The French Revolution and British Popular Politics

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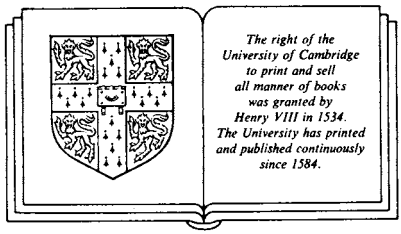

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Introduction

Mark Philp

The history of the French Revolution is more than usually subject to the vagaries of intellectual fashion and remains a vehemently contested field for research. Indeed, this has been the case since the first days of the Revolution. Although less subject to historical fashions, the precise nature of the British response to France has also been hotly disputed territory ever since news of events in France first crossed the Channel. It is not difficult to see why this should be so. The French Revolution, following hard on the heels of the American, raised questions for contemporaries, as for later generations, about the legitimacy of Britain's '*ancien régime*' and the degree and sources of its stability. It also led many to believe that substantial parliamentary reform was both necessary and inevitable, and this gave rise to a number of organisations dedicated to making the inevitable actual. The period from 1791 to 1803 is seen by many historians as the first major opportunity (and for some also the last) for a radical, popular, democratic reform of the British social and political order. One indication of its significance is Alfred Cobban's description of the pamphlet debate which followed the publication of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in November 1790 as, 'perhaps the last real discussion of fundamentals of politics in this country... Issues as great have been raised in our day, but it cannot be pretended that they have evoked a political discussion on the intellectual level of that inspired by the French Revolution'.[1] The intellectual debate, however, is only one dimension of events in Britain in the 1790s. By the end of 1792, it had largely been displaced by the development of reforming and loyalist organisations which played a major role in shaping Britain's domestic politics in the decade, and which carried the debate over into a practical struggle for and against parliamentary reform. Moreover, it is in 1792 that the first democratic organisations for political reform with memberships drawn predominantly from the artisan and working classes enter British

[1] Cited by Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 1.

politics.[2] By the end of the 1790s these organisations, after a series of conflicts and confrontations with the government, had been driven underground and, in association with similar groups from Ireland, sought to achieve their initially reformist objectives through insurrectionary action.[3] What was triggered by events in France culminated in fugitive attempts to use French arms to emulate her revolution, with a French raid in Wales and with landings in Ireland (but too late to aid the rebellion there) in 1797–8, and with acute crises on mainland Britain in 1797–8 and 1801–2.

The connection between domestic political concerns and events in France was signalled as early as Price's sermon, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, given in November 1789, which provided Burke with one of his principal targets in his *Reflections*. Price's ostensible purpose was to celebrate the benefits of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, although he also used the occasion as an opportunity for pointing to remaining shortcomings in the British constitution. But he concluded by reminding his audience of 'the favourableness of the present times to all exertions in the cause of public liberty':

> I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge, which has undermined superstition and error – I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever; and nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it. – I have lived to see THIRTY MILLIONS of people, indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice; their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects. – After sharing in the benefits of one Revolution, I have been spared to be a witness to two other Revolutions, both glorious. – And now, methinks, I see the ardour for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience.
>
> Tremble all ye oppressors of the world! Take warning all ye supporters of slavish governments, and slavish hierarchies! Call no more (absurdly and wickedly) REFORMATION, innovation. You cannot now hold the world in darkness. Struggle no longer against increasing light and liberality. Restore to mankind their rights; and consent to the correction of abuses, before they and you are destroyed together.[4]

Price's sermon encapsulates three aspects of the early response to the

[2] Cf. Mary Thale (ed.), *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792–1799* (Cambridge, 1983); Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1979); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968); Gwyn. A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes: Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution*, 2nd edn (London, 1989); and many others.

[3] Roger Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience, 1795–1803* (Gloucester, 1983); Marianne Elliot, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen in France* (New Haven, Conn., 1982).

[4] R. Price, *Discourse on the Love of our Country* (London, 1789), pp. 50–1.

French Revolution. He unashamedly joins the general enthusiasm for events, and the approbation of the ambitions of the French, but there is not much attempt to understand the French on their own terms. Many people on this side of the Channel saw events in France as mirroring the British Revolution of 1688, and expected the establishment of a limited monarchy alongside representative institutions. Few early commentators were initially critical, and few grasped or made much attempt to grasp the complex set of forces which made up the Revolution.[5]

Price's sermon also links together British and French affairs, not simply by seeing French events as emulating British achievements, but also in identifying the cause of reform in France with that in Britain and in the use of French affairs to make domestic political points. Charles James Fox, the opposition Whig leader, welcomed the fall of the Bastille with a degree of hyperbole which was later to cause him problems ('How much the greatest event that has happened in the history of the world, and how much the best'), and he succumbed to the common tendency to interpret French events in English terms, seeing the Revolution as 'a good stout blow against the influence of the crown'.[6] This process of reading French events through domestic political concerns and domestic traditions of political controversy, is often combined with attempts to use the example of France to stimulate the activities of organisations and party factions in Britain. The example of France comes to act first as a beacon for, but later as a warning against reformist ambitions in the decade. Three groups in particular tried to use French affairs to further their domestic political ambitions, and later found themselves tarnished by their connections: the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI), which had been in eclipse since the demise of the Yorkshire movement for political reform of the early 1780s; the Protestant Dissenters, whose attempts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts in 1787, 1789 and 1790 had failed; and the opposition Whigs, whose cause was in disarray following the debacle over the Rockingham administration and subsequently the Regency crisis. Each found in France a cause with which they could identify, but each also came to find their attachment to France a more costly association than they had initially assumed, especially after the declaration of war between France and Britain in February 1793.

The sermon also indicates a third aspect of the subsequent debate and

[5] Burke first showed evidence of hostility in the September of 1789 – Burke to Windham, 27 September 1789, in T. W. Copeland (ed.), *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (Cambridge, 1958–78), vol. VI, p. 25. Derek Jarrett's recent *Three Faces of Revolution: Paris, London and New York in 1789* (London, 1989), gives a shrewd account of the variety and confusion of response to the early events of the Revolution. On the early response, see Robert Hole's discussion below, ch. 1.

[6] Cited in John Derry, 'The opposition Whigs and the French Revolution 1789–1815' in H. T. Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution 1789–1815* (London, 1989), p. 40.

of the terms in which it was conducted. Out of the particular affairs of the French nation, commentators began to draw lessons and see signs of more universal import. As Major John Cartwright, one of the mainstays of the earlier days of the SCI, put it: 'The French, Sir, are not only asserting their own rights, but they are advancing the general liberties of mankind.'[7] This universalisation of particular to general liberties is also found in Price's sense of the 'light' of reform 'setting AMERICA free, reflected to FRANCE, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates EUROPE!'[8] It is also evident in the emphasis on the progress of reason and opinion insistently reiterated in the works of reformers such as Paine, Godwin, Priestley, Thelwall and others. Indeed, in Priestley's work, as in others, there is also a distinct millenarian streak, in which the French Revolution is assigned a role in the inauguration of the thousand year rule of Christ.[9] In each case, a little local difficulty becomes a sign of a broader march of principle which inevitably has implications for British politics.

Burke, in his vehement denunciation of the Revolution and its English sympathisers – most obviously Price and Lansdowne, but also implicitly his erstwhile Whig friends, like Fox – poured derision on this attempt to translate political practices and principles from one country to another by appealing to reason and truth. Against principle, Burke set accumulated wisdom and experience; against reason, he set precedent, prescription and property. British enthusiasts for France used an inheritance of commonwealthman and country party thought as a basis for constructing their understanding of the implications of French events, but they often interpreted these traditions in more universalist terms than their predecessors. In contrast, Burke seized on the more parochial aspects of this inheritance and sought to establish an opposition between the Englishman's legacy of particular rights and duties, set within a hierarchical social, political and economic order, and the wild fanaticism of those who thought it possible thoroughly to reform a society whilst preserving the blessings of culture and civilisation which derived from the old order. Burke's initial responses were seen as exaggerated hyperbole by most of his contemporaries, but as time passed and affairs in France became more bloody and threatening, the *Reflections* came to be seen as

[7] J. Cartwright, cited in H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789–1815* (Oxford, 1985), p. 7.

[8] Price, *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, p. 51.

[9] Clark Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore, Md., 1975), pp. 126–43, on Priestley. See also chs 7–9, on the English dimension of Millenarianism more generally. On Irish Millenarianism, see David W. Miller, 'Presbyterianism and "modernization" in Ulster', *Past and Present*, 80 (1978), especially pp. 80–4.

prescient, and the stark choice it offered between the status quo and chaos seemed more appropriate.[10]

This sense of appropriateness was enhanced for those now growing increasingly hostile to France by developments on the British scene arising out of the pamphlet debate which the *Reflections* sparked. The pamphlet debate has considerable significance as a watershed in the development of British liberal and conservative political thought, and it is also an important moment in the growth of a popular press and the evolution of a popular political literary style. But it also had a more intensely practical significance in terms of the sheer scale of the exchanges. Burke's *Reflections* sold some 30,000 copies in the first two years after its publication, and it drew over a hundred replies, and probably over two hundred works in support.[11] But the volume of items is over-shadowed by the extent of circulation achieved by some of the contributions. Paine's *Rights of Man*, on the most conservative estimate, probably sold between 100,000 and 200,000 copies in the first three years after its publication, and with the procedures available to ensure multiple readerships and the 'bridging mechanisms' which brought the text even to illiterate and semi-literate people, it seems likely that a substantial proportion of all classes would have had some acquaintance with Paine. The innovative character of many works in the debate, their rhetorical inventiveness and power, their sheer volume and their mass circulation, ensured that the debate, in some form or other, penetrated through British society. This 'mass', popular character to the debate is picked up by and reinforced first by reformers and subsequently by loyalists, and plays a critical role in shifting the focus of events from France to Britain.[12]

[10] Cf. Leslie Mitchell's editorial 'Introduction' to *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke: The French Revolution 1790–1794*, vol. VIII (Oxford, 1990).

[11] This is probably a low estimate. See Gayle Trusdel Pendleton, 'Towards a bibliography of the *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* controversy', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 85 (1982), pp. 65–103, and Gregory Claeys, 'The French Revolution and British political thought', *History of Political Thought*, 11, 1 (1990), pp. 59–80. There are obviously many ways to count publications as contributing to the debate – are, for example, the critical reviews to be seen as contributions to it? But even on the relatively tight criteria used by Pendleton and Claeys, it is possible to find items which are not included. For example, Pendleton does not include many of the songs and ballads which can plausibly be claimed to be commentaries on Burke and Paine. Moreover, by focusing on the *Reflections* and *Rights of Man*, much of the broader reform literature, including newspapers and periodicals, such as Thomas Spence's *Pig's Meat, or Lessons for the Swinish Multitude* (London, 1793–5), and Daniel Eaton's *Hog's Wash or a Salmagundi for swine/Politics for the People* (London, 1793–5), is necessarily excluded. While this is legitimate given Pendleton's limited project, it would be dangerous to rest generalisations about the balance of radical and loyalist publications on this basis.

[12] On the loyalist side, in addition to Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin*, see S. Pedersen, 'Hannah More meets Simple Simon: tracts, chapbooks, and popular culture in late eighteenth century England', *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986), pp. 84–113; also, more generally on the publication of loyalist material which by 1795 was, in the form of the Cheap

The pamphlet war led reformers to attempt to strengthen their case for reform by widening their base of support, and they did this by seeking the maximum possible proliferation of radical and reforming publications. In doing so, they helped encourage artisan and working-class involvement in the extra-parliamentary reform movement. The vehicles for the dissemination of political literature were the metropolitan and provincial corresponding societies which sprang into life (or, for some, back into life) in the first two or three years of the decade. Manchester's society was formed in 1790, and the London-based Society for Constitutional Information, and London Revolution Society, were in action from this time. But the real spate of activity occurred later: eight societies were formed in and around Sheffield at the end of 1791 and the beginning of 1792; and societies were also formed in Liverpool, Stockport, Warrington, Leeds, Wakefield, Halifax, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge, Norwich, Great Yarmouth, Ipswich, Chester, Derby, Belper, Birmingham, Walsall, Coventry and Wolverhampton. Smaller groups also appeared throughout the south and south-west, and a crop of new organisations sprang up in London.[13] The newest phenomenon in all this is the London Corresponding Society, founded by Thomas Hardy, which catered specifically for the working man and which, consequently, marked a major departure from the older societies which were dominated by minor gentry and professional men.[14] But perhaps equally worrying to the government at this stage was the formation of the Whig Association of the Friends of the People, whose attempts to secure reform were at least partly aimed to pre-

Repository Tracts, far outstripping reformist publications, see Robert Hole, 'British counter-revolutionary popular propaganda in the 1790s' in Colin Jones (ed.), *Britain and Revolutionary France: Conflict, Subversion and Propaganda* (Exeter, 1983), and n.19, below.

[13] Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty* (London, 1979), chs. 5 and 7; Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution*, pp. 9–13. As with the parameters of the pamphlet debate, so with radical organisations – the boundaries are not easily drawn. One little explored area of political activity, which falls short of a formal organisation for parliamentary reform, but which would none the less have had a major role in extending the controversy is the debating societies. Mary Thale's 'London debating societies in the 1790s', *Historical Journal*, 32, 1 (1989), pp. 57–86, has helped open up this field of research for the metropolis, but many of the less formally organised discussion groups are difficult to trace such as the Cannonians, mentioned by Holcroft's friend Shield (cited in E. Colby, *The Life of Thomas Holcroft* (London, 1925), vol. I, p. 209), or the even more informal open-house dinners, such as those given by Horne Tooke at his house in Wimbledon. The problem for the historian is not simply to trace these informal debating contexts, but also to assess how far such activity is in any way different in the 1790s. Unfortunately our evidence for Horne Tooke, for example, is limited to the 1790s, but Tooke's entertaining of men and (less often) women from a range of social classes does seem to have been in part a consequence of his involvement in the radical societies, and might well have been a phenomenon distinctive to the 1790s (the data on his contacts is drawn from Godwin's diary, Bodleian Library (Bod. Lib.), Abinger MS,.

[14] See in particular, Thale, *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society*; Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes*, ch. 4; and Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, ch. 5.

empt more widespread extra-parliamentary activity, but who were nonetheless seen by the government as encouraging the reform movement and thereby as posing a threat to the established order.[15]

It was partly to alienate the more conservative Whigs from their reforming allies that the Royal Proclamation against Seditious Writings and Publications was issued in May 1792; but the move was also prompted by the rapid spread of Paine's work and the burgeoning of the radical presses in both the metropolis and provinces which led to a proliferation of handbills, chapbooks, poems, songs and squibs in support of the radical cause. This spate of radical activity was associated by many, including the government, with the growing number of food riots, and the confidence of the political elite was not helped by the often fierce rhetoric which peppered the societies' correspondence with France, expressing support and admiration for their revolution, and sometimes the wish to emulate it. Local magistrates also found evidence of potential insurgence in handbills and verses, dissenting sermons and casual conversations, strikes, riots, murmurings in the army and, finally, in rumours of the wholesale production of arms.[16] To add to government concern, the situation in both Scotland and Ireland seemed even worse. Scotland greeted each new French victory in its war with the Counter-Revolutionary Coalition with toasts, bells and lighted windows; Dundas, the Home Secretary, was regularly burnt in effigy; there was a spate of violent rioting towards the end of the year; and in December a general convention of reformers was held in Edinburgh. Ireland had corn riots from the summer of 1792, a swelling of republican agitation in the north, and there was the prospect of further attempts to remove the disabilities of the Catholics at the end of the year.

Two aspects of all this activity were especially alarming. A major concern for those in government circles was the extent of the communication between corresponding societies, which bridged both geographical and social distances, and which raised the spectre of mass, organised and centrally directed political activity. Moreover, this occurred against a background of growing international tension. With domestic radicalism rife, the prospects of maintaining internal security in the event of a war with France might not have looked good, and the enthusiasm for fraternal exchanges between the reform societies and the National Assembly could only have added to government fears of subversion and

[15] See Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, p. 206, which mentions Pitt's view that because certain prominent members of the association were 'concerned' with others who harboured a 'direct hostility to the very form of our government ... this afforded suspicion, that the motion for a reform was nothing more than the preliminary to the overthrow of the whole system of our present government'.

[16] Cf. John Ehrman, *The Younger Pitt: The Reluctant Transition*, vol. II (London, 1983), chs. 4 and 5.

domestic revolution.[17] In December 1792 the government seemed to believe that insurrection was imminent and in response embodied the militia, fortified the Tower, brought hundreds of troops into London and issued a further Proclamation against Seditious Writings.[18]

The end of 1792, however, brought some consolation for the government with the formation in November of the Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers. Several hundred provincial associations followed Reeves's London example and by early 1793 there may have been as many as two thousand such organisations spread throughout the country.[19] The active members were drawn predominantly from men of property, but they did attract participation from the lower orders by public meetings and other loyalist demonstrations, such as processions, bonfires, Paine burnings, and so on. In more practical ways the loyalists orchestrated a campaign against reform organisations by putting pressure on publicans to refuse to rent rooms to the societies and by harassing known sympathisers with France and reform. Moreover, in an attempt to stem the spread of Painite principles, the associations financed the publication of a range of loyalist works, from pamphlets to chapbooks, broadsides and songs.[20]

By the time war broke out with France in February 1793, popular politics in Britain had been deeply affected by the example of France. The British government faced widespread, organised pressure for parliamentary reform, and a public which had been so encouraged to flirt with republicanism by Paine's works, that the social and political elite had felt

[17] Although there might also be some sense, as some reformers pointed out, that a war might force reform off the political agenda in a way which could command public support. See, for example, Godwin's commentary on the declaration of war with France, Bod. Lib., Abinger MSS, dep. b. 227/1g.

[18] Clive Emsley, 'The London "Insurrection" of December 1792: fact, fiction or fantasy?', *Journal of British Studies*, 17, 2 (1978), pp. 68–86.

[19] H. T. Dickinson, 'Popular loyalism in the 1790s' in Eckhart Hellmuth (ed.), *The Transformation of Political Culture: England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1990), p. 517–20. More generally, see A. Mitchell, 'The association movement of 1792–3', *Historical Journal*, 4, 1 (1961), pp. 56–77; D. E. Ginter, 'The loyalist association movement of 1792–3 and British public opinion', *Historical Journal*, 9, 2 (1966), pp. 179–90; E. C. Black, *The Association: British Extra-Parliamentary Organization 1769–1793* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), ch. 7; R. R. Dozier, *For King, Constitution and Country: The English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington, Ky., 1983).

[20] To a greater extent than the radicals, a concerted attempt was made to disseminate loyalist songs written, for the most part, specifically for the occasion and using already well-known tunes. For example, 1792–3 saw the publication of two collections of the *AntiGallican Songster* and two of the *Anti-Levelling Songster*. No comparable collections exist for the radicals, and the radical songs from the period I have been able to trace are to be found either in Spence's *Pig's Meat*, Eaton's *Hog's Wash* or in loose-leaf broadsides (and these are in the minority). Although the loyalists devotion to the song as a means of confirming and eliciting support for their cause does not match that shown in 1803, when there were few radical competitors but where the invasion threat was clearly a stimulus to flights of poesy, it is still an impressive showing.

it necessary to organise to an unprecedented extent in defence of the status quo and the constitution. But, by this time, the example of France had come to play an increasingly complex role for people in Britain: many who had originally supported developments were now distressed by the increasing bloodshed and the increasing radicalism of the Revolution; others now looked to France as the way ahead. Interpretations of why France's Revolution had taken a bloody course were linked to changing senses of the prospects for radical change. If some found in her example reasons for becoming less politically adventurous, others found reasons for being more so; and still others found reasons for attempting to dissociate themselves from France, while insisting on the justice and necessity of reform at home. But for ten to fifteen years after 1793, British popular politics remained profoundly affected by the war with France and the changing state of French affairs. This is not to say, as we shall see, that popular politics was wholly, or even largely dependent on the impetus from France, so much as to insist that the Revolution and its course helped to establish an essential component of the background to the confrontation between reformism and loyalism which took place in British popular politics in the 1790s, and which at times seemed to threaten Britain with a similar degree of revolutionary change as France had experienced. The 'conventionism' of the reform societies in 1793 and 1794 and the sedition and treason trials in Scotland and in England to which they gave rise; the mass public meetings of 1795 and the 'Gagging Acts' which they elicited; the food and crimp riots of 1795–6 and the naval mutinies of 1797–8; the revolt in Ireland in 1798; the successive suspensions of habeas corpus after 1794 and the outlawing of the London Corresponding Society, the United Englishmen, United Britons, United Irishmen and United Scotsmen in 1799; the new spate of treason trials associated with the Irish revolt and with attempts to involve France in 1798; and the renewed rash of loyalist propaganda in 1803 in response to a further perceived threat of invasion by France – all these events, and the many others which chart the fortunes of the reformers and their loyalist opponents and which, for some, at times brought Britain close to revolution, are affected by the French Revolution, even if there are also strong, underlying domestic tensions and traditions providing some of the impetus. While it is appropriate to question the precise nature of the influence of French events, and while it is possible to doubt that the sources of ideological conflict and political tension in the two countries were wholly similar, it is not reasonable to doubt that events in France provided a central background condition for the confrontation in Britain in the 1790s especially, between the defenders of the status quo and a popular, extra-parliamentary movement for political (and, occasionally, social) reform.

In the analysis of the events in the 1790s and early 1800s there are many areas of disagreement, from which have emerged substantially different accounts of the period and of its significance in British history. There is controversy over how widespread was the enthusiastic response to events in France, how far radical and reformist views permeated down through the class structure, and to what extent they rendered uncertain the loyalties of the middling and lower orders of late eighteenth-century British society. There is dispute about the strength of the British state in the face of public demands for reform and for an end to the war in France, and on the depth of the commitment to the established regime on the part of the various sectors of the ruling elite. Also, it remains unsettled to what extent the government's prosecution of the war served to jeopardise the legitimacy and stability of the government by making enormous demands on the loyalty of British subjects at a time when food shortages and recruitment tactics were resulting in widespread rioting.

These issues, and a range of related concerns, have been the subject of a number of publications in recent years.[21] But there remain a series of substantial difficulties with the accounts which have been advanced thus far. These difficulties do not derive from a paucity of evidence, there has been a great deal of high-quality scholarship in this area which has done much to provide the basis for an adequate account of events. But problems remain, both because of the complexity of the flow of forces and events in the period – public mood is a far from stable commodity and is not easily measured at the best of times – and because the analysis of events in the decade lead us directly into important, but seemingly intractable, historical and sociological issues concerning the sources of order and disorder within the British state in the last decade of the eighteenth century. For example, to ask why Britain did not experience a revolution in the 1790s is a loaded question, if only because revolutions are not natural events, like thunderstorms, but social and political ones, the nature of which, and thus the conditions for which, necessarily change over time.[22] Political will must combine with circumstance, and both will and circumstance are profoundly affected by people's expectations and experience. That this is so makes questions of the sources of radical thought in Britain, of the exact nature of the reformers' intentions, and of

[21] In addition to those cited above by Dickinson, Dozier, Elliot, Ehrman, Emsley, Goodwin, Thale, Thompson, Wells and Williams, see also Ian R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution* (Oxford, 1984), and the bibliographies in Dickinson's edited collection, *Britain and the French Revolution*, and Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine: Social and Political Thought* (London, 1989).

[22] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (Cambridge, 1979); but see also John Dunn, *Rethinking Modern Political Theory* (Cambridge, 1987), ch. 4, and *Modern Revolutions*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1989).

the extent to which their beliefs and aspirations were transformed as a consequence of Pitt's campaign against them, or as a result of events in France, central in estimating how close some Britons came to countenancing revolutionary action (or action which would have had a revolutionary outcome), and how close they brought the British state to revolution (and to what sort of revolution). Similarly, in the analysis of those who resisted the movements for reform, it is imperative to identify the sources of reaction, to examine the extent to which these were deep-rooted among both the elite and the people of Britain, providing a reserve of instinctive loyalty to the British state, and to assess how far this loyalty could be pressed in times of war, famine and public unrest. This collection of essays does not pretend to solve all these problems nor, indeed, do the contributors agree in their interpretations of the events of the 1790s and their relative significance in securing or destabilising the status quo. We have, however, tried to clarify the points of disagreement and their implications; and although each essay focuses on different aspects of the period, each also draws out some of the broader implications of its analysis.

The literature on the period 1789–1803 revolves around two main issues: the first concerns the origins, nature and impact of the 'debate on France'; the second, the sources of order and disorder within the British state and the potential for revolution. This division is heuristically valuable, and divides the contributions to this volume into roughly equal groups but, as the chapters which follow demonstrate, the two sets of concerns are intimately and intrinsically connected. Political, social and religious ideologies are an essential component in sustaining or questioning the hegemony of elites and the legitimacy of states, and thus in preserving order or in initiating experimentation with insurrection. In addition, the French Revolution is not a single event, so much as a complex, evolving political and social process, and to speak of the 'debate on France' or the reaction to French affairs tends to underplay this dynamic character. The French Revolution is not something which can be endorsed or condemned once and for all, and its impact on Britain is also not once and for all. To take one instance, the war between Britain and France which arises from the Revolution, has a profound effect on Britain, at the very least in terms of making heavy demands on finances, equipment and personnel. Crimp riots, the naval mutinies and public anger at the cost of lives in the West Indies, all indicate ways in which popular unrest was exacerbated by the demands of the war. Moreover, once the Revolution controversy had changed its ground, a good deal of the pamphlet literature critical of Pitt's policies is directed primarily against the war, and attacks on the conduct of the war and on its

objectives and cost are a central plank of the remaining parliamentary opposition of the period.[23] Just as the French Revolution is an evolving process, so is the ideological confrontation between government and opposition and loyalism and reform, and so too are the British government's attempts to win the war, to retain the allegiance of the political, social and financial elites, and to secure the compliance of the people of Britain. Moreover, each of these processes is affected by, and affects, each of the others. While there is heuristic value in distinguishing between issues associated with the debate and questions of the threat of insurrection, we should not think, as the chapters which follow show, that the issues can be, or ought to be, regarded as wholly distinct.

Although there has been a good deal of work on the intellectual debts of various contributors to the debate, and although an increasing amount of work has appeared on the language of the debate since Boulton's original work, it is true to say that our understanding of the sources of the debate on France, of its character, its multiple levels and its long-term impact, remains uncertain.[24] The period from 1770 to 1830 is one in which previous lines of ideological allegiance and adherence are broken up and reformed in ways which leave a substantially different ideological context for political action. The 'debate on France' plays a crucial, but as yet incompletely understood role in this transformation – one which the recent works of Dr J. C. D. Clark and Professor Pocock have further complicated.[25] It remains unclear how far the doctrines of radical reformers in the 1790s should be understood, as they were denounced, as part of a contagion of French principles, and how far they are indigenous to late eighteenth-century English political ideology. The same must also be said of the sources of reaction and of the complex role which religious

[23] J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793–1815* (Cambridge, 1982); also Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars 1793–1815* (London, 1979), chs. 3–4.

[24] On the language of the debate see, James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London, 1963); Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791–1819* (Oxford 1984); Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin*; J. Turner, 'Burke, Paine, and the nature of language', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 19 (1989), pp. 36–53. Butler's book gives an excellent bibliography for a range of the contributors to the controversy, but subsequent works of note include Malcom Chase, *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism 1775–1840* (Oxford, 1989); Iain Hampsher-Monk, 'Rhetoric and opinion in the politics of Edmund Burke', *History of Political Thought*, 9, 3 (1988), pp. 455–84, and 'John Thelwall and the eighteenth century radical response to political economy', *Historical Journal*, 34 (1991); Claeys, *Thomas Paine*, and his 'The French Revolution debate'; and Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988).

[25] J. C. D. Clark, *English Society 1688–1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge, 1985); J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), especially part 3. See also Claeys, 'The French Revolution debate'.