

Review: James Epstein and David Karr, *British Jacobin Politics, Desires, and Aftermaths: Seditious Hearts* (London: Routledge, 2021) 404pp. ISBN 978-1-003-02880-2, £120.00.

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'I ADOPT THE term *Jacobinism* without hesitation', wrote John Thelwall in 1796, 'because it is fixed upon us, as a stigma by our enemies'.¹ In *Seditious Hearts*, James Epstein and David Karr seek to understand the motives of those who, like Thelwall, committed themselves, often openly, to radical reform. The introduction and opening chapter of this monograph are co-authored by Epstein and Karr, who each contribute four further chapters respectively. A number of these essays have appeared as earlier versions elsewhere, here they are expanded and brought together to constitute a robust analysis of British radicalism in the last decade of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. The work is structured into two parts. The first analyses a 'strain' of Jacobinism existing in British radicalism in the 1790s, the second examines its resurrection in 1817 and memorialisation during the 1830s. The work concludes with a consideration of the political and intellectual life of social historian E.P. Thompson (1924-1993).

Chapter one is an able demonstration of what kind of work *Seditious Hearts* is. Epstein and Karr are not concerned with re-examining long standing historiographical questions such as how revolutionary the 'British plebeian movement' was, nor with demonstrating the existence of a 'faction' of British Jacobins.² Indeed, they generally sidestep debates of conceptual nomenclature around the applicability of the term 'Jacobin', whilst acknowledging that it was both a pejorative title foisted upon reformers by their political opponents and multi-stranded ideology in its own sense.³ Epstein and Karr instead chart a 'Jacobin

¹ John Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature Against the Usurpations of Establishments... Part the Second* (London: H.D. Symonds, 1796), p. 32.

² James Epstein and David Karr, *British Jacobin Politics, Desires, and Aftermaths: Seditious Hearts* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 20, 42.

³ Ibid, pp. 4, 19. The epithet has, however, seen a recent revival in its use as a term of analysis. See, for example, Tom Scriven, 'The Electoral Politics of the English Jacobins and Its Legacy, 1796-1807', *The Journal of British Studies*, 60.4 (2021), 890-918.

moment', a brief period within the early 1790s in which British reformers were able to identify publicly with French revolutionary principles and in which a 'Jacobinism', as 'a dialogic construction', was articulated within a space between loyalist, government and radical exchange.⁴ To illustrate this, Epstein and Karr re-analyse traditional sources, such as court records and histories by 'respectable' radicals such as Thomas Hardy or Francis Place for the performative gestures of radicals which speak to more conspiratorial actions and 'desires'. This is the methodology at work through the resulting chapters, highlighting the instability of language and meaning and the diversities within British radicalism through an analysis of performance, emotion and space. As such, it goes one step beyond the methods of discourse analysis used by scholars such as Mark Philp and Jon Mee, whose work Epstein and Karr engage with throughout *Seditious Hearts*.⁵

The strands of 'Jacobinism' within British radicalism of the 1790s are persuasively outlined in the following chapters, even if the authors repeatedly recognise that the reformist movement, as a whole, remained primarily constitutionalist in its actions and aims.⁶ Chapters two and four examine British Jacobins' relation to space and sociability, in the meetings of the London Corresponding Society and within the London bourgeois public sphere respectively. Chapter three explores the role of 'Jacobinism' in radical theatre through a close reading of two plays by Thomas Holcroft, *The Road to Ruin* (1792) and *The Deserted Daughter* (1795), including an analysis of his theatrical practice. Closing part one, chapter five analyses the place of America in the imagination of British radicals who constituted a network of craftsmen, early Romantics, middle-class intellectuals and Dissenters centred on Newgate prison.⁷ Throughout, both Epstein and Karr argue that the actions of radicals during this period were tightly managed and that 'Jacobinism' itself was granted meaning by the 'communicative

⁴ Epstein and Karr, p. 20.

⁵ Mark Philp, 'The Fragmented Ideology of Reform', in *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 32-35; Jon Mee, *Print, Publicity and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁶ Epstein and Karr, pp. 19, 197.

⁷ This is by no means an unexplored topic. See, for example, Emma Macleod, *British Visions of America, 1775-1820: Republican Realities* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 127-152.

conditions' enforced by loyalist authority, including the threat of social ostracism, political violence, prosecution, imprisonment and transportation.⁸ Yet this repression could be productive, opening up spaces to politically-radical performance, or 'counter-theatre', whether in the courtroom, public theatre, coffeehouse or tavern.⁹ This is a valuable line of enquiry, one that builds upon contemporary studies of performance and linguistics.¹⁰ However, this opposition, whether popular or civic, is frequently depicted by Epstein and Karr as vindictive and paranoid, even one-dimensional in its outlook, overlooking recent attempts to nuance political loyalism in the revolutionary period.¹¹

The second part of the monograph explores the 'aftermaths' and 'recurrence[s]' of British Jacobinism after the 1790s. Chapter six examines its re-emergence in political and literary culture in 1817 at four key moments: the mass petitioning campaign of that year, the publication of Robert Southey's *Wat Tyler*, the Blanketeers' march and the execution of the Pentrich rebels. Chapter seven analyses the memorialisation of radical memory and the 'Scottish Martyrs' during the 1830s. In doing so, Epstein and Karr valuably expand the scope of this work to encompass the legacies of 1790s radicalism that persisted into the nineteenth century. Chapter eight concludes the work with an examination of the life, writing and methodology of E.P. Thompson. This inclusion proves that more than half a century after the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), Thompson's work continues to be a major reference point in British radical studies.¹² The chapter is a fitting end to a work which greatly expands on many of the themes raised by Thompson, even if its content means it stands slightly out of step with the essays that precede it.

⁸ Epstein and Karr, p. 42.

⁹ Ibid, p. 20.

¹⁰ For example, Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹¹ See Mark Philp, 'Vulgar Conservatism 1792/3', in *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 40-70.

¹² See also Roger Fieldhouse and Richard Taylor, eds., *E. P. Thompson and English Radicalism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

This is a lengthy and intricate work that covers an extraordinary variety of topics, from Covent Garden theatre to the printing network at Newgate prison, early Romantic poetry to radical intrigue in colonial Australia. It is a challenging but rewarding read, meticulously grounded in the literature of several scholarly fields. Considering this, its few deficiencies seem marginal. One limitation is that for a study of 'British Jacobin Politics', much of the focus is upon a London circle of English radicals. Beyond chapter seven, and briefly chapter one, little mention is made of Scotland, and even less of radical and 'Jacobin' actors in either Ireland or Wales.¹³ Moreover, the book may have benefitted from a co-authored conclusion in parallel to the co-authored introduction and opening chapter. This would have provided an opportunity to draw out further themes from previous chapters and to re-affirm one of the work's key contentions: that there existed a 'Jacobin' strand within British radicalism of the 1790s which continued to have implications for the radical movement into the nineteenth century, an argument made openly in chapter one, but only implicitly in subsequent chapters.

Nevertheless, *Seditious Hearts* is successful in synthesising and building upon recent scholarship in a range of fields, including spatial analysis, print culture, the history of emotions and memory, radical theatre, as well as transatlantic and trans-imperial radicalism. The work should be praised for analysing British radicalism within a larger frame of context than the decade of the 1790s, remaining alive to its continuities and alterations beyond this period. By untangling the competing actions, thoughts and emotions of reformers in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Epstein and Karr provide a valuable contribution to scholarship on British radicalism in the early nineteenth century.



¹³ Epstein and Karr do acknowledge these omissions in chapter one (p. 19). On radicalism in the British Isles beyond London, see Marianne Elliott, *Partners in Revolution: The United Irishmen and France* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); J.D. Brims, 'The Scottish Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution', unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Edinburgh (1983); Elaine W. McFarland, 'Scottish Radicalism in the later Eighteenth Century: "The Social Thistle and Shamrock"', in T.M. Devine and J.R. Young, eds., *Eighteenth Century Scotland: New Perspectives* (East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 1999), pp. 275-98; Bob Harris, *The Scottish People and the French Revolution* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008), pp. 13-44.

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