Abstract: Johanna INNES

Democracy and demagoguery in the British Isles 1700-1850

Eighteenth and nineteenth-century British understandings of democracy were heavily freighted with tropes derived from classical – Greek and Roman – accounts of the political dynamics of ‘popular government’. Among these were a set of ideas about problems in leadership in conditions of democracy. Images of the popular leader, the ‘demagogue’ derived from Greek and Roman writing were not invariably negative, but very often were so. Established politicians who sought ‘popularity’ (a word which retained its negative Roman connotations) were sometimes called demagogues, or compared to specific Greek or Roman popular leaders. From the later eighteenth century, however, the demagogue increasingly came to be imagined as a man from outside the traditional governing class, a humbly born ‘mob orator’.

In this paper I will examine the changing ways in which the figure of the demagogue was contested, chiefly in England, but with some reference to developments in Scotland and Ireland. I will explore arguments around the term, considering them both as a form of polemic, and as substantive contributions to discussion of issues of leadership under democracy. I will relate changes to changes in political practice, as well as to the ways in which political options were constructed. I will pay particular attention to the positions adopted by those who favoured a greater role for the people in government. Some of these sought to challenge applications of the term; others embraced it – Yes, said the Chartist leader Feargus O’Connor, I am a demagogue. The word comes from the Greek, and means ‘a leader of the people’. Yet others saw it as regrettably applicable precisely to such ‘mob orators’ as O’Connor, and accordingly sought to imagine alternative forms of democratic politics that would exclude demagoguery.

This proposal emerges from a project on the ‘Re-imagining of democracy’, from the mid eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century, one of whose commitments is to taking seriously discourses about democracy current in the periods under study. We hope by this means to complicate and enrich contemporary discourse.

Joanna Innes, Somerville College Oxford
joanna.innes@some.ox.ac.uk