

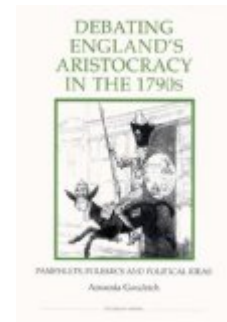
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Amanda Goodrich.** *Debating England's Aristocracy in the 1790s: Pamphlets, Polemics and Political Ideas.* Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2005. x + 213 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86193-275-7.

**Iain Hampsher-Monk, ed.** *The Impact of the French Revolution: Texts from Britain in the 1790s.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xi + 353 pp. \$36.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-57911-7.

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## Scoundrels in Context: The Pamphlet Wars of the 1790s

In November 1789, the dissenter Richard Price gave a sermon which interpreted Britain's 1688 in light of France's 1789. The failure of the movement for political reform in Britain had revealed an island kingdom untrue to its own revolutionary heritage, but the French liberals, Price claimed, had now extended the principles of 1688 faithfully, in the process teaching Britons something about their own possibilities. "Tremble all ye oppressors of the world," Price wrote. "Take warning all ye supporters of slavish governments and slavish hierarchies" (quoted, Hampsher-Monk, p. 55)! When the sermon was published the following year, Edmund Burke responded by casting France's Revolution as something monstrously different, in degree and kind, from 1688. Thereafter, Britain's print culture quickly exploded into a sustained and vehement war of ideas. Despite its quick polarization, the national debate moved into complex terrain, interrogating not merely Britain's own past revolutionary moments and France's present one, but also the nature of political legitimacy, the politics of class and gender, secular vs. confessional ideologies, and the relationship among language, spectacle, and political control.

For these reasons, the 1790s offer a rich window for exploring both the expression of political ideas, and their circulation within the crucible of revolutionary pressure.

To aid those teaching this period, Iain Hampsher-Monk—long an important authority on the political and social ideas of the 1790s—has now assembled a collection which makes available in a single affordable volume a select number of the key interventions in the pamphlet war. The book offers an accessible, yet ranging and authoritative, thematic introduction, followed by fourteen excerpts from well-known contributors such as Burke, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, and Hannah More, and from figures less familiar to non-specialists, such as the liberal barrister James Mackintosh, the radical orator John Thelwall, the communitarian Thomas Spence, and the millenarian and self-described prophet Richard Brothers. The volume should be a superb teaching tool: so that readers can deeply explore the arguments presented, the excerpts are intentionally much fuller than what is found in most anthologies. Hampsher-Monk has also framed the supporting material very well. Each selection is paired with bibliographic suggestions reflecting recent historiography, and with biographical and editorial introductions that pay careful attention to the specific context of each work. For example, explaining the chaotic use of capitols in the London Corresponding Society's *Address* to the British people of late January 1794, Hampsher-Monk suggests that the uneasy typesetting probably reflects the increasing desperation felt by its members, two of whom had re-

cently been convicted in Edinburgh of sedition. (Within three months the government arrested a score more radicals, and in October the state trials for high treason would begin.) Moreover, most selections are accompanied by an evocative illustration, reminding readers that the war of ideas occurred not only through text, but through other discursive modes as well. As Hampsher-Monk notes in his introduction, a central question in the arguments of the pamphlet wars concerned not merely their theoretical content, but “who it was that was making them, and how” (p. 19). Indeed, an excerpt from one of the works that more creatively engaged with form as well as content (such as one of the radical satirical dictionaries), would have been a useful addition to this excellent volume.

Here, for example, is how the satirist Charles Pigott redefined and demystified England’s governing class: “Aristocrat—a fool, or scoundrel, generally both; a monster of rapacity, and an enemy to mankind.”[1] Pigott’s radical division of humankind into aristos and others, Amanda Goodrich claims, is representative of a radical discourse of aristocracy as it emerged in the early 1790s. Built upon an examination of five hundred pamphlets published between 1790 and 1795 that contain “representations of aristocracy, conscious or otherwise,” Goodrich’s study argues that the pamphlet wars saw the emergence of a new and distinctive conception of the place of the aristocracy in the British state (p. 14). Initially, representations were extremely polarized. Burke’s *Reflections* (1790) defended all aristocracy (including England’s own) through a lament for France’s overthrown *ancien regime*, a rhetorical tactic which set the terms for Manichean representations of Britain’s social structure. Beginning with Paine’s *Rights of Man*, part 1 (1791), radicals reversed Burke’s valuation of the peerage, but retained the basic duality: there were aristocrats and there were “the people.” A gulf of different interests and virtues separated the two.

Yet by 1793, Goodrich argues, the discourse on aristocracy had become newly complex: as the French Revolution radicalized, British reformers turned away from “revolutionary rhetoric” and more readily embraced constitutionalist language (p. 113). By this point as well, a new defense of aristocracy had become central to loyalist interventions in the pamphlet wars. As the French economy deteriorated, traditional celebrations of British economic prosperity *vis-à-vis* French poverty were redeployed, with the British aristocracy now celebrated as a meritocratic, commercially oriented, open elite. Loyalists augmented long-standing claims that aristocratic hierarchy produced stability, with new economically ori-

ented justifications, arguing that rank had given Britain a potent social engine for national prosperity. For example, Goodrich detects a modification in the defense of primogeniture (bitterly decried by many radicals), with loyalists now declaring that it “was practiced out of economic expedience ... rather than to bolster aristocratic hegemony” (p. 96). Such arguments relating the peerage to national prosperity, she claims, drew attention away from traditional radical depictions of aristocrats as social and economic parasites, and helped persuade Britons that a defense of the status quo was in the self-interest of all.

Goodrich’s argument is intriguing, and in many respects sensible: as the pamphlet war moved into the years of the Terror in France and Pitt’s White Terror against radicals in Britain, rhetorical positions were fluid and prolix, as were events. Certainly the economic dislocations in revolutionary France offered powerful opportunities for loyalists’ prosperity arguments. However, there are problems to consider. Goodrich’s study is largely internal; while she adeptly examines the ideas expressed in pamphlet literature, she does not contextualize these sources within the particular social and political controversies that helped give rise to them. This purely representational approach to analyzing pamphlet literature pushes the social world out of view, ignoring the force which tangible events might have given (or denied) particular arguments. For example, there is no mention of the regional economic effects in England caused by the war against France, effects which reached critical levels by the spring and summer of 1795. How might prosperity arguments have actually been *read* in such contexts? At the same time, for a book which deals in issues of literary representation—issues so important in recent historical and literary scholarship on the 1790s—Goodrich’s own analysis is under-theorized. Pamphlets in this book have stable, unitary, unproblematic meanings, and meaning wholly resides in production rather than reception and circulation. This internal focus weakens Goodrich’s arguments for the causal force of a new model of commercial loyalism.

Finally, there is also little discussion of the relative control of the sites of discourse during the pamphlet wars. While Goodrich notes that the repressive legislation of the mid-1790s significantly closed down the debate, she represents the discursive field of the first half of the decade as a pure zone of free exchange. The royal proclamation against seditious writing announced in May 1792, which simultaneously portrayed radical literature as a threat to the state *and* encouraged subjects to denounce the “seditious” to their local magis-

trates, merits but one footnote and one brief mention in the text. Radical and loyalist literature are thus interpreted without reference to their sometimes very different fields of production, with radical authors in particular often writing under constraints that effectively inhibited the production and circulation of ideas. The creative venom informing works like Pigott's sometimes reflected more than merely an internal tendency towards populist dichotomies. He finished the *Political Dictionary* in disease-ridden Newgate prison while serving a sentence for sedition. Taken sick, he died before his sentence was up, and so the dictionary was published posthumously. To sell it was to invite prosecution.

Still, Goodrich's book will be an important starting

point for further explorations of new vocabularies of conservative political legitimacy that emerged during the 1790s. She intriguingly suggests that the new commercial loyalist model of aristocracy "helped to ensure that no revolution took place in England between 1790-6" (p. 168). A sustained exploration of circulation, readership, and audience could lend greater support to such a claim; moving beyond the discursive frame may well substantiate her important thesis. But for now, connecting these developments in loyalist discourse to the avoidance of revolution remains a challenging prospect.

Note

[1]. Charles Pigott, *A Political Dictionary: Explaining the True Meanings of Words* (London, 1795), 3.

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