Abstract: Mark PHILP

Between Word and Deed: Languages of democracy/practices of participation:

England from 1789-1850

The paper will explore these different elements in the changing landscape of British political life at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. Its concern is to demonstrate the variable content ascribed to democracy, and the varying reactions to changing practices of political participation amongst both reformers and loyalists by members of the political elite as well as those writing in the popular press and for popular journals. In doing so, I aim to show that democracy in this period is open to wide contestation, that it lacks the reference which we now ascribe to the term, and that the practices that we associate with democracy are also not consistently associated with it.

Something happens to the language of democracy in Britain between the beginning of the French revolution and the middle of the nineteenth century. The term initially refers to a classical form of government for small states or a component in a mixed government regime, its scope broadens: representative democracy is coined as phrase; the emphasis on political equality increases (and becomes coupled in some areas with an emphasis on social equality as an objective); universal manhood suffrage becomes an explicit demand in popular campaigns for political reform; the term ‘democrat’ becomes a live term – signifying a range of sympathies and allegiances (where it is not used negatively as a term of abuse); and, while democracy is hotly contested, it become a site of political and linguistic contest to a degree that is absent through the eighteenth century.

Something also happens to popular political practices and organizations. In the paper I will suggest that the interaction between language and political organisation is a very much more complex phenomenon than it is generally characterized as being.

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