical French rule had been imposed on England and the ‘hatred’ that ‘invasion and tyranny begat’ became ‘deep rooted in the nation … not a village in England has forgotten it’, although he also claimed here that England had no constitution. Joseph Gerrald admired the ‘Golden days of Alfred, a patriot King’

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and sought the roots of a convention in the Saxon ‘folk-mote’ where ‘the majority of wills’ dominated government.\textsuperscript{75}

Furthermore, radicals’ promotion of the revolution settlement of 1689, and its centenary in 1789, provided further evidence of such constitutional continuities. The Glorious Revolution was celebrated as a source of the power of the people to effect political change within the constitution.\textsuperscript{76} The writings of political philosophers, particularly John Locke, were also invoked by radicals as evidence of the sovereignty of the people and the right of resistance. The Reverend Richard Price had triggered the French Revolution debate between radicals and loyalists in Britain with a sermon given on the centenary of the Glorious Revolution and celebrating the outbreak of revolution in France. Price claimed that in Britain sovereignty lay in the people who had the right to choose and remove governments and monarchs if they proved unfit for purpose. To Price, both government and the monarch were servants of the people but he was not advocating revolution.\textsuperscript{77} Radicals continued to promote such ideas, and Paine stood almost alone in directly claiming that Britain had no constitution.\textsuperscript{78} This sense of legitimate public control over the constitution, including the right to overthrow components of it in certain circumstances, conversely enabled radicals to contemplate working within the existing constitutional framework and within the law. One example of such ideology can be identified in the widespread radical response to the restrictive Two Acts of 1795. Radicals identified these acts as the government’s attempt to establish something resembling an absolute monarchy with Pitt on the throne. Meetings were held in protest, and the LCS declared that the acts were a violation of Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights. It was suggested that radicals should invoke the ‘right of

\textsuperscript{75} Joseph Gerrald, \textit{A Convention the Only Means of Saving Us from Ruin} (London, 1794), pp. 91, 111.


\textsuperscript{78} See for example, Paine, \textit{Rights of Man}, pp. 140–47. See also Godwin, \textit{Enquiry Concerning Political Justice}, p. 475.
resistance’ as a ‘natural right’ and a ‘constitutional duty’.79 To some extent, then, as Michael Smith has argued, ‘radicalism was tempered by the conceptual limitations of its constitutional and political discourse … It could not escape the political and cultural worlds it was designed to transform.’80

Moreover, in addition to this constitutionalist ideology, a consistent ‘constitutionalist action’ was adopted by radicals that reveals an adherence to conventional practises in relation to monarchy. Such action, including mass petitioning and remonstrances to the king, were established methods of popular action that had been practised for centuries.81 It was generally believed that the right to petition government and the king was guaranteed by the Bill of Rights (1689) and petitioning was widely adopted during the eighteenth century. Steve Poole has further identified a recognized contractual relationship between the monarch and the people: that it was the king’s role to address the grievances of the people when they appealed to him. As a result, popular criticisms in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were made primarily on the basis of the king’s failure to fulfil his contractual duties rather than an attack on the monarchy per se. Correspondingly, Poole argued, the people generally viewed the monarchy as a separate entity to parliament, and thus above faction and party control and also the corruption so closely associated with government.82 Despite Paine’s complaint that petitioning smacked of slavery, during the 1790s popular radical societies often invoked the right to petition.83 And, importantly, radicals first petitioned parliament, rather than the king, as the target for reform. In 1793 radical societies led by the LCS petitioned parliament; and a number, including the Sheffield Constitutional Society, decided to petition the king only once the

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83 Paine argued that the Bill of Rights allowed government to divide amongst itself all powers and profits. The nation was merely left with the right of petitioning, which was an insult. Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 193.
petition to parliament had failed. In the 1795 radical response to the Two Acts, mass petitions were presented to parliament, and upon their failure a remonstrance to the king was proposed. John Baxter suggested that the LCS once again resort to ‘Addresses, Petitions, or Remonstrances’ as the means to provoke reform.\(^{84}\) Thus continuities can be traced within radical constitutionalism and the actions it promoted.

VI

In brief, similar attitudes to monarchy and radical continuities can also be identified in the early nineteenth century. Whilst revolutionary republicanism could be found within radicalism, constitutionalism remained dominant until at least the demise of Chartism in about 1848. The Chartist Declaration of Rights (1839) was clear in its adherence to the constitution:

> The sovereignty of this United Kingdom is monarchical; not despotic, but limited … the prerogatives of the imperial crown of this United Kingdom are a constitutional trust vested in the person of the monarch for the benefit and service of the people, and may be controlled, modified, and limited by the will of parliament.\(^{85}\)

As Paul Pickering has pointed out, Chartist radicalism was no more coherent and clear in its aims and ideologies than earlier radicalism, but for the majority of Chartists the monarch was ‘not the problem’.\(^{86}\) Frank Prochaska argued that from 1832 ‘virtually all radicals now assumed that their principal enemy was the oligarchy not the Crown’.\(^{87}\) Certainly, ‘Old Corruption’ remained a contentious issue and ‘aristocracy’


\(^{86}\) Ibid., p. 227. Dorothy Thompson also observed that Chartists were not much concerned with monarchy. Dorothy Thompson, The Chartists (Hounslow, 1984), p. 6. See also Malcolm Chase, Chartist: A New History (Manchester, 2007), pp. 106–7.

was still a major target of attack in calls for reform. An enduring anti-aristocratic rhetoric was adopted and adapted into new areas of radical debate. But, as radicals became more closely associated with the demands of the emerging working class, their antagonists also reflected broader groups. Chartist writings invoked ‘aristocracy’ broadly to include not just the governing elite, but also a capitalist middle class that oppressed the working class and denied them economic as well as political rights. New terms were also adopted – such as ‘millocracy’, ‘shopocracy’, or ‘millocrat’, ‘cotton lord’, ‘steam aristocracy’. In 1839 The Charter condemned ‘the malevolence of aristocratic and shopocratic tyranny’.

Familiar forms of constitutionalist action were also consistently adopted in the early nineteenth century. With greater control now exerted by the authorities over access to public spaces and the development of a ‘bourgeois public sphere’, those promoting revolutionary action found themselves marginalized. Radicals needed access to the ‘public sphere’ to influence a broader public opinion, and constitutionalism was increasingly the only action and discourse available within such shared spaces. In 1817 constitutionalist action can be seen in meetings at Manchester, Spa Fields in east London and with the Hampden Club attempting a mass national petition to the House of Commons for reform. As in the 1790s, when the petition failed to even gain recognition by the government, petitioning the king was promoted. The subsequent attempted march of the Blanketeers famously carried petitions from Manchester to London.

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88 Goodrich, ‘Understanding a Language of Aristocracy’.


to present to the Prince Regent. One speaker at a meeting of marchers declared: ‘We will let them see it is not riot and disturbance we want … and we will apply to our noble Prince as a child would to its father … so lawful and constitutional a proceeding’. \(^2\) Again in 1839 Chartists first petitioned parliament and then, anticipating failure, promoted approaching Prince Albert to become ‘the People’s Champion’ like King Alfred. The queen was also asked to put herself above government and support the people’s petition for adult suffrage;\(^3\) 1840 saw mass petitioning to the queen by Chartists calling for the reprieve of the radical John Frost.\(^4\) These examples suggest that appeals were commonly made to the monarch as a figure outside and above government.

VII

The argument here is that anti-monarchism and regicidal threats are to be found in popular radical culture and republican tracts. The fact that many radicals promoted republican or universalist ideas suggests that they were excited by the possibilities of a world made afresh in line with democratic and egalitarian principles.\(^5\) That their ideas often remained somewhat nebulous and were not taken further to develop a framework for a republic or an entirely new democratic constitution in Britain is not surprising. Not only were government suppression and the broad legal interpretation of treason serious deterrents, but it is also clear that English radicalism had not reached a moment of crisis at which concrete plans for an entirely new government were imperative. Revolution had left the American colonies and France without legitimate governments, and this accelerated their need to create a new constitution. Furthermore, the continuing turmoil of the Revolution and the French Wars meant that France did not provide a suitable model of a fully functioning republic; and the Americans were still undecided as to what to call their fledgling government and how to fully unite the federal states. A n acceptable universal form of democratic

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\(^2\) Poole, ‘French Revolution or Peasants’ Revolt?’, p. 15; Poole, *The Politics of Regicide*, pp. 147–9.

\(^3\) Poole, French Revolution or Peasant’s Revolt?’, p. 20. See also Thompson, *The Chartists*, p. 58.


government had not yet emerged, and would not do so during the 1790s. Thus, the radical proposals for revolutionary change were diverse, experimental and shifted in response to the tumultuous times. Ultimately, such proposals did not amount to a united call for regicide or a republic in Britain. Rather, they were overtaken by a wider radical movement for reform of the existing constitution, focused on the governing elite of ‘aristocracy’.

The evidence also suggests, that continuities may be identified in radical attitudes to monarchy in the adherence to English constitutionalism. During the French Revolution and beyond the majority of British radicals continued to agitate for a greater democracy by adopting a consistent ideology of constitutional reform set within a recognized framework of English history, law and political philosophy. They also adopted familiar practices and forms of constitutionalist action to assert the popular voice that fell within established popular political protocols and paradigms. Such action engaged with the monarch in conventional ways that tended to represent the king as a separate entity to parliament, and on occasion, a longstanding ‘friend to the people’. Moreover, such constitutionalism hindered the development of anti-monarchical action beyond rhetoric and ‘performance’, significant thought these aspects may have appeared at the time. Reform or restoration of the English mixed constitution necessarily entailed retention of the monarch but also a recognition of the limitations of monarchical power. For radicals, then, it was the ‘aristocracy’, encompassing the two houses of parliament and government of the day, that was condemned as the bulwark preventing the people from asserting their rights to a role in politics, a place in the ‘public political sphere’ and to greater social and economic equality. The monarchy was pushed to the wings of the political stage. It is not the intention here to revert to a vision of a consistent and continuous radicalism in the English past. Rather, it is to suggest that within a fragmented and diverse radicalism, continuities may also be identified in relation to attitudes to monarchy.

96 See John Dunn, Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy (London, 2005), esp. ch. 2.

97 See e.g. Thompson, Making.