

**Rémy Duthille. *Le Discours radical en Grande-Bretagne, 1768-1789.***

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Rémy Duthille's book is an essential and timely addition to the body of scholarly work on the British radical tradition and its different "languages" in the later eighteenth century. While, as the author acknowledges, the majority of these studies have addressed the period after the fall of the Bastille in France and questioned the resonances between the political and constitutional experiments underway across the Channel and their reception and influence in radical circles on British soil, considerably less attention has been devoted to the earlier period and the impact of the American Revolution on British radical discourse. What's more, the 1770s and 1780s have sometimes been studied in the light of the events of the following decade. This book contributes to rectifying some of the misapprehensions which can result from such a retrospective approach while also righting the substantial neglect of the period through a meticulous exploration of the written and oral production of two major figures of the radical movement of the era, Welsh Dissenting minister Richard Price and veteran reformer Major John Cartwright as well as their associates in the two major London reforming societies of the time.

The author sets Cartwright and Price's work from the period firmly in the context of the activities of the Society for Constitutional Information and the Revolution Society, which the author retraces in chapter one ("Le patriotisme de deux sociétés radicales londoniennes"). He outlines the different circumstances of the foundation of both societies, their respective membership and fees, and the relative social exclusivity common to both, and flags up the difficulties encountered when trying to establish the extent of the influence of tracts produced by reforming societies in this era, before the proliferation of pamphlet literature in the following decade. Rémy Duthille makes an important point when he suggests that both societies were sociable spaces not political groups, though he insists upon the character of the SCI as heavily influenced by religious Dissent and political radicalism. There is an interesting discussion in this chapter on the background to and issues at stake in the Middlesex election of 1768 and the root of radicals' objections to Wilkes' attempts to undermine Anglo-Scottish unity at a time when, in their eyes, the principal aim of reforming efforts should have been tackling and exposing parliamentary corruption. The author

shows a solid knowledge of the workings of parliamentary faction, the pivotal role of by-election results and the precise nature of criticism of oligarchic corruption within radical groupings.

A central element of this chapter is the careful dissection of the meaning of the term “patriotism” at the time, a discussion that, as the author notes, has animated scholars such as Olivia Smith, Hugh Cunningham and others. In the Whig constitutional heritage, it constituted the duty to act with the national rather than personal interest in mind and the importance of curbing the power of the Crown. Rémy Duthille brings to the fore the different uses to which the term could be put within radical circles, namely to denounce the corruption and ineptitude of the Whig opposition which failed to negotiate a truce in the American conflict or substantially advance the cause of parliamentary reform. As the author aptly sums up, “Les radicaux définissent le patriotisme comme un sentiment porté à la patrie, entraînant un devoir envers la cause publique, quel qu’en soit le prix” (46). To act patriotically was to defend one’s “country,” as in the rights of its *people*. Challenging the Tory cry of “King and Country” and the hegemony of the Anglican Church, radicals of the hue of Price and Cartwright could deem patriotic the call for the restoration of people’s rights, whether anchored in history or nature. Rémy Duthille’s findings confirm John Barrell’s suggestion that in the late eighteenth century the notion abounded “that the political conflict of the period was to be regarded as a conflict, among other things, about the meaning of words” (1).<sup>1</sup>

Addressing the question of exactly which rights radicals wanted to restore, the author argues in chapter two (“Le discours radical, entre droit naturel et constitutionnalisme”) that there was a certain coherence in the language of English radicalism in the 1770s and 1780s by virtue of the readiness of its key figures to invoke the twin discourses of natural right and English constitutionalism. Building upon the work of J. G. A. Pocock and James Epstein (whose research focuses on the period from the 1790s to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century), Rémy Duthille suggests that both radicals—despite Price being considered a rationalist, universalist thinker and Cartwright more reliant on a national constitutionalist idiom—succeeded in weaving these traditions into their discursive strategies in the service of a broadly common political cause which focused on denouncing parliamentary corruption, leading the charge for the reform of parliament and lending a certain measure of support to the campaign for universal male suffrage. Both saw strategic advantage in combining these two discourses to rally people to the radical cause. Radical discourse is therefore considered in both its linguistic iterations and its performative guise, in

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<sup>1</sup> John Barrell, *Imagining the King’s Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793-1796* (Oxford: OUP, 2000).

other words as a means of action. Rémy Duthille suggests that the choice of language was often dependent on the theme addressed by each respective writer. In addressing the War of Independence, both Cartwright and Price were more comfortable using natural rights arguments partly because of the universal reach of the American experiment, but also since those opposing the colonists could mobilise an arsenal of constitutionalist arguments to undermine the separatist pretensions of their adversaries. For Duthille, both authors' major pamphlets on the American war combined these discourses and he suggests it is therefore of little utility to try to categorise the texts in one tradition or another. He, instead, counsels sensitivity to changes within the texts themselves.

In focusing on the production of Price and Cartwright in the period before 1789 in chapters three and four, the author further brings out the crucial importance of the War of American Independence in shaping the strategy and language of radicalism in these decades. Both men condemned what they saw as the illegitimate assault on constitutional liberty that the coercive measures against the colonists represented and couched their opposition to the British government's approach in terms of "patriotism." While Price's text shows a commitment to defending the colonists' position and counselling the negotiation of peace based on reason alone, it is nevertheless, in Duthille's view, peppered with national references: "Droit naturel et constitutionnalisme convergent vers les mêmes conclusions pour Price. Il se réclame à la fois de l'universalité des principes du droit naturel, et d'une tradition anglaise" (91). In "democratizing" Locke, Price relied on an English Dissenting tradition, rather than an international one, and in doing so supported American claims to be more qualified to assert the rights of Englishmen than the English government ostensibly bent on curtailing them. In the author's view however, Price's admiration for the English constitution was based less on its precise national anchorage than on its fit with rational principles thus allowing him to argue—through the example of the conflict—that the British constitution diverged from an ideal based on natural rights.

In the following chapter devoted to John Cartwright's production, Duthille shows how the author, while a proponent of the constitutionalist idiom in most of his work, after the American War (his advice to the Manchester radicals organizing the mass meeting at St. Peter's Fields in 1819, well after the chronological frame of this book, is a notable illustration) had recourse to natural rights arguments in his pamphlet *Take Your Choice* which Duthille posits as a "texte composite" (122). Although the specificity of Cartwright's work was its reliance on the compilation and accumulation of longstanding historical English legal authority from texts by Sir Edward Coke, William Blackstone and others, or the veneration of Anglo-Saxon precedents, Cartwright also

argued for parliamentary reform on “rational” grounds and insisted that liberties existed well before Magna Carta. For Duthille, Cartwright “rationalisait en partie la doctrine de la constitution ancienne” (146). What’s more, he reminds his readers that arguing for reform through the mobilization of the ancient constitution was far from a conservative posture. The author challenges E.P. Thompson on this point, suggesting that there should be no ‘hierarchy’ of radicalism and that all expressions of a desire for fundamental change, whether rooted in a national heritage or more influenced by the language of universal rights, can legitimately be considered radical.

Rémy Duthille’s emphasis on the central role of the American conflict leads him to downplay Linda Colley’s thesis whereby British identity was “forged” in opposition to the French “Other,” through successive wars and religious and institutional divergence. The author suggests that it was in the shadow of the American War that British patriotism was played out. Thus, radicals did not define the British constitutional tradition in opposition to France in this earlier period, but through their country’s own internal and varied constitutional history. As such, “l’affirmation nationale passe par une histoire whig qui pend le parti de la liberté contre l’oppression dans un cadre national auquel ‘l’Autre’ n’a qu’une part très marginale” (138). In the mould of scholars such as Carinne Louinissi, whose work is alluded to by the author, and Steven Sarson, whose research has shown the essential legacy of the Glorious Revolution in the ideological grounding of the new American nation, this book goes some way towards broadening the scope of the American Revolution, by showing that its impact was not confined to its national borders. Also, in the same vein as Ian Haywood and John Seed, in their edited collection on the international context to the Gordon Riots, Rémy Duthille’s work widens our understanding of how British political culture was forged in an arena of international conflict, transatlantic diplomacy and exchange of ideas.

In chapter five the author questions the nature of Price and Cartwright’s attitude to the place of the people in political life and makes a significant contribution to a debate currently raging amongst historians<sup>2</sup> over who exactly “the people” were in the eighteenth-century mind. Rémy Duthille considers that in radical writing “the people”—untainted by decadence—were idealized as the only body able to regenerate the constitution. He suggests that both Price and Cartwright, to differing degrees, defended universal suffrage in the abstract, but did not actively advocate for reform of the franchise: “L’idéologie des radicaux, si elle oriente vers la démocratie en posant le principe du suffrage universel, ne débouche pas sur des pratiques démocratiques, mais plutôt sur

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<sup>2</sup> Georgina Green’s work, *The Majesty of the People Popular Sovereignty and the Role of the Writer in the 1790s* (Oxford: OUP, 2014) is a notable example.

des revendications anti-aristocratiques” (172). Cartwright and fellow SCI member John Jebb argued that the poor met the criteria of “independence” as much as the rich and that the propertied were just as vulnerable to influence as those without, breaking with the Old Whig tradition that only a stake in the national interest, through property, conferred the required civic virtue for political participation. To vote, men needed a keen moral compass rather than any particular educational requirements. This was a position that would later be countered by other radical writers. Mary Wollstonecraft—writing in the 1790s—saw poverty and social inequality as a barrier to the moral improvement necessary to shoulder the burden of active public citizenship, hence why an overhaul of education provision had to be an essential prelude to the obtention of the franchise.

In a fascinating section which includes a valuable discussion of the historic opposition to standing armies in Whig ideology, the author shows how both men defended the right of the people to bear arms, and the superiority of organized militias over standing armies. He identifies a shift in radical thinking away from the Old Whig position that militia membership was the preserve of the elite. If the common people bore arms this could be a way of reconciling people with political institutions and forging a sense of civic responsibility that would guard against the type of popular violence that erupted in the Gordon riots of 1780.

One question that remains outstanding, and that the author acknowledges as a dilemma, is whether it is justified to draw broader conclusions on the nature of British radicalism in the era from a study of two figures from London’s professional classes whose mixed language of universalism and constitutionalism called upon a specifically English national tradition. While chapter six (“Projets britanniques et solidarités atlantiques”) addresses the way in which Price and Cartwright and radical associations took into account the nations of Britain in their discourse, the focus remains resolutely on the London radical scene. To get around the difficulty, and go some way to considering the wider British scope of the radical tradition in the era, Rémy Duthille deftly defines the precise remit of each element of his study. Thus, the section on Scotland is focused on the links between English reform associations and the Scottish burgh reformers and the example set by the latter to the English radical movement and the section on Ireland focuses on the precedent set by the Irish Volunteers. From these different case studies, Duthille persuasively suggests that the War of Independence fed into the emergence of a particularly British rhetoric of reform, though did not go as far as to prompt the forging of a “pan-British radicalism” (203).

The latter half of this chapter sets out the difficulties faced by radicals who courted the accusation of treachery for their support of the American colonists' cause in their struggle against the Crown. It charts their efforts to show that the cause of the American "rebels," deprived of representation, mirrored that of the poor in Britain who did not have access to the franchise but who paid taxes on commodities. The author also dwells on Price's tendency to pit an egalitarian and regenerated America against British decline and oppression, a stance which appears to chime with works by non-British writers during the late colonial and revolutionary period such as Hector St Jean de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). Price's view of commerce—that it could free nations from the weight of colonial warfare yet also potentially be a source of corruption—is set in the context of his status first and foremost as a "moralist" rather than a universal citizen in the mould of Thomas Paine. To conclude the chapter, in which Price is foregrounded, the author suggests that the latter firmly devoted his energies to militating for parliamentary reform rather than the cause of abolition. This, it is suggested, was perhaps due to the close ties between members of the Non-conformist community and industrialists, and the fact that the fight for abolition was primarily the preserve of conservative evangelical activists rather than Dissenting radicals. It would be interesting to discover if Price held any views on the criticism levelled at the industrial middle-classes (often by wealthy and influential slaveowners) that their treatment of the labouring poor amounted to a form of slavery itself.

The final chapter, entitled "*A Discourse on the love of our country de Richard Price: synthèse du patriotisme radical à l'aube de la Révolution française?*" seeks to re-examine Price's famous sermon in its own right, rather than in terms of retrospective readings of it as a prelude to Edmund Burke's famous denunciation of the French Revolution in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). As such it is a fitting closure to a book which seeks, in a broader sense, to remove 1770s and 1780s radicalism from the shadow of the 1790s and assess the contribution of its key figures on their own terms. For Rémy Duthille, Price's *Discourse* should be read in the light of a particular moral and religious debate unfurling in Britain rather than broader Enlightenment thinking. Price was seeking to reconcile national interests and those of mankind and thus contributed to a shift towards the language of universal rights, seeing revolution as a break with the past and an opportunity to reshape a new European order with liberty at its core.

Rémy Duthille shows wide-ranging knowledge of the literature produced on this topic, and his bibliography and footnotes are comprehensive and detailed, allying a plethora of manuscript sources with an array of secondary material from across English-speaking and French scholarship. The decision to publish the work in French, while keeping quotations in their original

English, is testimony to the bicultural premise on which this book has been written, and is heartening for historians working their craft within the realm of English Studies in French language departments. One of the strengths of Duthille's work is to release the study of rhetoric and discourse from the narrow straitjacket of the quest for "coherence." In the author's view, one shared by other scholars such as Mark Philp and Gordon Pentland, individuals can aggregate different discursive traditions without falling prey to accusations of incoherence, inconstancy or hypocrisy. Duthille affirms that trying to find consistency in the language of radicalism is tantamount to distorting the historical record. He finds that the radical tradition of the 1770s and 1780s, epitomised by Price and Cartwright, allowed for the strategic deployment of two different discourses—and one wonders whether there were more—influenced by a national context, events across the Atlantic and reverberations in the wider empire. The author adopts a meticulous approach to the study of language, and demonstrates remarkable knowledge of the core texts of his corpus and their reception. He also provides some glimpse of potential future projects, on the response to Price's work, for instance, or the wider impact of Cartwright outside the English-speaking world, both of which would be a fascinating continuation of this enterprise.

The book inevitably raises further questions. Duthille suggests that both Price and Cartwright were lukewarm in their practical commitment to advancing the cause of universal manhood suffrage despite their endorsement of the principle, and the reader is left speculating as to why this was and what type of action, if any, the author believes could have been pursued to advance this aim. It might also be wondered—and the author himself acknowledges this query—to what extent the views of two prominent figures and their associates can be considered representative of the variety and heterogeneity of the radical reform movement across the British Isles during these years. Finally, although the rationale for Duthille's decision to study radicalism before the advent of a plebeian, artisan debating culture, epitomized by the foundation of the London Corresponding Society in early 1792 is not in doubt, such a decision inevitably omits from the undertaking consideration of the elements of continuity and connection between these decades and the following. These are nevertheless considerations which are not the object of this book and do not detract in any way from the achievement of the author in bringing this important research to the attention of a wider audience. This book will interest scholars and students of radicalism broadly, those working on discourse in a historical context as well as those interested in learning about a period of British history often overlooked or seen through the lens of the later upheavals of the 1790s and beyond.

