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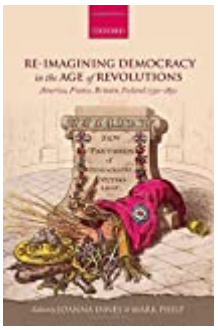

Joanna Innes, Mark Philp, eds. *Re-Imagining Democracy in the Age of Revolutions: America, France, Britain, Ireland, 1750-1850.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. x + 240 pp. $110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-966915-8.

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How well do we understand the origins and early development of modern democracy? Joanna Innes and Mark Philipâs edited volume *Re-Imagining Democracy* is the outgrowth of a nearly decade-long collective project at Oxford University. This work makes a rich enquiry across four of the most prominent centers of the Age of Revolution–describing how âdemocracyâ between 1750 and 1850 went from being an ancient anachronism or term of disdain for popular anarchy into becoming a broadly cherished ideal and central descriptor of modern government.

Dividing the book into four nationally themed sections and a synthetic conclusion, the authors succeed in demonstrating how, as Innes and Philip declare in the introduction, there is âno one history of the re-imagining of democracyâ but also that the concept advanced out of an overlapping transatlantic ferment (p. 7).

The editors in the introduction briefly trace the preceding intellectual history of the term âdemocracyâ in early modern Western history. Circa 1750, it was largely used by the educated to refer to the unstable ancient Greek city-states of antiquity, usually connoting the âtumult and instabilityâ of that era (p. 1). Though from the mid-seventeenth century onwards the British referred to âdemocracyâ as an element of their âmixed government,â the anarchistic elements seen as inherent in popular rule stopped reformers from identifying with the epithet âdemocraticâ (pp. 1- 2).

âDemocracyâ would acquire its positive modern meaning only through the political fluctuations of the Age of Revolution. *Re-Imagining Democracy* begins with the case of the United States, where during the American Revolution âdemocracyâ remained a term of abuse to be avoided by even the most ardent radicals. As Thomas Paine scholar Seth Cotlar notes, no variation of the term was used in *Common Sense*. Elbridge Gerry at the 1787 Constitutional Convention successfully denounced troubles of the Articles of Confederation system as resulting from an âexcess of democracyâ (p. 18). Yet during the early Federal era, in reaction to the concentration of power under the Constitution and the example of the French Revolution abroad, a self-defined âDemocraticâ oppositional party took shape. By the election of 1800, which brought Thomas Jefferson and the Democrats to the presidency, the âdemocraticâ nature of the United States had acquired ârespectabilityâ across the political spectrum (p. 27).

Adam I. P. Smith explores the very different subse-

quent case of antebellum America. âDemocracyâ soon came to have a âlegitimizing functionâ similar to what âcivilizationâ had for Europeans–and would be endlessly contested across the political spectrum (p. 28). A broad spectrum of politicians, from southern Democrats to northern abolitionists, would claim that their movements and positions typified âdemocracyâ–while believing their democratic ideology would serve as a âbulwark of stabilityâ against the new challengers of socialism and communism (p. 36).

Of course, âdemocraticâ rhetoric often served to hide the much slower real pace of reforms. Laura F. Edwards, in âThe Contradictions of Democracy in American Institutions and Practices,â turns a sharp eye to âthe tension between efforts to limit and to expand the peopleâs participation in governmentâ between the Revolution and Civil War. Even in the most radical of the early state constitutions offering general manhood suffrage, much of the population remained excluded through âstatus relationshipsâ of bondage and gender (p. 43). Even after the constitutional-era contraction, the re-expansion of suffrage across the early to mid-nineteenth century created a system that was âsimultaneously expansive and constrained for all the people (p. 54).â The growth of democracy led to fewer status changes than its enthusiasts had prognosticated.

Section 2 chronicles the tortured path of France–which like colonial America before it, largely avoided âdemocracyâ early in the Revolution. Ruth Scurr documents how between 1789 and 1791, âdemocracy was widely considered an outmoded, undesirable and dangerous form of governmentâ (p. 62). The establishment of universal manhood suffrage in 1792 did lead to increased discussions of âdemocracyâ–but also linked political participation to ârepresentation and surveillance,â making the concept co-exist uneasily with Jacobinsâ emphasis on the general will (p. 65).

Michel Drolet brings French conceptualizations of democracy through the mid-nineteenth century, seeing as central the problematic between the growing emphasis on the individual âselfâ and how this coexisted with a continued focus on the âgeneral willâ and âcommon goodâ (pp. 69-70). Alexis de Tocqueville had feared social equality would give rise to greater âself-interest,â and was seconded by liberals such as FranÃ§ois Guizot who saw âidolatry of democracyâ as the factionalism, division, and âanarchy itselfâ (pp. 70, 72). Early French socialists like Charles Fourier and Henri de Saint-Simon also equated âbourgeois democracyâ with the modern individualism they opposed (p. 80). Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, as the French voting franchise oscillated between elite and full suffrage, the desirability and practicability of âdemocracyâ remained uncertain.

Malcolm Crook provides a useful overview of the distinctiveness of âFrench electoral cultureâ between 1789 and 1848 (p. 86). âRepresentationâ in France under the Old Regime was a term claimed by a broad array of non-elected groups who saw their duty as âre-presentingâ the views of other subjects–and became commonly used to refer to the judicial Parlements. The Estates General of 1789 eschewed direct voting in favor of a two- or three-tiered process, and only three million of Franceâs population of more than twenty million participated at any stage (p. 88). Universal suffrage would be established in 1793 only to be repealed in 1795, with the Thermidorians seeing the preceding period (much like their American counterparts in 1787) as an âexcess of âdemocracyââ (p. 91). Under Napoleon, however, the French created a new tradition of plebiscites. The franchise would be strictly limited under the Restoration and July Monarchy, before universal suffrage would be reestablished by the Revolution of 1848–only to abet the reestablishment of an illiberal Bonapartist dictatorship. Yet despite the âdisappointingâ reversals of the revolutionary era, and the âtendency of democracy to threaten anarchy, then mutate into despotism,â nevertheless the era did âenshrine the principle of universal suffrage,â and which became permanent after France again became a republic in 1870 (p. 97). As opposed to the relatively smooth democratizing transitions in Britain and America, France provided a model of oscillation and experimentation.

Part 3 turns attention to Britain, displacing its usual place at the front of similar volumes to show how âdemocracyâ itself would be increasingly discussed by the British only after the example and inspiration of the American and French Revolutions. As Philip describes, only in the early 1790s would âdemocratâ become a âbadge of identityâ and also a âfighting wordâ (p. 113). During this time, it became a term of identification for reformers and âEnglish Jacobins,â though still one of denunciation for their opponents. Edmund Burke declared âdespotic democracyâ would not respect the rights of minorities, an assertion many found to be validated by the French Revolutionary Terror (p. 105). Following the coming of war with France in 1793, the âdemocratsâ would be largely suppressed and excluded from British politics.

As Innes, Philip, and Robert Saunders combine to explore in âThe Rise of Democratic Discourse in the Reform Era,â only in response to Chartism and the transnational waves of revolution in 1830 and 1848 did âdemocratizationâ slowly become a phrase utilized across the political spectrum. The Chartists of 1837-48 made âdemocracyâ central to their message, as a way of showing the limitations of the 1832 Parliamentary reforms. Yet âdemocracyâ lacked a fixed usage–and would be coopted by Benjamin Disraeliâs Tories as a term for the supposed meritocracy instituted in 1832. The international reaction against the 1848 revolutions also helped elites continue to castigate democracy as–using ancient categories–âvulgar, tumultuous, whipped on by demagogues, and despotic in its pretensionsâ (p. 128).

Innes thereafter (somewhat belatedly in the volume) addresses the broader British development of democratic practices between the 1770s and 1850s, examining voting, petitioning, and club uses. Innes begins by usefully complicating the minimized definition of âdemocracyâ utilized elsewhere in the volume, describing how educated Britons across the era would have âunderstood democracy *relationally* [her emphasis], as a form of political culture in which politicians vied for power as self-proclaimed champions of the peopleâ (p. 129). Voting, directly incorporating only a small percentage of males and additionally subject to many anomalies, could not have been sufficient by itself. Petitioning–until the 1780s usually directed by bodies of electors but increasingly used to display broader public opinion–became also nearly as highly valued as voting. Clubs, meanwhile, functioned as important bodies for cultivating opinion across the eighteenth century, and fostered broad reformist upsurges in the 1790s and 1830s-40s. The methods which would typify modern democracy flourished across this period even as the British remained distrustful of âdemocracyâ as a concept.

Part 4 turns attention to the less well known territory of Ireland. Ultan Gillenâs âConstructing Democratic Thought in Ireland in the Age of Revolution, 1775-1800â looks at the rise of reform movements in Ireland following the start of the American Revolution, which led to legislative independence in 1782–but with suffrage still confined to propertied Anglicans. The French Revolution and the broader âlanguage of revolutionary internationalismâ would see the spread of broader calls for democratization, with the United Irishmen becoming a prominent voice for religious equality and broader representative government over the 1790s (p. 154). Democracy, Gillen concludes, during the era âcreated a genuinely radical, secular and novel ideologyâ offering âa path to a better world, and … a vision worth fighting forâ (p. 161).

With the suppression of the United Irishmen in 1798 and the Act of Union abolishing the Irish Parliament of 1800, democratization in Ireland slumbered like its European counterparts until the 1830s and 1840s. Laurent Colantonio examines ââDemocracyâ and the Irish People, 1830-48,â looking at the Irish participation in the second revolutionary era. He pays particular attention to the Catholic leader Daniel OâConnell, who would synthesize Irish, British, and European elements to develop a distinctive âdemocratic libertyâ coming from âpopular expression, mass participation, âmoral force,â libertyâ in calling for Catholic Emancipation and the restoration of an Irish Parliament (p. 164). Colantonio especially highlights the close ârelationship between democracy and nationalismâ in the Irish dissident tradition (p. 173). S. J. Connolly seconds Colantonio in seeing âdemocracyâ for OâConnell as not primarily âa principle of representation, but a spirit of opposition to oligarchy or privilegeâ (p. 179). The principle of popular representation, rather than the electoral mechanism, remained the most important element in âdemocracy.â

Innes and Philip close the volume with a chapter looking at âsynergiesâ across the North Atlantic, judiciously utilizing both transnational and comparative perspectives. The cross-movement influences in each case appear clear, in which ânot only did texts and people move,â but also took place âagainst the background of a commonly shared cultureâ (p. 193). Even as national traditions diverged over the first half of the nineteenth century, transnational waves of protest continued. Comparatively, each of the four nations saw the rise of âpublic accountabilityâ to âthe peopleâ rise as a central political trope, along with a growing emphasis on âequality,â even if conceptualizations of how these principles would be expressed varied greatly (p. 211).

Re-Imagining Democracy provides a fresh overview of the intellectual history of democracy around the North Atlantic across the revolutionary era. It usefully problematizes the central theme of R. R. Palmerâs famous *Age of Democratic Revolution* (1959-64) and will make historians think harder about which phenomena they choose to classify as âdemocratic.â

The volumeâs essays are largely synthetic in style, and tend to avoid direct historiographical debates. Nevertheless, they beg the question of the extent to which we should classify the advent of modern âdemocracyâ with its arrival as a discursively accepted term. Should

we not be discussing postclassical âdemocracyâ until the 1790s (if even yet then)? Or, is it rather more helpful to see democracyâs development as a longer-term process? Were the pejorative connotations of âdemocracyâ problematic for eighteenth-century actors, or did more commonly accepted descriptors such as âpopular sovereigntyâ and âlibertyâ serve many of the same functions?

Particularly with the rise of interest in the interconnected nature of the Atlantic Revolutions over the past decade, *Re-Imagining Democracy* merits close reading for scholars of the history of democracy and general revolutionary era. The many contradictions of the most pliable form of politics continue to demand further study both historically and conceptually.