



Introduction

This issue of *Leaves* is the result of a collective effort that began in October 2017 with a conference on “Sociability and democratic practices in Great Britain” in the late Georgian period.¹ The conference examined how sociability accommodated a growing number of political demands that were being voiced coming from outside, and often directed against, the principal state and ecclesiastical institutions (the royal court, Parliament, the Church). Following the French Revolution, a plebeian sociability began to develop not only in the form of radical or Jacobin political societies and clubs, but also as anti-Jacobin and loyalist groups. Abolitionist, working men’s and trade union movements, local and national leagues such as the Anti-Corn Law League, and of course, the Chartists, also raised moral, religious and class-based demands. Sociable institutions were no mere vessels, or empty spaces, in which politics was discussed; rather sociability informed discussions and, in return, political demands shaped the form of sociability which each group promoted and experienced. The conference explored a number of case studies showing how particular contexts led to experiments in sociable experience. As one of the conference papers showed, for example, an institution like the Theatre Royal Drury Lane could function as a site of Foxite assembly with some parts of the audience during the 1780s. And Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a prominent playwright and Whig politician, straddled the world of the stage and politics. The main focus of the conference was on the 1790s, the French revolutionary decade, which gave a fillip to the ideal of democracy, and the following three decades, marked by growing radical mobilization for reform, and a rejuvenation of the Whig party in a context of increasingly contested Tory dominance.

In the wake of de Tocqueville’s assertion that “the most democratic country on the face of the earth is that in which men have [...] carried to the highest perfection the art of pursuing in common the object of their common desires” (115), active participation in voluntary associations is seen as imbuing members with democratic values and as having a role in nurturing citizenship. This key idea, that democracy was not just a matter of ideology but that the spread of democratic values owed as much to new practices experienced in clubs, societies, parties, or trade unions, runs through all the articles in this collection. In other words, many groups put into practice democracy within a society that was still deeply traditional and

¹ The editors wish to gratefully acknowledge the generous financial assistance of the research group Héritages et constructions dans le texte et l’image (Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest) in the organisation of the one-day conference at Bordeaux, “Sociabilités et pratiques de la démocratie en Grande-Bretagne (1760-1850),” hosted by Climax (Cultures et littératures des mondes anglophones) on 5 October 2017.

hierarchical. Indeed, today we associate “democracy” with universal suffrage and human rights. Yet, commenting on the 1750-1850 period in the British Atlantic world, Joanna Innes and Mark Philp remarked that “democracy was increasingly associated with the establishment of powerful representative legislatures and the broad diffusion of voting rights; yet there remained great diversity in forms of practice” (6), as well as in terms of officials elected and forms of elections. Democracy was also discussed in terms of social rights; it was not always equated with universal suffrage, most activists demanding a broadening of the suffrage only. Most radicals and all Chartists demanded universal manhood suffrage, but not female suffrage, and many reformers were content with various forms of more limited (e.g. householder or ratepayer) suffrage. A deep rift in the period separated the Whigs, who were content with the limited advances of the 1832 Reform Act, and the radicals and the Chartists, who felt betrayed and wanted more.

Besides formal demands, then, actual practices are a fruitful field of investigation, including in sociable institutions that are not primarily reformist or even political. Inspired by Robert Owen’s Radical Society and William Thompson, the Rochdale Pioneers in Manchester started what is considered today as the first co-operative in Great Britain. In 1844, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers was born in the wake of various initiatives that had sprung up since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The members gathered around the need to get rid of the middleman as the first goal was to create a store with food, clothes and other useful articles. They also wanted to build houses and acquire land so that unemployed workers could come and cultivate plots in order to sell the products of their labour. The founding principles were “discount, democracy—one man, one vote—, social shares, freedom of membership, the absence of credit, the importance given to educating the members” (Bonner 27). Similar associations had already experimented with new forms of democracy with the overt intention of dispensing with a system that was still highly hierarchical. In the co-operative movement, members were free from the influence and grip of the capitalistic society born from the Industrial Revolution; they were truly equal and could also put into practice the fraternity upheld by the French Revolution.

Outside Parliament, there was a buoyant culture of public debate and oratory in many clubs, associations and societies. Such an environment provided a political culture of sorts: not only a set of references or a smattering of knowledge, but also a familiarity with practices of power, such as public speaking or balloting. Following in de Tocqueville’s footsteps, Almond and Verba thus argue that voluntary associations, whatever their nature, are instrumental in the development of political culture (372). Even an institution like the late eighteenth-century debating society, which was run for profit and did not aim at the enlightenment of spectators, played some educational role (Thale 1989). Debating societies developed in the second half of

the eighteenth century and burgeoned during the War of American Independence; especially, around 1780, several societies were created for ladies exclusively, discussing moral, social, and political subjects, including apparently “unladylike” ones such as the vote and the desirability of a female Parliament (Thale 1995). These societies, by giving individuals the opportunity to actively engage in democratic practices, permitted the development of “habits of cooperation and public-spiritedness, as well as the practical skills necessary to partake in public life” (Putnam 372). In other words, they enabled their members to develop civic virtues. Though some of those institutions, like the “Robin Hood Society,” became notorious for rowdiness and unpolite behaviour, they certainly discussed a whole range of moral and political subjects, inculcating some skills through rules meant to keep proceedings orderly, such as not straying from the question or not interrupting other speakers or speaking out of turn. A great number of unfavourable sources criticized the lowness of the debates—but could it be that critics from the élites feared the subversive possibility that plebeians could understand politics and deploy oratory as well as their betters? At debating societies, hundreds of men and women could listen to debates on serious or frivolous, social, religious, and political subjects—which is why the Pitt government had many of them closed in the mid-1790s, for fear they would become hotbeds of sedition. Addressing the context of Chartism three or four decades later, Malcolm Chase warns that:

We overlook too easily how routinized public debate was in the culture of even quite small communities, carefully regulated according to generally accepted rules of procedure, rules that were in turn imitated in the proceedings of a wide variety of political and educational endeavours, such as the ubiquitous mutual instruction societies which typically included the arts of public speaking in their curriculum. (Chase 3)

The following articles are selections from the conference proceedings, to which two texts by Japanese researchers were added, to increase the scope of the collection, in terms of ideology, with Keisuke Masaki’s contribution on Whig sociability, and geography, with Shunsuke Katsuta’s article on mass meetings in Dublin.

Each of the articles looks at an arena of political conflict; together they map some of the diversity of the late-Georgian sociable landscape. Despite continuities and echoes between all of the contributions, they form two groups. Two texts concentrate on British sociability and citizenship in the context of, and often in clear comparison with, revolutionary France. Rachel Rogers shows how the “British club,” which gathered expatriates of several European nations in Paris in the crucial months of late 1792, developed a hybrid sociability borrowing from English and French conventions, fostering a culture of debate to express republican and democratic values. Kimberley Page-Jones examines the “fancy,” the community of spectators gathered around boxing rings, as the site for an education to citizenship and a crucible for a

manly, martial Britishness. Beyond the immediate site of sociability, writing also transmuted the fancy into a key site for Romantic debates on patriotism, and the possibility of a democratic, non-nationalist form of belonging. Both articles explore some well-established distinctions (patrician/plebeian, radical/loyalist) and suggest that the deeply antagonistic politics of the 1790s and 1800s were a laboratory of democratic politics, sometimes paradoxically. Emerging forms of sociability, mediating between opposite impulses, shaped new collective bodies in creative, if ever fragile, ways.

The next three articles span a broad spectrum of political associations and practices from the 1810s to the 1830s. Keisuke Masaki's substantial study maps Whig clubs in provincial England, showing how the legacy of a charismatic leader, Charles James Fox, could hold the party together. Somewhat paradoxically, the party of reform which worshipped a man who welcomed the French Revolution developed forms of club life that might have been more elitist than the rival Pitt Clubs of the Tory party. The link between elite politicians and the rank and file is one theme of Shunsuke Katsuta's analysis of the "aggregate meetings" that were convened *ad hoc* to discuss political issues in early nineteenth-century Dublin. Such mass meetings occasionally transcended denominational boundaries when joint Protestant and Catholic meetings could be set up. Yet this article evinces a sense, as do others in the collection, of the instability of political conjuncture and the complexity of the local and national contexts. Kate Bowan also examines mass meetings, this time through the prism of music, showing how a song could travel from the drawing room to the open-air mass meeting. The case of Eliza Flower's and Harriet Martineau's *The Gathering of the Unions*, a very popular radical song whose female authors received no credit at the time, is ideal to reflect on the possibility of women's agency in highly gendered sociable spheres, and the power of music to gather people together and create a form of political sociability outside the middle-class drawing room.

Works Cited

- Almond, Gabriel Abraham, and Sidney Verba. *The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. 1963. Princeton UP, 2015.
- Bonner, Arnold. *British Co-operation*. Co-operative Union Ltd., 1961.
- Chase, Malcolm. *The Chartists: Perspectives & Legacies*. Merlin, 2015.
- Innes, Joanna, et Mark Philp, editors. *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750-1850*. Oxford UP, 2013.
- Putnam, R. D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Thale, Mary. "London Debating Societies in the 1790s." *Historical Journal*, vol. 32, 1989, pp. 57-86.

---. "Women in London Debating Societies in 1780." *Gender & History*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1995, pp. 5-24. *Wylie Online Library*, [doi:10.1111/j.1468-0424.1995.tb00011.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.1995.tb00011.x).

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated by Henry Reeve, Pratt, Woodford & Co, 1848.