‘A curious mixture of the old and the new’?

The nature of the English Corresponding Societies 1792-95.

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham for the degree of Master of Arts by Research.

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May 2019.

Abstract

This thesis relates to the British Corresponding Societies in the form they took between 1792 and 1795. It draws on government papers, trial transcripts, correspondence, public statements, memoirs and contemporary biography. The aim is to revisit the historiographical debate regarding the societies' nature, held largely between 1963 and 2000, which focused on the influence on the societies of 1780s' gentlemanly reformism which sought to retrieve lost, constitutional rights, and the democratic ideologies of Thomas Paine and the French Revolution which sought to introduce new natural rights. The thesis takes a wider perspective than earlier historiography by considering how the societies organised and campaigned, and the nature of their personal relationships with their political influences, as well as assessing the content of their writings. It concludes that the societies' nature was pragmatic and practical not ideological, moulded by political inexperience, their motives in entering reform debate and their class. Pragmatism was critical to the way the societies absorbed their political influences, provides an explanation of why they conflated apparently contradictory sources to create the 'curious mixture', and enabled them to unite to achieve the common goal of reform despite their differences, providing a greater level of cohesion than the historiography allows.

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Abbreviations

APLP	Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers
FOP	Friends of the People
LCS	London Corresponding Society
MCS	Manchester Constitutional Society
SCI	Society for Constitutional Information
SSCI	Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information

Italicisation

All italics are from the original unless otherwise stated.

‘A curious mixture of the old and the new’?[1]

The nature of the English Corresponding Societies 1792-95.

Introduction

The ‘curious mixture’ of the title was how Malcolm Thomis and Peter Holt described the ideology of the British radicals of the 1790s. The ‘mixture’ consisted of the retrospective, constitutional arguments which the gentlemanly reformers of the previous decade had used to demand parliamentary reform, and the innovative, democratic principles of Thomas Paine and the French Revolution. Thus, the radicals appeared to demand the return of historic, lost constitutional rights and the admission of new, natural rights, an approach in which Thomis and Holt saw ‘a strong element of paradox and internal contradiction’, with the use of ‘curious’ perhaps suggesting that this conflation was the result of ignorance.[2] The aim of this thesis is to follow the other definition of ‘curious’, that is arousing curiosity, and to endeavour to understand why the radicals made the choices they did when drawing on these apparently contradictory sources and to assess what this reveals of the movement’s nature.

The subject of this thesis is the British corresponding societies in the form they took between 1792 and 1795. The societies were comprised largely of working men, a demographic which had featured in political events of the recent past in the Wilkesite movement and the Gordon Riots. However, their involvement in these earlier events was in the form of protest, whereas the societies attempted to introduce their class more fully into the political debate. This thesis will argue that the way the societies engaged in this debate, thus creating the ‘curious mixture’, was determined by the nature of their membership. Most

[1] M. Thomis and P. Holt, *Threats of Revolution in Britain 1789 -1848* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 5.
[2] Thomis and Holt, *Threats of Revolution in Britain,* 6.

members were politically inexperienced, learning as they went from the connections they made and the models they encountered, and reacting to events as they unfolded. The decisions they made were therefore usually based on utility, practicality and pragmatism not ideology; they were motivated less by ideology than by what ideology could do to help them achieve their aims. Nor were these aims political, even though the societies demanded political reform; their objectives were economic and social, but they believed that only by achieving representation in parliament could they improve their circumstances. Reformist ideologies of either hue were therefore merely tools to achieve their objective; to the societies there was no contradiction in comingling arguments based on the imagined Anglo-Saxon constitution and the 1688 settlement that had been central to the gentlemanly reformers' ideology, with the democratic principles of Paine and France, if they all pointed towards a system of broader representation that would lead to improved economic and social conditions. However, other factors further complicated the resultant 'curious mixture'. Not being committed to any specific ideology, the societies' aims and the expressions of their demands were affected by events, in particular war with France and the actions of the societies' loyalist opponents. Finally, the increasing need for discretion in the face of restrictive legislation further modified their mode of expression. While the mixture might seem 'curious', this interpretation suggests that to the societies it was a pragmatic response to circumstances.

It is however dangerous to make such overarching observations. Mark Philp's contention that the pluralism of the movement's demography and beliefs, and the fluid and evolutionary nature of its arguments, make it impossible to attribute to the societies common aims, motivations or characteristics, is now widely accepted.[3] Nevertheless, by maintaining

[3] M. Philp, 'The fragmented ideology of reform' and 'Disconcerting ideas: explaining popular radicalism and popular loyalism in the 1790s' in M. Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). The former was first published in 1991, the latter in 2007.

that the radicals were more pragmatic than idealistic, it is possible to sustain the thesis that despite their differences the societies were able to unite under a single banner, universal male suffrage (regardless of whether this was exactly what they wanted), to address the one thing they had in common, economic and social grievances (even if these were different in detail). This hypothesis also accommodates the changing nature of the radicals' arguments, by contending that the societies adapted pragmatically to circumstances rather than adhering to ideological dogma. This thesis does not seek to overturn Philp's arguments, only to suggest that the sources can be interpreted to indicate more a more unified movement than he allows.

The aim of this thesis is to disentangle the 'curious mixture' and establish how and why the influence of gentlemanly reformism, Paine and France, the need for discretion, the impact of events, and the societies' inexperience and pragmatism contribute to it. It will argue that pragmatism pushed them towards the more conservative and evolutionary nature of gentlemanly reformism, but that Paine gave these novice reformers a voice and a tone they could own, whilst France provided the romantic inspiration of members of their own class successfully entering the political debate for the first time. The need for discretion and the impact of events coloured the way this combination was expressed but its structure remained relatively unchanged.

This hypothesis will be sustained not by the admission of new sources, but by approaching existing materials in a new way. The debate concerning the nature of the societies began in the 1960s and was at its fiercest through to the early years of the new millennium. Since then, the debate has been relatively muted as historians have moved on to explore other aspects of the period. Given this gap in the historiography, re-engaging with the sources, and applying a wider social lens than has been used before, will provide a means of

re-opening an important historical seam afresh. Much of the early historiography was focused on whether the radicals were ideologically Paineite, proto-Revolutionaries or peaceable agitators for reform in the English tradition, and on how this contributed to their failure or explained why there was no revolution in Britain. The ideological context in which the early historiographical debate was conducted, directed historians towards what the societies said or wrote. This thesis suggests this approach can mislead because the societies were not anchored to an ideology and so what they said fluctuated under the influence of other factors. This thesis will consider the societies' output, but will lay equal emphasis on how they organised and campaigned, and the nature of their personal relationships with earlier British reformers, Paine and the French Revolutionaries as these aspects are less likely to fluctuate under the influence of external events. This new focus will reveal the importance of the contribution of their own nature to their behaviour, alongside that of their external political influences.

The introduction is presented in four sections. As the content of the thesis is thematic not chronological, a brief history of the societies is provided to give context. This section is followed by a review of the historiography to explain how the debate concerning the societies' nature originated and to chart its development. The third section provides a review of the primary sources to be used and the difficulties they pose. The introduction will conclude with an outline of the rest of the thesis.

Background

The corresponding societies emerged in the early 1790s and flourished briefly before succumbing to governmental pressure at the end of 1795, at which point as Francis Place, a later official and chronicler of the London Corresponding Society (LCS), put it 'the whole

matter fell rapidly to decay'.[4] The focus on this manifestation of 1790s' radicalism is because it represented something new – organisations of largely unenfranchised, working men, as Place described them, 'the thinking part of the working people', uniting to press for political reform.[5]

The first society to form was the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information (SSCI) at the end of 1791. Similar organisations appeared across Britain in early 1792, especially in other industrial towns (which were under-represented in Parliament) such as Manchester, in strong Dissenting communities (who saw parallels between religious and political freedom) such as Norwich, and in London. The societies were not restricted to England, with Scotland being particularly active. This thesis will not consider Ireland where the political debate was tied to the demand for independence. From early 1792 the societies sought to communicate with each other and the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) in London, the most significant remnant of the 1780s' reform movement, to whom the junior societies looked for advice. The move to associate worried the authorities and the first attempt to curtail their activities was a Royal Proclamation against seditious writings in May 1792.[6]

In August 1792, the Paris Insurrection initiated the second stage of the French Revolution, and in the following two months the National Assembly was replaced by the National Convention, elected by universal male suffrage. The Convention abolished the monarchy and declared a republic, and its advent witnessed an increase in violence with the attack on the Swiss Guard and the September Massacres. To this point, the mood in Britain had largely been supportive of the Revolution, perceiving it as France catching up with

[4] F. Place and M. Thale, (ed.) *The Autobiography of Francis Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 149.
[5] Thale, *The Autobiography of Francis Place,* 139.
[6] This measure was followed by further legislation over the next three years Including the Traitorous Correspondence Act in March 1793, suspension of Habeas Corpus, May 1794, the Two Acts, December 1795.

Britain constitutionally, but the events of August and September 1792 turned moderate opinion against it. At this inauspicious juncture, the societies contacted the Revolutionaries, who had, after all, achieved their own aim of universal male suffrage, an action that began to marginalise the movement. The societies' alienation was further compounded by the establishment of a counter-movement of popular loyalist associations set up with the approval of the authorities in November 1793.[7] In their opposition to each other, the associations and the societies began to polarise opinion.[8]

In February 1793, France and Britain went to war and the societies had to tone down their support for the Revolutionaries. They turned to domestic matters and initiated their first major campaign – petitioning Parliament in support of Charles Grey's motion for Parliamentary reform in May, which was backed by the patrician reform organisation the Friends of the People (FOP), an organisation which declared its 'bounden duty [was] to propose no extreme changes' with any reform to adhere 'in every measure… to the fundamental principles of the Constitution'.[9] The FOP wanted to corral public opinion and represent it in Parliament, but this misunderstood the societies' grievances which were fuelled by the belief that Parliament took decisions over their heads and not in their interests. The

[7] Robert Dozier maintained that Lord Grenville wanted to establish 'counterassociations'. Boyd Hilton went further, arguing the prime mover, John Reeves, who founded the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers (APLP), 'almost certainly acted with ministerial connivance when he founded [the APLP]'. However, Philp argues 'it is clear… he [Reeves] acted initially without instruction from the government', and for Jennifer Mori 'There is now no doubt Reeves started the APLP by himself', although both agree Pitt soon took an interest. R. Dozier, *For King, Constitution and Country*, *The English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 51-52, 57-59; B. Hilton, 'A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People? England 1783-1846' in J.M Roberts (ed.), *The New Oxford History of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 69; M. Philp, 'Vulgar Conservatism' in *Reforming Ideas in Britain: Politics and Language in the Shadow of the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 45; J. Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), 7.

[8] Philp, 'The fragmented ideology of reform', 17, 26.

[9] J. Horne Tooke, *The Trial of John Horne Tooke for High Treason* (London, 1795), Volume 1, 188-190. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed February 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW123903002&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

petitions and Grey's motion were rejected and the societies abandoned the FOP and sought alternative ways to achieve reform. The Scottish movement had already held two conventions of its societies and some English societies joined its third convention in November 1793 to form the first British Convention. Any organisation calling itself a convention at this point was bound to cause alarm given the French experience, and the authorities reacted by closing it down. The convention's leaders were subjected to show trials and deported. This heavy-handed approach infuriated the English societies who began preparing for a second British Convention to determine how the societies should proceed. The government forestalled the new convention by arresting many of the societies' leaders and charging twelve of them with treason in May 1794.

The trials of Thomas Hardy, founder of the LCS, John Horne Tooke, the major figure in the SCI, and John Thelwall, an active member of both organisations, began in November 1794. All three were found not guilty and released with their co-defendants but the stress of imprisonment and the trials forced many of the societies' leaders to withdraw from the front line. The societies had been decapitated. The movement revived in 1795, bolstered by anti-war sentiment and increasing hardship as the war bit. There was a return to petitioning, this time supported by mass rallies, numbering tens of thousands of protestors. At the end of 1795 the government, concerned at the scale of the rallies, introduced the Two Acts which restricted the size of public gatherings and widened the definition of treason. This legislation prevented the societies from operating openly in their original manner and although they persisted to the end of the decade it was in a reduced state and with a more subversive approach.

The historiographical debate

E.P. Thompson's 1963 work *The Making of the English Working Class* began an important debate about the nature of 1790s' radicalism. Prior to Thompson's contribution the traditional Whig view of history prevailed, in which Britain was considered loyal and supportive of its government, with any unrest seen as minor economic grumblings, and the radicals cast as Burke's 'grasshoppers' - a noisy but ineffective minority.[10] Thompson saw the situation differently. He argued that 'the conjunction between the grievances of the majority and the aspirations articulated by the politically conscious minority' resulted in Britain's first working-class political movement, united behind a demand for parliamentary reform. [11] For Thompson 'in the 1790s something like an "English Revolution" took place, of profound importance in shaping the consciousness of the post-war working class'.[12] Gwyn Williams (1968), put it more succinctly: 'it was in 1792 that "the people" entered politics'.[13] Using the testimony of individual radicals, and relying on spies' and magistrates' reports which other historians had disdained, Thompson sought to articulate the perspective of working men, 'to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the "obsolete" hand-loom weaver, the "utopian" artisan… from the enormous condescension of posterity'.[14] It was just such artisans, utopian or not, who would populate the corresponding societies. This thesis will argue that not enough has been made of the contribution of the nature of these working men, their class and their newness to the political debate, to the character of the societies and the organisations' decision making.

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[10] 'Because half a dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field; that of course, they are many in number; or that, after all, they are other than the little shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and troublesome insects of the hour'. E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 181.

[11] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1963), 184.

[12] Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 194.

[13] G. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-culottes: Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution* (London: Libris, 1968), 4.

[14] Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class,* 12.

Thompson regarded Paine as pivotal to the societies' development – 'Paine speaks for the governed' – and saw his influence as innovative but also resonating with Britain's reform tradition: 'he gave to the English people a new rhetoric of radical egalitarianism which touched the deepest responses of the 'free-born Englishman'.[15] At the initiation of the debate, Thompson demonstrated that the 'mixture' was not entirely 'curious'. Thompson saw only a secondary role for France: 'It was not agitation about France, although French events both inspired and bedevilled it. It was an English agitation… for an English democracy'.[16] For Thompson, it was the Paineite reading of the principles of the Revolution not the Revolution itself that shaped the British radicals.

Thompson's hypothesis was the catalyst for a series of works supporting and developing his vision, as well as counter arguments that challenged his perception of the societies' scale and impact. At one extreme was Roger Wells (1983). Using similar but more extensive sources than Thompson, Wells challenged 'historians' distaste for speculative analysis' and argued that Britain came close to revolution in the late 1790s.[17] Like Thompson he proclaimed this decade as 'the birth of the first genuinely working-class democratic political movement'.[18] At the other extreme, Ian Christie (1983-1984) argued that government had 'the tacit consent of the people', and suggested 'it is easy to exaggerate the scale of the [radical] movement… mass support… for the London Corresponding Society may be consigned to oblivion'.[19] Some of the subtleties of Thompson's exposition, particularly in

[15] Ibid., 100, 103.
[16] Ibid., 111.
[17] R. Wells, *Insurrection: The British Experience 1795-1803* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1983), 253.
[18] Wells, *Insurrection*, 21.
[19] I.R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 35, 50.

relation to the influence of Paine and France, became lost as the debate shifted to considering the radicals' nature in terms of moderation or revolution.

Much of the historiography of the second half of the twentieth century revolved around a discussion of the degree to which 1790s' radicalism was ideologically influenced by France and Paine or Britain's gentlemanly reformism. Harry Dickinson, perhaps the most authoritative historian of the 1970s and 1980s, reconciled, as Thompson had, the innovative and retrospective aspects of radicalism. He noted a strong connection with gentlemanly reformism, particularly in the prioritisation of political education and the societies' pacific approach, but also noted a Paineite tinge to their aims and the intermingling of natural rights and constitutional vocabulary.[20] Other historians took up positions on either side of this middle line. Williams, as the title of his work suggests, detected parallels between British artisans and French *sans-culottes*.[21] Clive Emsley (2000) noted that the historiography increasingly suggested that the societies were ambivalent about violence, and argued himself that they were not 'as moderate and constitutionally-minded as Whig interpretations suggest'.[22] In contrast, Jennifer Mori (2000) argued for a continuation of gentlemanly reformism, differentiating between 'genteel' and 'vulgar' radicalism, and maintaining that Britain never moved beyond the 'genteel' stage, whereas in France the bourgeoisie ceded control of the Revolution to the *sans-culottes*.[23]

Generally, historians saw more of an affinity between 1790s' radicalism and gentlemanly reformism than with France and Paine. There were two periods when the radicals might have adopted republican principles. The first was in the second half of 1792, after the

[20] H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 20.
[21] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-culottes.*
[22] C. Emsley, *Britain and the French Revolution* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), 5
[23] Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution*, 35-36.

publication of *Rights of Man*, Part 2, and concurrent with the second revolution in France but before the regicide and the declaration of war. Williams identified a significant increase in recruits to the LCS in October and November 1792 and argued: 'For the British popular movement, the French Revolution which counted was that of 10 August 1792'.[24] Williams's assertion is supported by the societies' correspondence with the new Convention, and arguably the link was only thwarted by the deterioration in France and the declaration of war.

Famine, hardship and war in 1795 provided another opportunity for democratic ideas to take hold. Wells and Thompson insisted that a radical minority did politicise the resultant unrest, bringing the country close to insurrection until crushed by government repression. Wells maintained 'time and time again political slogans appear' and Thompson, whilst conceding the main motivations were hunger and the clamour for a moral economy, argued that 'popular tradition was stiffened by the Jacobin consciousness of a minority'.[25] In contrast, Thomis and Holt argued that the Food Riots were not political and that the protests were 'traditional and almost legitimate'.[26] Williams saw the riots as the ultimate example of the middling sorts' inability to mobilise the masses, arguing that the failure of the 'crise de subsistence' in England to have the same effect it had had in France in 1789 was 'striking'.[27]

The historiography suggests that at these two critical junctures the societies were unable or unwilling to break from traditional British reformism and adopt a more innovative approach. The majority of historians saw radicalism remaining, as James Epstein noted, 'rooted… within a discourse about the 'real' meaning of the English constitution'; they

[24] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-culottes,* 69-70.
[25] Wells, *Insurrection*, 21; Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 70, 73.
[26] Thomis and Holt, *Threats of Revolution in Britain*, 25.
[27] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes,* 101.

'ignored [Paine's] strictures against invoking the legitimating force of the past'.[28] Williams acknowledged 'the English quarrel had, in truth, not much to do with France… It is impossible to escape the long shadow of the seventeenth century. This is the decisive difference from France'.[29] M.S.C. Smith suggested radicalism's adherence to British constitutionalism was inevitable because 'it could not escape the political and cultural worlds it was designed to reform'.[30] There is then a degree of agreement that gentlemanly reformism had more influence on 1790s' radicalism than Paine or France.

However, there is disagreement on what the gentlemanly reformers' constitutionalism meant to the societies. The debate is complicated by the evidence base; as Philp put it, 'one needs the greatest of care in taking the official pronouncements of the radical societies as expressive of their fundamental commitments'.[31] There are a number of reasons for Philp's assertion. Fear of prosecution may have led to the moderation of radical messages making the degree of the societies' adherence to constitutionalism hard to read. The adoption of gentlemanly reformist language might also have been a more deliberate tactic to hide democratic beliefs; Thomis and Holt maintained that the societies used the rhetoric of 1688 claiming not 'an impending revolution but rather of a previous revolution betrayed' in order 'to present radical demands as part of a British tradition'.[32] Epstein also saw the adoption of constitutionalism as tactical but as an attempt to broaden appeal: 'the constitutional idiom… endowed their movement with the sort of authority needed to mobilise the force of popular radicalism nationally'.[33] As has been seen, other historians such as Thompson and Dickinson

[28] J. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* [1993] (London: Breviary Stuff Publications, 2014), 8, 9.
[29] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes,* 7, 8.
[30] M.S.C. Smith, 'The French Revolution, British Cultural Politics, and Recent Scholarship across the Disciplines', *Huntington Library Quarterly* Vol. 63, No.3, 417.
[31] Philp, 'Disconcerting ideas', 100.
[32] Thomis and Holt, *Threats of Revolution in Britain,* 5-6
[33] Epstein, *Radical Expression,* 21.

argued that the societies saw the old and the new ideologies as interchangeable, and Emsley suggested that the radical, Dissenting minister Richard Price's analysis of the 1688 settlement was an example of this, repositioning constitutional history in the context of French democracy.[34] There is therefore little agreement on what constitutionalism meant to the societies. This thesis will argue that the disagreement is founded on the assumption of an underlying ideology; if, in fact, the radicals were pragmatists, then all the above arguments can be accommodated as valid propositions in different circumstances.

The early historiographical debate centred on the influence of innovative and retrospective principles and so it was inevitable that the societies' nature would be examined through the prism of ideology. The focus on ideology was compounded by the introduction to the debate of loyalism. Thompson had 'rescued' only one side of the lower orders, the radicals, and denied loyalism was an authentic response, discerning in it 'an increasingly artificial air', whilst Wells dismissed it as 'the product of anti-reformist middle-class activities'.[35] Dickinson had first highlighted the role of loyalism in 1977, arguing it was 'a conservative ideology of considerable appeal, endurance and intellectual power' centred on the defence of a balanced constitution with representation based on property ownership.[36] But loyalism was only fully brought to the fore in Robert Dozier's *For King, Constitution and Country* (1983), in which he drew on loyalist associations' declarations and resolutions and their coverage in local newspapers.[37] Dozier did not see loyalism as an ideological movement but as an instinctive response - a 'massive retaliation' against radical propaganda.[38] Linda Colley (1992) gave a more cohesive interpretation of loyalism, arguing that it arose from the

[34] Emsley, *Britain and the French Revolution*, 10.
[35] Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 123; Wells, *Insurrection*, 21.
[36] H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth Century Britain* (London: Methuen, 1977), 272.
[37] Dozier, *For King, Constitution and Country*.
[38] Ibid., 96.

gradual development of British national identity between 1707 and 1837 in which the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars were crucial, forcing Britons to come together, defining themselves by their opposition to an 'other', at this point, France.[39] Regardless of the different interpretations of its nature, the acknowledgement of the importance of loyalism tended to position radical and loyalist ideologies, indistinct though they were, as opposing forces. Dickinson explained the failure of radicalism as its inability to agree what it stood for, noting the radicals were 'hopelessly divided' and their failure therefore 'hardly surprising' – they had lost the argument to the loyalists because their ideology was less cohesive.[40] This thesis was accepted by many historians and has been called the 'Dickinsonian consensus'.[41] Analysis of the societies therefore became tied to an imagined debate between radical and conservative ideologies.

The focus on ideology was challenged by Philp in the early 1990s.[42] Philp agreed with Dickinson that the radicals were disunited, emphasising the diversity of the societies' membership.[43] Philp argued that the only factor common to the radicals was their shared experience of exclusion, not just in terms of representation but in a myriad of social, religious and economic ways that varied by location; their diversity made a coherent ideology impossible.[44] However, Philp did not perceive that the plurality of demography and belief was the societies' undoing, arguing that the real cause of the radicals' failure came from their confrontation with the loyalists.[45] The confrontation caused a polarisation as each side tried to

[39] L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* [1992](New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014).
[40] Dickinson, *Liberty and Property,* 259-60.
[41] J. Dinwiddy, 'Interpretations of anti-Jacobinism' in M. Philp (ed.), *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 38.
[42] Philp, 'The fragmented ideology of reform'; see also Philp, 'Disconcerting ideas', an extension of his argument published in 2007.
[43] Philp, 'Disconcerting ideas', 96.
[44] Ibid., 100-101.
[45] Philp, 'The fragmented ideology of reform', 17, 26.

define (and defend) its position in relation to the other, which had the effect of marginalising the societies.

Philp's analysis is supported by the way radicalism changed over the period, suggesting it reacted to events and the actions of its opponents rather than being guided by an ideology. There is the optimism of the initial approval of the French Revolution, the welcoming of the new Convention despite opinion turning against France, the conflict initiated by the appearance of the loyalist associations, the retrenchment into petitioning when war was declared, the flirtation with conventionism when the petitions failed, the return to petitions after the 'decapitation' following the treason trials, and the increased focus on the war in 1795 – each action driven by events. Amanda Goodrich (2005) demonstrated the effect by charting the changing themes used by the radicals between 1793 and 1795, highlighting a move from political reform to economic issues as poor harvests and the war changed priorities.[46] Philp argued that radicalism, being a shifting, pluralistic amalgam of the excluded, reacted and adapted according to the factors that weighed upon it at any one time, because they were unanchored to any ideology.[47]

Philp's analysis changed the perception of the period. Beyond 2000 there is less focus on the politics of 1790s' radicalism and more on specific aspects of the movement or the role of individuals within it. These studies expand the understanding of elements of the societies' nature rather than extending the debate described above. John Barrell's assessment of the changing application of the treason laws provided acute analysis of the trials which also

[46] A. Goodrich, *Debating England's Aristocracy, in the 1790s: Pamphlets, Polemics and Political Ideas* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 113-138.
[47] Philp, 'Disconcerting Ideas'.

revealed much about the defendants'.[48] Goodrich's observations, above, came from a study of the pamphlet wars, which analysed the changing nature of the radicals' communications across the period, particularly in relation to the clash with the loyalists. Philp produced works on Paine, and Gregory Claeys analysed the contribution of Paine and Thelwall, providing insights into the ideology of both men.[49] Other historians focused on the radicals' usage of language and how this helps to interpret their beliefs.[50] These studies contribute indirectly to this thesis but the main focus is the debate that largely occurred between 1963 and 2000. The debate on the nature of the societies has not disappeared completely; Philp made further contributions most notably with 'Disconcerting Ideas' (2007) which has been integrated in the analysis above, and in 'Time to Talk' (2014) which provides insight into the nature of the LCS through its analysis of the development of the second LCS constitution, whilst Claeys (2007) dealt extensively with the Burke-Paine debate and radical-loyalist confrontation.[51]

To summarise the lessons of the historiography, there is no consensus on the level of ideological influence that can be attributed to gentlemanly reformism, France and Paine, although a majority of historians detected a greater affinity to constitutionalism. There is even less agreement on what constitutionalism meant to the societies. Philp's contribution demonstrated that the lack of consensus arose because historians were looking for something that did not exist: a coherent ideology, indeed, cohesion in any form. His argument

[48] J. Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[49] See in particular 'English republicanism in the 1790s', 'Failing the republic', 'Paine's experiments' and 'Revolutionaries in Paris: Paine and Jefferson' in Philp, *Reforming Ideas*, 102-132, 133-157, 158-186, 187-209; G. Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 35-48, 138-153.
[50] I. Hampsher-Monk, 'On not inventing the English Revolution: The Radical Failure of the 1790s as Linguistic Non-performance' in G. Burgess, and M. Festenstein, (eds.), *English Radicalism 1550-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 135-156, doi: org.ezproxye.bham.ac.uk/10.1017/CBO9780511495762; J. Mee, 'The Political Showman at Home: Reflections on Popular Radicalism and Print Culture in the 1790s' in M.T. Davis, (ed.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain 1775-1848* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 41-55; M. Scrivener, 'John Thelwall's Political ambivalence: Reform and Revolution' in M.T. Davis, (ed.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain 1775-1848* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 69-83.
[51] Philp, *Reforming Ideas*, 71-101, 287-311; see in particular 'Edmund Burke', 'Thomas Paine' , 'the Spectre of "Levelling"' in Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain*, 11-34, 35-48, 68-98.

maintained that the only factor common to the radicals was their exclusion; that they were brought together by myriad negative, environmental factors not shared, positive ideological beliefs.

This thesis hopes to advance the historiography in three ways, all revealed by better understanding the nature of the societies through a wider analysis of their influences, which encompasses their connections and modes of operating as well as their writings. Firstly, in a metaphor of the time used to contrast Tooke's beliefs with Paine's, this thesis will alight the stagecoach at Hounslow rather than continuing to Windsor with Philp.[52] It will agree with Philp that it is pointless to try to define an ideology for the societies, but contend that they were united by more than a sense of exclusion. It will argue that pragmatism, generated by the societies' newness to the debate and lack of ideological baggage, and reinforced by the influence of their primary mentor, John Horne Tooke, allowed their varied grievances to be brought together under a single umbrella they all understood – economic and social disadvantage – and to agree that the solution was improved representation. Even if they disagreed what this might look like, they united behind a common rallying cry of universal male suffrage. This thesis will also propose that their 'exclusion', in whatever form it took, was productive. The societies' members drew energy and enthusiasm from participating together in the political debate for the first time, a factor Philp describes himself in his article 'Time to Talk' but without underlining its value as a positive, unifying factor. [53] The societies were not homogenous, nor were they united by a commitment to a shared ideology, but their pragmatism allowed them to coalesce in order to pursue a common goal.

[52] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 1, 458.
[53] Philp, *Reforming Ideas,* 287-311.

The same factors explain the 'curious mixture'. The societies pragmatism, the lack of ideological attachment and the connection to Tooke and the SCI, persuaded them to base their demands in the safer ground of gentlemanly reformism, whilst Paine provided the language which allowed them to express their demands in their own, authentic voice. Thus 'the old and the new' were conflated. The third element of the 'curious mixture' – France – seems paradoxical in this context. Supporting the Revolutionaries at the point that they became antithetical to British public opinion was hardly pragmatic. Yet the societies' stance was also a product of their nature – the class and political inexperience of their members; they found the example of people of their own class fighting for political liberty compelling and were blinded to the consequences of their actions. However, the societies never adopted French ideology, thus proving that the attachment was purely one of romantic symbolism. Gentlemanly reformism, Paine and France therefore contributed to the 'curious mixture' in different ways. There was a further complicating factor; the lack of any significant ideological commitment to these influences meant that events and the need for discretion in the way they expressed themselves constantly changed the balance of how they were used. These factors are the key to the 'curious mixture'.

Finally, this thesis will argue, as the points above on cohesion and the 'curious mixture' show, that the importance of the societies' own nature in explaining their behaviour deserves more attention than the historiography has given it. The societies' newness to the debate, their reasons for entering it, their own experiences, and their class determined the way they absorbed their political influences, how they adapted and developed them for their own use, and how they expressed them.

These hypotheses cannot be derived from what the societies said and wrote alone, as it is impossible to disentangle their true motives from the external factors that influenced their mode of expression. The societies' pronouncements must be considered alongside their personal connections to gentlemanly reformism, France and Paine, and the way they organised and campaigned which are less entangled by such external factors. These new angles of enquiry provide a better understanding of the societies' nature and how it influenced the decisions they took.

Sources and Research Considerations

Three main sources contribute to this thesis – the societies' public pronouncements, private correspondence between societies and individuals within them, and the memoirs and contemporary biographies of the societies' leaders. For the first two categories this study will draw on documents collected by the government's Committee of Secrecy, instituted to investigate the societies' activities, and used in evidence at the trials of Hardy, Tooke and Thelwall. The trials offer an intriguing source of insight as the questions this thesis addresses were central to the arguments in court – what the societies' motivations were and whether they were influenced by Paine and France (the prosecution) or entrenched in gentlemanly reformism (the defence). Each source provides significant interpretive obstacles, in particular, whether the societies' materials can be taken at face value, hence it is important to consider with whom the societies associated and what they did as well as what they said.

Public pronouncements and private correspondence

There are significant difficulties in interpreting the societies' written materials as they were written under the legal threat of the seditious libel laws, the physical threat of loyalist reaction, and with the need to court moderate opinion, factors recognised by the protagonists.

Thomas Walker, the founder of the Manchester Constitutional Society (MCS), noted in 1794 that 'It is evident that the habit of expressing with accuracy and forethought the sentiments intended to be conveyed, is of very great importance to the future safety, as well as the reputation of such societies' with some societies failing in 'phraseological caution' and suffering the consequences.[54] Thelwall advised audiences at the political lectures for which he became famous, to be 'at once *active*, *vigilant*, and *prudent*… let us speak with all the caution we are masters of'.[55] Writers may therefore have avoided inflammatory language that better expressed their convictions and may have been tempted to appeal to the safer ground of gentlemanly reformism rather than the more subversive principles of Paine and France, particularly after war was declared in February 1793. These concerns are more for the societies' public declarations than their private correspondence where they may have been less circumspect, especially in the early days. The questions to be answered with regard to these sources are to whom were they addressed, to what purpose and how public were they? Finally, the societies were a broad church and the views expressed can be inconsistent, rendering general conclusions problematic.

The most significant extant primary material in this area is the papers of the LCS and the SCI. Mary Thale's *Selections from the Papers of The London Corresponding Society* (1983), which has more recently been supplemented by Michael Davis's compilation of key LCS documents (2002), together with official records, provide a comprehensive review of the

[54] T. Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events in Manchester* (London, 1794) 125-6. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed May 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW123681982&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

[55] C. Thelwall, *Life of Thelwall by his Widow* (London: J. Macrone, 1837), 129.

London societies' output.[56] The regional societies produced fewer materials (or fewer have survived) but official sources provide a good cross-section, and, as background to the regional societies, Albert Goodwin's *The Friends of Liberty* (1979), remains unsurpassed and has been complemented by Jenny Graham's exhaustive *The Nation. The Law and The King* (2000).[57] Sheffield, the first working men's society, was considered by some the most radical, Williams claiming that 'If any place was to be a Faubourg St. Antoine to an English Revolution, it was surely Sheffield'.[58] The SSCI played a more significant role than has been recognised by many historians, underlined by its prominence in the evidence given to the Committee of Secrecy and at the treason trials, which highlighted its influence on other societies including the LCS.[59] The society's history has been well chronicled by, amongst others, John Stevenson.[60] The MCS was set up by Walker and Thomas Cooper, both businessmen and members of the SCI, in the winter of 1790-1791.[61] The organisation consisted of wealthier types and was more akin to the SCI than the corresponding societies, having a membership fee of half a guinea which put it outside the reach of most working men.[62] However, the MCS played an important role in the movement and supported two junior societies in Manchester which were more authentically 'working class', the Patriotic Society and the Reformation Society. The MCS was said to be thoroughly Paineite and was involved in an aggressive tussle with loyalists and the authorities, as much a clash of religious belief as political, the society including a significant Dissenting community.[63] Some MCS papers are available from

[56] M. Thale, (ed.), *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); M.T. Davis, (ed.) *London Corresponding Society, 1792-1799* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2002).
[57] A. Goodwin, The *Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the age of the French Revolution* [1979](Abingdon: Routledge, 2016); J. Graham, *The Nation, The Law and the King*, *Reform Politics in England, 1789-1799* (Lanham, MD and Oxford: University Press of America, 2000).
[58] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes,* 58.
[59] Goodwin is an exception.
[60] J. Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats: Sheffield in the French Revolution, 1789-97* (Sheffield: Sheffield History Pamphlets, 1989).
[61] Graham, *The Nation, The Law and the King*, 108.
[62] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 147.
[63] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-culottes*, 18.

governmental sources and others are reproduced in Walker's memoir. The beginnings of the societies in Norwich are obscure, but historians agree that they became genuine working men's associations in Spring 1792.[64] Norwich is another example of the influence of Dissent on the movement and its organisations were keen correspondents with other societies, ensuring it featured heavily in the Committee of Secrecy papers. The town's radical history has been chronicled by C. B. Jewson. Finally, Scotland is an under-researched but important region, having large numbers of active societies. This study will not correct that deficit but will focus on Scotland's role in the British Convention, a transcript of which is included in Hardy's trial papers. Other societies will be referenced where appropriate but the focus will be on those listed above.

Radical memoirs, journals and contemporary biography

Many historians have dismissed these contributions as unreliable but as this study is not intended as a narrative, the materials' subjective treatment of events may in fact help understand the authors' motives. Besides general worries about the objectivity of autobiography, historians have had specific concerns with these works. Hardy's *Memoir* was published after the Great Reform Bill in 1832 (although he claimed it was written in 1799) when the temptation to cast the author as the architect of eventual reform must have been significant; Hardy, writing of the LCS, hoped 'the present generation – who are likely to reap the fruits of its labours – cannot but highly appreciate [it]'.[65] Nevertheless, Hardy's *Memoir* is an important source. The first third consists of a history of the LCS up to the treason trials, the

[64] C.B. Jewson claimed a Revolution Society began on 5 November 1789: C.B. Jewson, *The Jacobin City: A Portrait of Norwich in its Reaction to the French Revolution, 1788-1802* (Glasgow and London: Blackie and Sons, 1975), 6; Goodwin acknowledged there was a commemoration of the revolution in 1789, but argued the society was founded in November 1790 or July 1791 when a celebration of Bastille Day was held: Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 154-157; Graham sited its establishment in the spring of 1792: Graham, *The Nation, The Law and The King*, 211n. It is likely that the society began in a form reminiscent of the MCS, but unlike its Manchester equivalent, became a working men's society.

[65] T. Hardy, *Memoir of Thomas Hardy* (London: James Ridgeway, 1832), vii. Accessed March 2018. http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/94pd50.

final two thirds are a forlorn description of his attempts to find patronage from rich supporters of radicalism in recognition of his efforts. The contrast between the two sections, and the consequent naivety of the whole, lends credibility to the first third. It also contains in an appendix, letters describing the LCS's objectives which rarely appear in the historiography. Whilst the letters may contain the bias of hindsight, they reveal (at least Hardy's) motives, being written originally in a medium considered private, even if publication followed later.

Interpretation of Thelwall's biography is complicated by it being written by his second wife, who was not present during the period in question. Tooke's biographers describe the work as 'inaccurate' containing 'many factual errors', being based on Thelwall's notes written in old age 'which like Hardy's when he wrote his Memoirs, [were] not always reliable'.[66] He also became estranged from Tooke and their quarrel may have coloured his views.[67] It is a colourful account and possibly the hardest of these sources to interpret, providing apparently strong anecdotal insight into the radicals but, for example, mentioning Paine only once.[68] Thelwall's biography was written after 1832 which raises the same concerns as Hardy's *Memoir,* Thelwall's wife describing him as 'one of the earliest and most active of workmen laying the foundation upon which has once risen the grand superstructure of PARLIAMENTARY REFORM'.[69] Nevertheless, bearing these concerns in mind, Thelwall's biography enriches the understanding of 1790s' radicals through anecdotes that illuminate some of the principal actors' personalities and beliefs.

[66] C. Bewley and D. Bewley, *Gentleman Radical: Life of John Horne Tooke,* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1998), 108n.
[67] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 187-188.
[68] 'Tom Paine, whatever may have been his failings in other respects, was a man of humanity': Thelwall, *Life of Thelwall,* 243.
[69] Thelwall, *Life of Thelwall,* 39.

Walker wrote his memoir in 1794 when prosecution was a real threat, so imposing potential constraints on what he said and perhaps forcing him to provide an anodyne explanation of his activities. Graham exemplified historians' concerns by describing one observation in his memoir as 'one of many misleading statements which characterised his recollection of these years'.[70] Nevertheless, the documents this work contains are helpful in understanding the positioning of public statements by their contrast with Walker's private correspondence, and in understanding the conflict between the societies and loyalist associations.

Place's autobiography is considered by historians deliberately to underplay the LCS's radicalism. Williams lamented that Place's 'monstrous notebooks…blind as much as they enlighten'.[71] Thale explained Place being 'at pains to deny charges, made by the Committee of Secrecy "that [the LCS's] purpose was to establish a republic with the help of France"', and thus, as Wells argued, he 'deliberately exaggerated the weakness of the revolutionary fraternity'.[72] However, in making this defence, Place inadvertently provides insights into the LCS's diverse influences, emphasising the link to gentlemanly reformism but also admitting Paine's significance and enumerating the variety of views held within the organisation.[73] If his objective of absolving the LCS is kept in mind, his writings can still provide insight into the radicals' nature.

[70] Graham, *The Nation, The Law and The King*, 109.
[71] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes* 71.
[72] Thale, *Autobiography of Francis Place*, 195fn; Wells, *Insurrection*, 122.
[73] In describing Paine's influence, Place suggested that the society was populated by 'Republicans'; this is often quoted out of context and the qualifying sentence omitted: 'that is they were all friendly to a representative form of government': Thale, *Autobiography of Francis Place,* 196-197.

Tooke, sadly, destroyed his own papers before his death and left no memoir, but his modern biographers, Christina and David Bewley, have produced the definitive biography of this enigmatic man which brings together all extant records.

Without ignoring the concerns above, the aim of this thesis is not to create a factual narrative but to investigate the societies' nature, and these documents inadvertently provide evidence of influences and motives even if they do not provide a balanced view of the period. The question is not 'what happened?' but what they thought was happening and why.

The trials

Trial transcripts pose unique problems of interpretation. As evidence given at trial, and the reporting thereof, were not subject to the sedition laws 'passages from books considered libellous were routinely read out' in court and reported in the press.[74] A trial could therefore be used as a platform as it 'publicised a cause it was supposed to repress… prosecution became in some ways a legally sanctioned… means of sustaining and propagating the radical movement. .. [an] opportunity to seek converts and legitimise and reiterate the call for reform'.[75] The societies understood the potential of trials as communication vehicles. Maurice Margarot, Chairman of the LCS, tried for his involvement in the British Convention of 1793, claimed: 'What I say this day will not be confined within these walls but will spread far and wide' whilst his co-defendant, Joseph Gerrald, 'understood he was creating a literary text'.[76]

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[74] M.T. Davis, '"Good for the Public Example": Daniel Isaac Eaton' in M. T. Davis (ed.) *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain 1775-1848,* (London: Macmillan Press, 2000), 118.
[75] Ibid., 117.
[76] M. Margarot, *The Trial of Maurice Margarot (*1794), 4. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed June 2018.
<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW123960243&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>. ; J. Epstein, 'Our real Constitution': trial defence and radical memory in the Age of Revolution' in J. Vernon (ed.), Re-*reading the constitution: New narratives in the political history of England's long nineteenth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996,) 37.

Even the prosecutors knew that trials could be counterproductive: 'It has been said, and truly, that whenever a libel is prosecuted, it draws into a second cause of agitation, and that the very observations made upon the libel in a Court of Justice became, as it were, a promulgation of the libel itself'.[77] Some radicals published transcripts of their own trials and the press often published trials, or parts of them, verbatim. Such publications were a powerful means of communication as there was an 'avid readership for trial proceedings throughout the eighteenth century'.[78]

As Epstein and Amnon Yuval have argued, trials can therefore be divided into those whose defendants chose to defend themselves in the best light and those who used trials as a platform.[79] The treason trials, where the defendants were pleading for their lives, are examples of the former, whilst the Scottish trials show some evidence of the latter. Scottish law differed from English law and, in particular, Fox's Libel Law (1791), which was helpful to defendants, did not apply. In England 'the jury was the one constitutional institution that English Jacobins consistently praised' but in Scotland juries were still packed and judges partial.[80] The defendants therefore knew their fate and could use the court to promote their ideas, which they did – to a degree. The same two approaches to defence are visible in trials for sedition. One radical, Daniel Isaac Eaton, made his name by courting prosecution to publicise his cause.[81] Nevertheless, interpretation of trial transcripts is not black and white. Margarot and Gerrald promoted their cause but presented it in a gentlemanly reformist light,

[77] D.I. Eaton, *The trial of Daniel Isaac Eaton* (London: Eaton, 1794), 21. Accessed April 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW123878284&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

[78] J. Barrell and J. Mee (eds.), *Trials for Treason and Sedition 1792-94* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006-2007), volume 1, xxxvi.

[79] Epstein, 'Our real Constitution', 33; A. Yuval, 'Between Heresy and Acquittal: Henry Redhead Yorke and the inherent instability of Political Trials in Britain in the 1790s' *Journal of British Studies,* Volume 50, No. 3, 624.

[80] Epstein, 'Our real Constitution', 33.

[81] Eaton was tried on eight occasions between 1793 and 1801: Davis, 'Good for the Public Example', 114-116

raising the question of whether this was what they believed or an attempt to mitigate their sentence. Yuval described how Henry Redhead Yorke, a prominent radical, shifted uncomfortably between the modes of defence and platform in his trial for a seditious speech at a Sheffield rally.[82] Trial transcripts therefore need to be read with the awareness of these two modes of defence but with recognition that they can be blurred. In particular, in relation to the subject of this thesis, defendants may have felt an appeal to the freedoms of free-born Englishmen might play better with judge and jury than the natural rights arguments of Paine and France.

There are other complications in interpreting trial transcripts. As Epstein noted, at trial 'specific kinds of language and arguments are deemed appropriate… Courtrooms offer anything but an "ideal-speech situation"… A distinct hierarchy of speakers prevails… Authorised speakers and authorised modes of speech hold sway.'[83] The historian must disentangle the evidence from courtroom convention and language. Furthermore, in cases where the trial was not used as a platform, defendants rarely spoke (Tooke, who studied law, is an exception), so the reader must rely on second-hand testimony. The role of lawyers can also be problematic. The principal defence lawyer in the treason trials, Thomas Erskine was a radical and an SCI member, and neither he nor John Gurney, another lawyer often employed by the radicals, were shy in making subtle radical arguments. The nature of witnesses also needs to be considered. Some were government spies, others radicals who turned King's evidence or were pressurised into appearing, all therefore may have embellished the truth. Nor are transcripts necessarily trustworthy as the stenographers were not always reliable and some may have had political bias, particularly when commissioned by the radicals. For example, one, Joseph Gurney, was the father of the radical defence lawyer although,

[82] Yuval, 'Between Heresy and Acquittal'.
[83] Epstein, 'Our real Constitution', 33.

ironically, he is generally considered the most accurate transcriber.[84] All of these factors need to be disentangled before judgements can be made.

Nevertheless, trials are a valuable resource for historians. The treason trials in particular, contain a wide range of documents, from both the London societies and the regional organisations (Hardy's trial includes documents from at least twenty societies). The questions that must be addressed are to what degree trials were used as platforms, how far political belief could be woven into a defence, and to what extent the needs of the defence obscure defendants' genuine views, in other words, how far defendants would fall back on constitutionalism as the best means of defence. Finally, it is equally interesting to see how the prosecution portrayed the radicals and to understand their motives for so doing.

Thesis Structure

Chapter One will consider the personal relationships that the radicals developed with the previous generation of British reformers, Paine and the French Revolutionaries, in order to understand the nature of these links and assess how they influenced the societies. The relationship with the gentlemanly reformers was largely through the SCI, the organisation that straddled both periods, albeit in different forms, and in particular with John Horne Tooke who was prominent in both eras. Tooke is a pivotal figure; born in 1736, he trained as a lawyer but could not afford to establish himself at the bar so was ordained as a priest. He was, however, a reluctant cleric and became involved in politics, forming a tempestuous relationship with Wilkes, being imprisoned for libel, standing for the Westminster constituency and being an active member of a number of political organisations. Tooke was by the 1790s an experienced

[84] Barrell and Mee, *Trials for Treason and Sedition 1792-94*, Volume 1, xxxvii.

and senior campaigner.[85] This section will examine the cooperation between Tooke's SCI and the LCS, and the role that the SCI played in advising regional organisations. It will analyse the nature of the relationship between the SCI and the societies and assess what level of control, if any, the SCI had over them. The links with Paine are less direct as he left for France in the early stages of the societies' evolution, although he had by then become acquainted with some of the societies' leaders. The impact Paine had on the societies' leadership will be considered but this section will focus on his importance to ordinary members. Contact with the Revolutionaries was more symbolic than personal, consisting mainly of the Addresses that flowed between the radicals and the National Assembly and Convention. Nevertheless, this relationship was important to the societies and this section will consider the stimulus it produced.

Chapter Two will observe how the radicals organised themselves and campaigned, to identify to what degree the societies' behaviours were inherited, learnt or innate. The impact of the societies' British predecessors and the French political clubs on the shape of their organisations will be measured against the contribution their pragmatic nature made to the way they structured. The source of their commitment to political education will be evaluated as an inheritance from the gentlemanly reformers or recognition of their own need to learn. Petitioning will be considered as a learnt behaviour from the previous generation or as an example of divisions in the movement forcing a moderate compromise. The societies' approach to conventionism will be compared to the previous generation's attitude towards it and the experience in France. Finally, a contrast will be made between the attitude to violence of the British and French movements to demonstrate their contrasting natures. Observation of

[85] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical.*

these processes may provide a more objective manifestation of the societies' nature than what they wrote which was influenced by external factors.

The final chapter will discuss the societies' oft-debated ideological influences and their impact on two elements of their output: the consistency of the societies' objective of addressing their grievances by demanding universal male suffrage, and the inconsistency of the arguments put forward to support that demand, couched as they were in both constitutional and democratic terms. It will consider the impact on these two strands of the three political influences – gentlemanly reformism, Paine and France – as well the societies' own character, the impact of events, and the need for discretion in the way they expressed themselves. This chapter will aim to explain the 'curious mixture'.

Conclusion

It might be argued that the subject of the nature of 1790s' British radicalism has been overanalysed since Thompson began the debate in 1963. However, this study hopes to bring new insight through analysis not just of what the radicals said but of how they operated and of the importance of the relationships they built with the gentlemanly reformers, Paine and the French Revolutionaries. Its aim is not to define a radical ideology, or to establish why radicalism failed or why there was no revolution in Britain, but to understand why the radicals made the choices they did. The intention is to demonstrate that there was nothing 'curious' in the 'mixture of the old and the new' and that it was a logical manifestation of the societies' nature as well as their political influences.

1. Personal Relationships between the Societies and the Gentlemanly Reformers, Paine and France.

As the corresponding societies began to form in late 1791 and early 1792 they found there was a wealth of experience on which to draw, with many of the earlier British reformers still alive and active, even if many had abandoned the reform agenda. At the same time, in France, a new constitutional model was being constructed by men and women of the same class as the societies' members, providing an alternative model. Events in France were soon complemented by Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* released in two parts in March 1791 and in February 1792, in which Paine defended the French Revolution and made proposals for constitutional, fiscal and social change in Britain. The societies developed very different relationships with each of these influences. Drawing on the reminiscences of participants, correspondence between the societies, and evidence from the Committee of Secrecy and the treason trials, this chapter will assess what form these relationships took and how they influenced the societies' development and identity. It will do so by considering the societies' physical connections to the gentlemanly reformers, Paine and France as well as how they referenced them in what they said and wrote. It will conclude that the societies' practicality and pragmatism, and their personal relationships with its protagonists, led them to follow the existing example of the gentlemanly reformers, but that Paine provided them with the language with which to engage in the political debate, and France the inspiration to do so.

The Gentlemanly Reformers and the Corresponding Societies

This section will assess to what degree the presence of the previous generation of British reformers influenced the societies. It will focus on the Society for Constitutional Information and its most prominent member from the late 1780s, John Horne Tooke, as he and his

organisation participated in both the 1780s' and 1790s' movements. It will assess Tooke's personal influence on John Thelwall and Thomas Hardy and examine the role that Tooke may have played in the foundation of the London Corresponding Society. The section will conclude by considering the influence of Tooke and the SCI on the societies outside London.

The 1780s witnessed a number of attempts to reform Parliament from which the societies could learn. The County Associations movement, led by Christopher Wyvill, a land-owning cleric, who established the first Association in Yorkshire in 1779, provided the first example. The movement consisted of gentry who sought tighter controls over governmental spending and a reform of representation in Parliament.[86] The County Associations were joined by the original version of the SCI, established by long-time campaigner Major John Cartwright, who had been active in the Association movement, but considered Wyvill's organisation too conservative.[87] The SCI campaigned for universal suffrage and annual parliaments. There were also a number of failed attempts in Parliament itself, or by Parliamentarians, to force the issue of reform beginning with John Dunning's proposal to limit monarchical power in 1780, followed by proposals from Charles Lennox, 3rd Duke of Richmond, in 1783 demanding similar reforms to Cartwright's, and motions for moderate representational reform by Prime Minister William Pitt in 1785 and Henry Flood, MP, in 1790. The 1790s' radicals would have naturally fallen into this reform continuum were it not for one key difference – they were 'tradesmen and artificers, unpossessed of freehold land, and consequently hav[ing] no voice in chusing Members to sit in Parliament', rather than already enfranchised gentlemanly reformers.[88] This distinction acquired further significance

[86] C. Wyvill, *Political Papers chiefly respecting the Attempt of the County of York and other Considerable Districts, commenced in 1779, and continued during several subsequent years, to effect a Reformation of the Parliament of Great Britain* (York: Blanchard, 1794-1802), Volume 1, 67.
[87] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 113.
[88] 'The Sheffield petition for parliamentary reform, April 1793' reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats,* 61.

as France was experiencing a revolution increasingly controlled by that same class. To many of the previous generation the context of the French Revolution prevented any form of cooperation.

Nevertheless, the weight of reform activity in the 1780s, and the presence of its advocates, was bound to influence the new generation. The failure of the 1780s' movements might have persuaded the societies to try alternative routes, especially as their predecessors were of a class with more influence in Parliament and had still failed, but, in fact, they continually argued that their demands were no different to those of the 1780s' reformers. At Hardy's trial, Thomas Erskine, the societies' defence lawyer, maintained that the LCS's plan 'exactly corresponds with the plan of the Duke of Richmond'.[89] Pitt's name was often invoked; Maurice Margarot, in a letter to Henry Dundas, Secretary of State for the Home Department, in December 1792 demanding the government allow the societies to campaign unmolested, argued 'Mr Pitt and the Duke of Richmond have, themselves, traced out the path we now pursue'.[90] Francis Place summarised the LCS's aims as 'a reform in the House of Commons on the basis of… the plan [that] had some years before been laid down by the Duke of Richmond'.[91] It is possible that these statements are evidence of the earlier reformers' influence and confirm that the societies were moulded by, or modelled themselves on, the previous generation. There are, however, other explanations. There may have been an element of deference that even these supposed democratic reformers still felt towards those they considered their social and intellectual 'betters'. Tactical reasons may have persuaded the societies to follow the 1780s' line, either to reduce the chances of prosecution or to appeal to

[89] T. Hardy, *The trial of Thomas Hardy for high treason* (London: Gurney, 1794-1795), Volume 3, 248. Accessed March 2018.
http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW124427301&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE.
[90] *Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 3, 25.
[91] Thale, *Autobiography of Francis Place,* 194.

moderate opinion. It is also possible that in their inexperience and naivety they followed the only model that was available. It is likely that all these explanations are valid but to different degrees for different individuals at different times.

The societies could not ask Richmond himself for guidance since he, like Pitt, had foresworn reform by the 1790s. Instead they turned to those gentlemanly reformers who had not abandoned the cause, such as the SCI. Under Cartwright, the SCI was active between 1781 and Pitt's failed attempt at reform in 1785 after which it languished only to revive in the late 1780s, reanimated by the centenary of the Glorious Revolution, the beginning of the French Revolution and a further campaign in the cause of liberty, the repeal of the Test and Corporations Acts. The revival stuttered in early 1790 with the rejection of Fox's motion to repeal the Test Acts and in March 1790 only fourteen members attended the SCI's general meeting. Tooke now assumed responsibility for rejuvenating the organisation. Between 1791 and 1794, 134 new members joined of which 46 were proposed by Tooke.[92] The new intake was more radical and more socially aligned with the corresponding societies – 'few long-standing members of any importance remained and most newcomers were of less distinguished social and political standing, but they were educated, respectable and intelligent, and fired with enthusiasm by the revolution in France.'[93] The old SCI leaders viewed the new incarnation with suspicion. Wyvill, who later joined the Friends of the People, was strongly in favour of that organisation renouncing the SCI as 'He believed their conduct was dangerous'.[94] Cartwright, although remaining connected to the SCI until May 1792, 'was anxious to counteract the efforts of Thomas Paine, who laboured to introduce into the popular societies of the day, doctrines of pure republicanism' or so Cartwright's biographer, his niece,

[92] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 99.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., 110.

protectively claimed.[95] The rejuvenated SCI, however, welcomed Paine, making him an honorary member in 1787 and placing *Rights of Man* at the centre of its agenda.[96] The influence of direct contact between the two generations of reformers can largely be confined to the SCI's new incarnation.

Tooke's and the SCI's influence on the societies is evident in the testimony of the 1790s' radicals. One of the rejuvenated SCI intake, and a member of the LCS from October 1793, was Thelwall. Born in 1764 in London, Thelwall was still a young man in the early 1790s. A writer and journalist, Thelwall was a powerful orator and became a strong influence in the 1790s' radical movement, as a member of both London societies and through his political lectures.[97] Thelwall met Tooke when canvassing for him at the 1790 Westminster election and from this time their relationship blossomed.[98] Thelwall's wife claimed 'Thelwall, in a great degree, considered Horne Tooke in the light of his intellectual and political father', Thelwall's father having died in his youth.[99] Tooke's biographers have argued that Thelwall 'modelled his style on Tooke' and quoted Thelwall claiming Tooke 'transformed his life'.[100] Whilst Thelwall was intelligent and strong-willed, his relative youth and his father's early death made him a *tabula rasa* for Tooke. Tooke's mentoring of Thelwall nurtured one of the most important radical voices of the 1790s.

However, the most important influence of Tooke and the SCI was on the LCS and Thomas Hardy. Hardy, a Scot who moved to London as a young man, was a cobbler, and epitomised the artisanal nature of the societies' membership. Hardy acknowledged his debt to

[95] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty,* 361; F.D. Cartwright, *Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright* (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 192.
[96] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 176.
[97] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 141.
[98] Thelwall, *Life of Thelwall,* 74.
[99] Ibid.*,* 76.
[100] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 95. They give no source for the second quotation.

the SCI in an account of the origins of the LCS. The SCI were 'these *realy* great men [sic]', and he read much of their literature, which was supplied to him by another SCI member, Thomas Brand Hollis.[101] Hardy's admiration for these 'great men' therefore came from both personal contact and their writings. His connection to them convinced him 'that a *radical reform in parliament* was quite necessary' and motivated him to found the LCS.[102] The reform he wanted was also sourced from the previous generation in the form of Richmond's plan which became 'the bible for the LCS'.[103] Hardy even appropriated the word 'corresponding' from the Committee of Correspondence in Ireland, to whose Chairman, Colonel Sharman, Richmond's ideas had originally been addressed.[104] Hardy also acknowledged his debt to another earlier reformer, Richard Price, and his *Treatise on Civil Liberty*, written in relation to the American Revolution.[105] The gentlemanly reformers were central to Hardy's early political education but equally salient was his desire to learn, a feature that was characteristic of the politically inexperienced working men who populated the societies.

Tooke's precise role in the societies' development remains unclear. His prosecutors argued 'It is a matter of public notoriety that there have been associations formed… the professed purpose of which has been a change in the constitution of the commons house of parliament … [with] other purposes hidden under this veil, purposes the most traitorous'.[106] Tooke, they claimed, was the mastermind behind the conspiracy and was suspected of 'ruling the Constitutional Society, and modelling the Corresponding Society'.[107] The reality of Tooke's involvement is less dramatic. The LCS was established in January 1792 and the first

[101] Thale, *Selections*, 5.
[102] Thale, *Selections*, 5; Hardy, *Memoir*, 102.
[103] Thale, *Selections*, 5n.
[104] Ibid., 6.
[105] Hardy, *Memoir*, 8.
[106] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 8-9.
[107] *Trial of John Horne Tooke,* Volume 2, 247.

extant communication between the LCS and the SCI is a letter from Hardy to Tooke of 27 March 1792 asking for help in writing the LCS's first Address, as the society was unable to agree its content.[108] Thale suggested that Tooke made minor amendments to a version written by Margarot and signed Hardy's name before sending the Address to the press.[109] Hardy gave this explanation in his memoir, explaining that Tooke signed his (Hardy's) name, due to the need for publication without delay.[110] The prosecutors contended it was evidence of Tooke's control of the LCS. The government undoubtedly realised the accusation was exaggerated but needed to secure a conviction to suppress the societies.

However, even if Hardy's explanation seems more likely than the authorities', he was reticent about Tooke's influence and may therefore have been underplaying Tooke's involvement. At the time of the treason trials his reticence could be interpreted as an attempt to undermine the prosecution's accusations of conspiracy, but Hardy maintained this position, long after the events, in his memoir. He acknowledged no contribution from Tooke beyond the minor collaboration on the Address, and stated that he only became acquainted with Tooke (and Paine) 'about this period'.[111] Hardy claimed the LCS solely as his idea, and that 'J. Horne Tooke… Thomas Paine… neither of them had any hand in it'.[112] When Hardy wrote his memoir he was angry that his achievements were unrecognised (and unrewarded), so he was probably unwilling to share the glory of founding the LCS and so minimised Tooke's role as the prosecution had overplayed it. The truth of Tooke's involvement with the LCS is probably more than Hardy admitted but significantly less than the prosecution alleged. Hardy was willing to credit the gentlemanly reformers as an influence but more reluctant to admit their direct involvement with the LCS. Hardy's reluctance provides an important insight into

[108] Thale, *Selections,* xxi, 9, 9n.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Hardy, *Memoir,* 11-12.
[111] Ibid., 19-20.
[112] Ibid., 11.

his vision of the movement; he respected the previous generation and was grateful for their tutoring, but envisaged the LCS as something new and distinct, influenced by, but independent of, the gentlemanly reformers.

One further illuminating example of the SCI's involvement with the LCS concerned Felix Vaughan, a lawyer and a new member of the revitalised SCI, who joined the LCS and on 30 April 1792 was 'authorised to assist at the Committee appointed to form a constitutional code of laws for the government of the Corresponding Society'.[113] Vaughan's involvement shows how the SCI lent technical and professional assistance to the junior society, and probably exemplifies the relationship between the two: men of more experience, standing and learning, assisting novice but like-minded reformers. It may be that the more privileged membership of the SCI realised that if Parliament would not reform itself at their insistence, as the 1780s had proven, then it was their responsibility to help the unenfranchised of the 1790s to demand reform for themselves; as Richmond put it a decade earlier: 'IT IS FROM THE PEOPLE AT LARGE THAT I EXPECT ANY GOOD'.[114] The societies' pragmatism made them keen for such help.

Softer influence was effected through social meetings between the two generations of reformers, particularly as many of the societies' leaders were made honorary members of the SCI and occasionally attended its meetings. Much of this fraternisation would have occurred at dinners after meetings but Tooke's Wimbledon home, where he lived from June 1792, also became a centre for socialising. Tooke gave regular Sunday dinners for individuals from the

[113] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 2, 126. See also Volume 1, 99 for the prosecution's interpretation of this.
[114] C. Lennox, Duke of Richmond, *A letter ... to Lieutenant Colonel Sharman, of the Irish volunteers.* [n.p.], [1792], 5. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed July 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/mome/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=MOME&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=U102451781&type=multipage&contentSet=MOMEArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>

arts, journalism, business and academia as well as his political contacts.[115] Hardy was a visitor to Wimbledon for these dinners as noted by fellow guest, philosopher and writer, William Godwin, in his diary.[116] Such social intimacy may have further developed Hardy's political outlook in Tooke's mould. In contrast, Margarot was not invited to Wimbledon and there is no evidence of closeness between Tooke and the LCS chairman.[117] The lack of connection suggests that whilst there was some mentoring of the LCS leadership it did not amount to control, and that leading members of the LCS could put their stamp on the organisation. As the society matured there are indications that the boot was on the other foot. When both societies sent delegates to the British Convention in Edinburgh in November 1793, the SCI produced draft instructions for their delegates that were prescriptive, detailed and moderate but they were, some historians suggest, persuaded by LCS members to give the delegates more latitude and, by definition, the opportunity to be more radical.[118] This instance suggests that the new generation grew in self-confidence with time and were increasingly able to determine their own strategy.

Not all historians accept this observation. Thale, who was perhaps closer to the LCS than any other historian, suggested that 'The shadowy presence of Tooke in the first years of the LCS hints that 'the people' did have direction from men of higher status'.[119] The operative word is 'hints' and Thale does qualify the statement with 'in the early years', however, even so, the analysis above suggests that 'direction' is too strong, and was not what Tooke and the

[115] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical*, 116, 119-120.
[116] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 137; *W*. Godwin and V. Myers, D. O'Shaughnessy, M. Philp (eds.), *William Godwin's Diary.* Accessed June 2018. http://godwindiary.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/index2.html. Godwin only noted Hardy's presence from after the treason trials in late 1794, although Godwin was not a regular visitor until 1793 when he attended 6 dinners, and two more in 1794 prior to Tooke's imprisonment in May. The Bewleys imply Hardy was a regular visitor.
[117] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 137
[118] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 2, 99-101; Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 138. Goodwin claimed 'they may even have been forced': Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 292.
[119] Thale, *Selections*, xxi.

gentlemanly reformers sought. The relationship was closer to teacher and pupil than master and servant; the SCI were an invaluable resource for the inexperienced Hardy and the LCS, one that these pragmatic men were happy to exploit. The LCS was not a creation or a continuation of gentlemanly reformism but an organisation in its own right, able to seek advice from their predecessors and draw on their experience, but capable of determining their own path and willing to do so.

Societies outside London also sought help from the SCI, often addressing Tooke directly. As these letters were private, and not expected to be made public, they reveal more of the correspondents' sentiments than the public pronouncements they issued. In January 1792, the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information wrote to the editors of the *English Chronicle* in London asking for help in contacting London radicals and, in particular, 'John Horne Tooke Esq. Chairman; whose address we should like to be favoured with'.[120] Contact was evidently made as the SSCI, as well as a Norwich society, wrote to the SCI in March 1792 asking to associate with them and to have members adopted to facilitate their association.[121] Other societies followed. Birmingham offered thanks to Tooke, Cartwright and Erskine in February 1793 and again to Tooke in March 1793 'for his zeal in the cause of freedom'.[122] Birmingham's first communication asked for 'advice and assistance', a request already made by three other societies in November 1792, Leicester asking for, 'every necessary and particular', the Manchester Reformation Society requesting 'any information', and Coventry requiring a copy of 'the plan of Sheffield'.[123] Southwark highlighted the SCI's

[120] *The First and Second Report, From the Committee of Secrecy; Together with the Appendix to the Second Report* Appendix D, 117. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed March 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW104371675&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.
[121] *Secrecy Committee,* 120, 122.
[122] Ibid., Appendix E, 134, 141.
[123] Ibid., 134; Ibid., Appendix D 127, 129. 130.

role as the parent society, maintaining it was 'the best means of cementing proper union, and of directing with greater energy our united efforts'.[124]

The regional societies' need to associate was strong. Arguably the idea of association was learnt from Wyvill's organisation but there were other examples to follow; as the editor of the radical Sheffield periodical, the *Patriot*, wrote, 'Twas by this method France became so thoroughly united'.[125] The authorities saw it through a French lens: 'a number of societies, acting by regular and established correspondence communicated with each other, and acted under the guidance and direction of the two principal societies in this metropolis', with Tooke 'governing… the affiliated and associated Societies'.[126] The London societies were indeed at the hub of the movement's communications and internal relationships but it is unnecessary to look to France or gentlemanly reformism for the need to associate. The correspondence, as illustrated above, highlights that the regional societies were keen to learn the business of reform and it was generally they who initiated contact with London not the other way around. Association, though, went deeper than education; it was a means of bringing together the excluded, in Philp's phrase, and to build a positive, single movement out of disparate grievances, as Southwark's contribution above suggests.

That the initiative for association came from the regions not the SCI is a further indication of the movement's desire to learn from, but be independent of, the previous generation. Sheffield's role emphasises this point with even the LCS following its lead. Hardy wrote to a Reverend Bryant in Sheffield, whom he hoped had links with the SSCI,

[124] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 98.
[125] Secrecy Committee, Appendix D, 127.
[126] J. Thelwall *The Trial at large of John Thelwall,* (London, 1795), 17. Accessed March 2018. This is a summary not a transcript.
http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW124000041&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE; *Trial of John Horne Tooke* Volume 2, 247. See also *Trial of Thomas Hardy* Volume 1, 72.

asking for 'all the information you judge prudent, concerning the government of your Society, as ours is not yet perfectly organised'.[127] The SSCI complied and the organisational structure they created was adopted in London.[128] The SSCI also advised societies in the North and Midlands. Belper had adopted Sheffield's 'mode of conducting, &c'; Birmingham's 'rules and orders [were] adopted from the Sheffield Society'; Leeds wrote to the SCI 'by request of the Sheffield Society'; Stockport were given instruction on the 'the mode of application of our reason and arguments, on different men and on different occasions' by the editor of *The Sheffield Register*, promoter of the *Patriot* and leading member of the SSCI, Joseph Gales.[129] Sheffield did not control these societies but was instrumental in their development as much as, and probably more than, the SCI. Sheffield demonstrates that strong links between the SCI and the regional societies were not necessary for the latter to thrive and that the societies' development cannot be solely assigned to the influence of and contact with the gentlemanly reformers; the relationship was driven by the practical need to learn and desire to be part of a larger movement.

However, despite the independence of spirit demonstrated by the LCS as it evolved and the SSCI from its inception, there remains a suspicion that the societies relied on the gentlemanly reformers for leadership, and that, in contrast to Thale's claim that there was 'direction from above', the gentlemanly reformers were unable or unwilling to give it. This is hinted at in Hardy's veneration of the 'realy great men' of the SCI and to a lesser degree the junior societies' requests for advice from the SCI. However, there is evidence that this dependence went deeper and that the societies believed that their job was to educate the masses politically so that they would be ready when some 'great man' stepped forward to lead

[127] Hardy, *Memoir*, 14-16; Thale, *Selections*, 7 and 7n.
[128] *Secrecy Committee*, Appendix D, 119. Chapter Two will deal with the SSCI blueprint.
[129] Ibid.; Ibid., Appendix E, 134, 148; *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 3, 102.

them. Hardy held the SCI in high esteem, but also held himself in correspondingly low regard, claiming that his founding of the LCS remained a secret until after the treason trials because: 'it might operate to its prejudice were it made publicly known, that so obscure an individual was its founder'.[130] This may be false humility, or pragmatic realism, but it also suggests, even for the founder of the LCS, a residual degree of deference for his 'betters'. More explicitly, in 1799, Hardy wrote 'to a friend':

> I flattered myself that if a Society were formed on the principles of the representative system, men of talents, who had time to devote for promoting the cause, would step forward, and we, who were the framers of it, who had neither time to spare from our daily employments, nor talents for conducting so important an undertaking, would draw into the background. I was also encouraged to hope from… the vast numbers of friends to Reform, who had assisted for that purpose, in the years 1780-81-82… men of the first rate abilities and consequence in the country, who, I supposed, were not all dead, and who had not altogether relinquished the idea of prosecuting the subject of a Parliamentary Reform, but waited only for a favourable opportunity to come forward again.[131]

This note suggests Hardy believed that men of his class were unqualified to lead the movement and expected the gentlemanly reformers to fulfil this role. Even the independent-minded SCCI hoped that 'men of more respectable characters and great abilities would step forward'.[132] In November 1793 they complained of the perceived inaction of the SCI and 'the great bodies of the kingdom' who 'we little folks in the country look up to for examples'.[133]

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[130] Hardy, *Memoir*, 11.
[131] Ibid., 100-101.
[132] Quoted in Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes*, 58. Williams does not give a source.
[133] Secrecy Committee, Appendix E, 161.

Even if tinged with sarcasm, this comment is still indicative of the underlying belief that the societies should be led not lead. Deference can also be discerned in the societies' initial welcome of the FOP, consisting of the societies' social superiors, the sort of men who might lead them. However, the majority of gentlemanly reformers, Tooke being an exception, who had championed a wider franchise in the 1780s, took fright at 'the uncommon appearance of the popular societies', particularly so in light of events in France, and no leader of stepped forward from the higher orders. [134] The need for leadership reveals that even if E.P. Thompson was right that the 1790s represents the beginning of working class political participation, the new generation of campaigners had not yet lost their deference for their betters or found enough self-confidence to stand without them.

The relationship between the two generations of reformers shows a reliance of the new generation on the old for learning, but with the societies manifesting a determination to become a distinct movement. Their relationship emphasises that the societies' adherence to their predecessors was not simply expedient, a shield against prosecution or a means to appeal to moderate opinion, although it may have had those benefits on occasions, or even a parroting by rote of the only available model of agitation. The relationship reflected a genuine attachment based on the desire to learn from those with experience of campaigning for reform in the British context and with whom they could make direct contact. Gentlemanly reformism provided a useable model and it was this element of practicality that led the societies to adopt it. The relationship was not static, as demonstrated by the change in balance of power between the LCS and the SCI, nor did it follow a single model as shown by Sheffield's independence and leadership role. However, the societies lacked the self-confidence to lead their movement because they believed that men of their class could be recruiting-sergeants but not

[134] Hardy, *Memoir*, 101.

generals. The gentlemanly reformers, or more specifically the SCI, were prepared to mentor the societies, but no 'great man' was willing to offer the leadership that was necessary for success.

Tom Paine and the Corresponding Societies

Thomas Paine was a tangible presence for the 1790s' radicals; he was frequently in London and already engaged with the reform movement through his SCI membership and connections with reformers across Britain. His personal influence on the societies' leadership was significant but his most important contribution was indirect, through *Rights of Man*, which for the first time framed the political debate in language with which working men could engage. *Rights of Man* was a different form of influence from the gentlemanly reformers but nonetheless significant.

Paine became an honorary member of the SCI in December 1787 and through the Society became acquainted with Tooke, and Walker and Cooper, the founders of the MCS.[135] The rejuvenated SCI adopted *Rights of Man* as their primary propaganda tool and their praise for Paine was initially fulsome. On 23 March 1791 the SCI passed a resolution thanking Paine 'for his most masterly book' (*Rights of Man*, Part 1).[136] In May 1792 they passed a further resolution thanking Paine for publishing cheap versions of both parts of his work.[137] In June 1792, when Paine was charged with seditious libel, the SCI, supported by the LCS, raised a subscription for his defence.[138] The SCI did, however, decline a gift of £1000 from Paine from the proceeds of *Rights of Man* in July 1792, an indication that they realised their appeal

[135] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 176n.
[136] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix C, 82.
[137] Ibid., 92.
[138] Ibid., 96.

might narrow if they hitched themselves unquestioningly to Paine's wagon.[139] Nevertheless, they continued to issue advertisements confirming Paine's membership and recommending his work.[140] The relationship between Paine and the SCI was symbiotic. Tooke's biographers argued that 'It was largely due to the promotional efforts of the society, masterminded by Tooke, that [*Rights of Man*] had such an instant, huge success'.[141] In return, the 'huge success' of *Rights of Man* acted as the SCI's 'most powerful weapon' in spreading the message and recruiting new followers, not just for its ideas (which were not universally approved of), but because its simple language allowed the societies to engage working men in the political debate. [142] Paine's work was endorsed for this demographic by his SCI membership: he was one of them. As *Rights of Man* prospered with the help of the societies' distribution network, so Paine's fame (or infamy) grew, illustrated by the loyalist associations featuring the burning of Paine in effigy as one of their prime entertainments. The weight of Paine's reputation, and his association with the societies, bolstered support amongst like-minded individuals, but also contributed to the marginalisation process as the loyalists used it against the radicals to alienate them from moderate opinion. The symbiosis was both positive and negative.

As Paine left for France in September 1792 there was little chance for him to become personally involved with the societies. There was contact with the LCS but how much is unclear because of Hardy's reticence in crediting others with involvement in the society's establishment. However, Hardy, in his letter to Tooke seeking help with the LCS's first Address, admitted that 'Mr Paine was so good as to offer to draw something up for us if he

[139] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 2, 3-4.
[140] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 101.
[141] Ibid., 100.
[142] Ibid., 103.

had a little more time'.[143] Approbation for Paine was not restricted to the London societies. Manchester, with Walker's and Cooper's connection to Paine, passed a resolution of thanks on 16 March 1792 which praised 'his excellent and practicable plans'.[144] In Sheffield, Gales published extracts from Paine in his papers and produced a cheap version of *Rights of Man.* It is possible that Paine, indulging in one of his other passions, iron bridge construction, was in contact with Gales when he visited Sheffield to discuss specifications with local manufacturers.[145] Sheffield and Norwich made resolutions of thanks to Paine for *Rights of Man* in March 1792, the former claiming they gained 'true knowledge' from his works.[146] Sheffield were also responsible for a Paineite version of the national anthem.[147]

The extraordinary reception that Paine's work received and the volume of copies sold (up to 200,000) was driven as much by the way it was written as the ideas it contained; Paine's 'attitude' was, Philp has suggested, more important than his doctrine.[148] Paine's aim was 'to make those that can scarcely read understand' and so he would 'avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet'.[149] A new class was beginning to question the political status quo and Paine 'made possible a vernacular language of popular democracy' and was the first political theorist to treat them as 'citizens not subjects'.[150] It helped that he was one of them, unlike the gentlemanly reformers who had sought change on behalf of the unenfranchised from a position of social superiority. For this reason, although he

[143] Thale, *Selections*, 9.
[144] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix C, 84.
[145] W.H.G. Armytage, 'The Editorial Experience of Joseph Gales, 1786-1794, in *The North Carolina Historical Review*, XXVIII, (1951), 339-340. Stevenson claimed the link for certain whilst Graham called it 'an open question'. Goodwin claims Gales was 'a friend' of Paine'. Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats,* 13; Graham, *The Nation, The Law and The King,* 113; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 222.
[146] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix C, 85; *Trial of* Thomas *Hardy* Volume 1, 92.
[147] Armytage, *Editorial Education,* 344. The composition was originally by Joseph Mather.
[148] M. Philp, 'Introduction', in M. Philp (ed.),*The French Revolution and British Popular Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 5; Philp, 'Disconcerting Ideas', 99.
[149] Quoted in C. Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man*, (Atlantic Books: London, 2006), 89. Hitchens gives no source for the Paine quote.
[150] Epstein, *Radical Expression*, 3; Philp, 'The fragmented ideology of reform', 20.

would have met few society members, their connection to him felt personal. It is ironic that Burke's *Reflections*, which argued for the exclusion of the lower orders from politics, inspired a work that brought them into the debate – as Thelwall put it 'it was not Tom Paine but Edmund Burke who made me so zealous a reformer'.[151]

Paine's personal relationship with the SCI was instrumental in both parties' success as the society promoted his work and his work provided the medium through which the societies could reach working men. It was though the indirect connection Paine made with the societies' members through his use of language which was transformational. Paine provided the practical men of the societies with a tool which allowed them to participate in the political debate in their own voice, and an attitude towards those in government preventing change that was direct and blunt, and far removed from the gentlemanly tone of their predecessors. It was, however, a relationship of utility more than ideology; Paine did not significantly change the societies' demands but gave them a means of communicating their ideas to the people.

The French Revolutionaries and the Corresponding Societies

There was relatively little contact between the societies and the Revolutionaries, perhaps surprisingly given the similarities in class and objectives of the two movements, and certainly far less than the treason trial prosecutors required to prove a cross-channel conspiracy; even they admitted 'there are no Societies in France… in connection with the Societies here'.[152] Nevertheless, there are three phases during which the radicals made contact with France – the initial welcome of the French Revolution, Addresses to the newly-formed Convention in autumn 1792 and subsequent contact with Revolutionary organisations and individuals. This

[151] Quoted in Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate*, 196 n35.
[152] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 2, 247.

section will consider the nature of these contacts with France and what it reveals about the societies' relationship with the French Revolution.

The initial reaction in Britain to the French Revolution was celebration; it appeared that France was developing a mixed constitution mirroring Britain's model established in1688. The reaction was encapsulated by Cartwright in August 1789; France was taking 'the constitution of England for her model; in so doing, she acts with much wisdom… and when a presidency of a king is the choice of a people, it is a constitution above all praise'.[153] Price echoed this sentiment in a speech marking the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille in 1790: the French had now 'broke their yoke… asserted their rights, and made themselves as free as ourselves' but added with a degree of premonition 'THEY are now become an example to US'.[154] Such sentiments were initially common across British society.

In this spirit British radicals opened communications with the Revolutionaries. The London Revolution Society, established to commemorate 1688, was the first organisation to welcome the French Revolution in an Address moved by Price in November 1789, and they continued a regular correspondence with that body until Spring 1792.[155] The SCI, many of whose members belonged to the Revolution Society (Tooke included), adopted that organisation's Address but did not contact the National Assembly at this point.[156] However, in 1792 the SCI and the MCS picked up the baton relinquished by the Revolution Society and opened communications with France. Both sent Addresses to the Jacobins Club in Paris, the former on 13 April, which was presented in person by Cooper and James Watt (son of the

[153] Letter to the President of the Committee of Constitution of the States [sic] General quoted in Cartwright, *Life and Correspondence*, 182-3.
[154] Quoted in P. Frame and G.W. Powell, ''Our first concern as lovers of our country must be to enlighten it' Richard Price's response to the French Revolution' in M.A. Constantine, and D. Johnston (eds.), *Footsteps of Liberty and Revolt* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 62.
[155] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 111, 124.
[156] Ibid., 115. The Bewleys claim they did: *Gentleman Radical,* 93.

inventor), and the latter on 11 May, addressed to their 'Brothers and fellow citizens of the World'.[157] The communications were congratulatory, offering encouragement to a nation striving to reach Britain's level of constitutional development. At this stage there seems to have been little contact between France and the fledgling societies, who doubtless were focused on establishing themselves. Southwark was possibly the first society to acknowledge the inspiration they gained from France by adopting the preamble of the 1791 French Constitution in their introductory 'Declaration' in April 1792.[158] The radicals' actions attracted little criticism except from known opponents of the Revolution such as Burke.

The 'second Revolution' in August 1792 forced moderate reformers to reconsider their support for the Revolutionaries. Louis' execution in January 1793 and the declaration of war in February completed this process and, for many, reform became inconceivable at this time. Despite these inauspicious circumstances, the societies, led by the LCS, determined to address the new Convention. This seems a rash decision for the normally pragmatic movement as it detached the societies from the direction of public opinion and gave their enemies a weapon to use against them. It is therefore important to understand their motives.

The LCS's Address to the Convention was written on 27 September 1792, after the deposal of Louis and the September massacres, but was not presented until November when the situation in France had deteriorated further. In the first joint action between the societies, the Manchester Constitutional and Reformation Societies, the Norwich Revolution Society, and the society at Stockport, joined their names to the LCS communication, whilst eleven other groups sent separate Addresses, including the SSCI and the SCI.[159] This first instance of

[157] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix C, 91-92; T. Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 25.
[158] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 97.
[159] Thale, *Selections,* 21; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty,* Appendix 2.

public cooperation between the societies is significant. It demonstrates that they could speak with something approaching one voice on a controversial subject of principle. The societies had evolved in the first nine months of their existence from scattered, individual societies to something resembling a coherent movement. The government was forced to take note, and they and their supporters in the press, claimed the Addresses were prompted by the French or were proof of an Anglo-French conspiracy.[160] It is ironic that the societies first cooperated on a subject that separated them from mainstream opinion.

The reasons behind their actions are complex. Erskine, the radicals' defence lawyer, argued for a moderate rationale by siting their actions in the English tradition of free speech, as exercised in the past by members of the current Establishment. He impishly compared the communications to Burke's – unpunished – support for the American colonies, during the American Revolution.[161] A further moderate interpretation is that the societies were only following the more recent example of the London Revolution Society and other gentlemanly reformers in welcoming the earlier stages of the Revolution but with poor timing. However, the Addresses' tone works against these moderate interpretations. The societies felt a genuine bond with men of their class, fighting similar battles for comparable reasons; the LCS hailed 'your cause, so intimately blended with our own'. [162] As Paine had made the political debate accessible to the societies, so France provided an example of men of the same class winning that debate; the Revolution provided encouragement and inspiration. However, the language in which the bond was expressed suggests their support was based on a romantic interpretation of events in France; France was a symbol representing or reflecting their own

[160] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty,* 252.
[161] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 3, 270.
[162] Ibid., Volume 1, 119.

struggle, but it was not a model they chose to follow or learn from as they did with gentlemanly reformism.

The LCS gave their reasons for making the Address in a pamphlet published in mid-1794 concerning Hardy's arrest. It is an ill-considered document written in the heat of the moment, nevertheless its immediacy lends it credibility. The LCS argued that their motivation had been anger at the 'BLOODY AND TYRANNOUS MANIFESTO' of the Duke of Brunswick who had threatened to raze Paris and which, the LCS claimed, was the direct cause of the September massacres, as the *sans-culottes* eradicated the enemy within before Brunswick arrived at their gates.[163] The LCS's explanation is supported by the language used in the Address dealing with Brunswick's progress – 'cruelty and desolation leading on their van, perfidy and treachery bringing up their rear'.[164] The tone reflects their dismay at the apparent, imminent destruction of their inspiration. It reinforces the emotional nature of their connection with France; as Barrell put it the Addresses can be seen 'less as statements of doctrine or announcements of policy than as expressions of euphoria', and, he might have added, of anger.[165]

Thale proposed a more rational motive for their actions. She suggested that Margarot initiated the concerted Addresses to prevent the government entering the war by demonstrating the level of support for France in Britain.[166] Thale's claim is supported by an LCS letter to the SCI of 21 September 1792 confirming their intention to make an Address and stating: 'should those in power here – dare (… in opposition to the well-known

[163] The London Corresponding Society, *An account of the seizure of citizen Thomas Hardy* (London, 1794) Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed April 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW1043545324.

[164] *Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 1, 119.

[165] Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death*, 197-8.

[166] Thale, *Selections,* 21.

sentiments of the people at large) to join the German band of despots, united against liberty, we disclaim all concurrence therein'; the letter concludes 'the publication of such a respectable number of real names will greatly check the hostile measures'.[167] It seems likely that this was their intention but their anger at Brunswick's ultimatum driven by fellow feeling for the French, blinded them to waning public support for the Revolution. The saga of the Addresses underlines the societies' novice status in the political debate; their political antennae were insufficiently sensitive to understand the damage this connection might cause. It also encapsulates the relationship with France; it was a romantic symbol not an ideological model.

The involvement of the SCI and the experienced Tooke in the Addresses is surprising; this is compounded by two further actions. In mid-September 1792, Tooke opened an SCI subscription to support the Revolutionaries' war effort, reflecting what he called 'the common causes in England and France'.[168] He wrote to Pétion, the Mayor of Paris, enclosing 4000 livres, presumably the subscription, which Tooke offered towards France's defence against its enemies 'without excepting any one, were it even of my own country'.[169] In November, a second subscription was opened to provide shoes for the French army and the SCI despatched 7000 pairs before it was closed at the outbreak of war.[170] The second instance was the honorary membership the SCI bestowed on three Revolutionaries – Roland, Barère and St. André – in January 1793, after the execution of Louis but before the declaration of war. Their speeches to the Convention relating to Louis's trial, all notably anti-monarchical and republican, were reproduced in the SCI minutes on 1 February, the day war broke out, and

[167] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 2, 7-8.
[168] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical*, 122.
[169] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 2, 74.
[170] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 123.

publicised in the press.[171] That the normally publicly cautious Tooke was drawn into such a gesture underlines the strength of the societies' emotional connection to France, to the extent that it clouded even Tooke's judgement as he saw the symbol of democratic liberty about to be extinguished.

The societies' emotional attachment to France is contrary to their normal pragmatic nature. It can be explained by Philp's concept of common cause being found in exclusion; the two movements were of the same class and faced in different degrees the same exclusion from power. The response was an instinctive reaction to the threat to a people in whom they saw themselves. The strength of feeling was heightened because it was their own connection, not something handed down by the gentlemanly reformers, a unique link with France based on shared class. Thus the engagement was on an emotional not an intellectual level – there was no conspiracy, no attempt to take advantage of the Jacobin's promise to help other countries achieve liberty, and communications were merely mutual approbation not dialogue. Nevertheless, the brief association with France was damaging. It alienated moderate opinion, increased concern and interest from the government and provided the loyalists with a powerful weapon. The association with France triggered a marginalisation of the societies from which they never recovered.

Conclusion

The radicals made different types of connection with each of the influences discussed in this chapter. The response to each was determined by the societies' nature, and each influence had a different impact in shaping the societies development. To learn from the gentlemanly reformers was an obvious choice for the pragmatic societies. The societies' leaders had

[171] *Trial of John Horne Tooke,* Volume 1, 51.

witnessed their predecessors' campaigns and Tooke and the SCI were there to consult; direct contact with the older generation created a genuine and personal connection with gentlemanly reformism. Even when the societies wanted to assert their own identity, the personal connection ensured it was built on the foundations of the political education they received from their predecessors. Paine was a brief, personal presence in the societies' lives and close enough to them to give a sense of ownership of his ideas. But the real connection with Paine was linguistic; his language provided a practical tool which allowed the societies to engage in the political debate in their own authentic voice. There was also direct contact with France but this never amounted to significant dialogue or personal engagement as even the societies' prosecutors admitted. France's appeal was not one of pragmatism but emotion; it was a symbol of political liberty achieved through a struggle between men and women of the societies' class and the elite. At face value connection with the retrospective reform tradition and the forward-looking Paine and France seems contradictory, an example of Thomis and Holt's 'curious mixture', but when the nature of the personal connections are understood it is clear that they fulfil separate needs for the societies. Contact with the gentlemanly reformers provided a solid rationale and methodology to pursue reform, Paine the language to engage in the debate, and France an inspiration, a symbol of what might be achieved.

2. Structure and Campaigning Methods

By considering the societies personal connections to the gentlemanly reformers, Paine and France as well as how they referenced them in what they said and wrote, Chapter One demonstrated the different types of impact that these influences had on the societies' development, and the importance of the societies' own nature in the way they absorbed the influences. Chapter Two will take the same approach in relation to the societies' actions, in particular, the way they structured, their commitment to political education, the use of petitions and conventions, and their attitude to violence. By drawing on evidence presented by the Committee of Secrecy and at the treason trials, this chapter will analyse how they approached each activity, consider the debates they had around each programme in their correspondence, and examine their own interpretation of their actions as revealed by their meetings' minutes, reminiscences and public justifications. The findings of this chapter will support and develop the conclusions of the first. It will confirm that practicality and pragmatism dictated the societies' behaviour and pushed them more towards gentlemanly reformism than Paine and France, but will suggest more strongly than Chapter One the significance of their own character in the development of their programme.

Organisation and Structure

The societies' methods of organisation were not uniform but the structure adopted by Sheffield became the blueprint for many, including the London Corresponding Society. Goodwin rightly claimed that 'Sheffield radicalism had other contributions to make to the English popular movement, but none exceeded this in significance'.[172] The SSCI grew from a handful of friends to a reported membership of 2000 within weeks, forcing the society to introduce a structure to cope with the influx of members. They divided into groups of ten,

[172] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 170.

each of which nominated a delegate to a further meeting with another nine such colleagues, from whom a further representative was appointed to attend the 'Grand Council'.[173] The authorities construed the societies' structures to be imitating the French political clubs' organisational methods, but the earlier British reformers had organised in a similar way, whilst the societies themselves argued the formations were merely a practical solution to the problems of scale. This section will consider which of these factors most influenced the societies and why.

The treason trial prosecutors repeatedly linked the societies' organisational methods with France. At Thomas Hardy's trial they claimed 'the plan (the efficacy of which had been tried in France…) – was to unite, first, small bodies of men – as soon as they came to a greater number, to divide them into smaller parties, and so to spread themselves by degrees'.[174] John Horne Tooke's prosecutors reminded the jury of 'the Jacobin Club, and of the several associated and affiliated societies… of upwards of 40,000, dispersed all over that country' and alleged that Tooke wished to establish 'the same sort of association of clubs… a united body… a State within the State itself'.[175] The authorities associated the societies with the French Revolutionaries because they needed convictions but their actions also reveal a fear that France was teaching Britain's working men democratisation. The question is whether the authorities were right to detect parallels in the origins and evolution of the societies and the French Revolutionary clubs, and between the democratisation of France's constitution and the societies' methods of organisation.

[173] 'Plan of the Organisation of the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information, March 1792' reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 54.
[174] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 98.
[175] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 1, 34-5. See also *Trial of John Thelwall,* 20-21.

Analysis of the organisational structures of Revolutionary France does, superficially, reveal similarities. François Furet described the precursor to Jacobinism as the Enlightenment-influenced clubs and salons which evolved into 'the matrix of a new network of political relations that was to be the main characteristic and the outstanding innovation of the French Revolution'.[176] The evolution began in response to economic hardship and famine in 1788, producing more politically focused clubs, commencing with the *Club Breton* in Versailles in 1789 which became the *Club Jacobin* in December 1789.[177] The Jacobin Club had a hefty subscription 'to keep the poor at a distance' but popular clubs soon followed and in 1791, in Paris, they began to federate under a central committee, and correspond with similar clubs around France.[178] The French experience seems, as the prosecution alleged, to provide the blueprint for a network of local, popular political societies in Britain.

The hallmark of the French Revolution was the gradual democratisation of its constitution and government culminating in the election of the National Convention in August and September of 1792 by universal male suffrage. Reform of local government had already been undertaken from 1789 by the National Assembly, a body itself elected by a wider representation than anywhere else in Europe. The Revolutionaries organised Paris into 48 *Sections* which were structured in a hierarchy of primary assemblies and elected supervisory committees.[179] They divided France into 83 D*épartements*, run by councils elected every two years, which were subdivided into districts and these into cantons and, beneath that, communes.[180] The novelty of these structures was that their members were elected and broadly representative even if suffrage was not initially universal. When it appeared that

[176] F. Furet, (E. Forster, trans.), *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), 174-175; F. Furet, (A. Nevill, trans) *The French Revolution* [1988] (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 86.
[177] Furet, *The French Revolution*, 57; I. Davidson, *The French Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 48. The change of name occurred when the club moved into a former monastery of that order on Rue St. Honoré
[178] Furet, *The French Revolution*, 86, 93.
[179] Davidson, *The French Revolution*, 42-43.
[180] Ibid., 52.

Britain's societies were structuring themselves into similarly elected hierarchies, the government must have been concerned about the adoption of the concept of democratisation, which provided an unflattering comparison with Parliament, and might be seen as a logical precursor to the legislature's reform on democratic lines, as had happened in France. It was the extension of political engagement to working men and their experimentation with democracy that worried the government, and the easiest way to quash it was to link the societies with the increasingly bloody events in France.

It is equally possible that the societies developed not in imitation of the Jacobins, but in parallel, by following their predecessor's example. As in France, Britain's popular societies followed an earlier movement populated by a higher social stratum that drew its inspiration from the Enlightenment. The senior movements had their own national flavour and largely followed their native strain of Enlightenment thought which was then adopted by their successors; as Thomas Erskine argued, 'It is from the revered work of Mr Locke, and not from the Revolution in France that [a speech in Sheffield] most obviously flowed'.[181] The argument for parallel development is supported by the 1780s' British reform movement's organisational methods and its attempts to form national networks. Wyvill's Yorkshire association started as a traditional county meeting but resolved to associate with other such bodies around the country, setting up a Committee of Correspondence. Together with other associations they elected deputies, to meet 'in one great National Association'.[182] The Society for Constitutional Information's founding *Declaration* also exhorted 'their Fellow Citizens at large to associate in the common Cause'.[183] In November 1789, the London Revolution

[181] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 3, 241.
[182] Wyvill, *Political Papers* Volume 1, 61-2, 111, 117, 114.
[183] Society for Constitutional Information, *Declaration of rights, without which no Englishman can be a free man, nor the English nation a free people.* [London, 1795?]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed April 2019.
<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabl

Society recommended the establishment of similar societies across Britain which would correspond with each other and form 'a grand concentrated Union of the true Friends of Public Liberty'.[184] The idea of association and the creation of a national network were therefore not new and the personal connections between the 1780s' reformers and the 1790s' societies ensured the new generation understood how their predecessors had operated. The difference was that the 1780s' reform movement had been restricted to middling sorts and above, and so its democratisation reflected rather than contradicted the existing franchise, which was not the case with working-men's organisations of the 1790s. This does not negate the argument that the societies developed in parallel to France, but it explains why the prosecutors argued there was a closer connection with the working-class Revolutionaries, and emphasises that for the authorities it was class that was the movement's defining characteristic, and its most threatening aspect.

Sheffield is a prime example of the conflicting interpretations of the societies' organisations. The similarities to France were clear to suspicious eyes, and whilst there is no direct evidence that the societies' structure was copied from France, the Sheffield *Patriot*, owned by the leading SSCI member, Gales, has been described as 'bubbling with French ideas', so some form of imitation cannot be ruled out.[185] Nevertheless, there was also an English feel to the nomenclature, the SSCI's divisions being called 'Tythings', in imitation of the Anglo-Saxon constitution that was a model for many gentlemanly reformers.[186] It can therefore be argued that the formation was drawn from France or gentlemanly reformism. The society offered a third alternative. They maintained that it was simply a practical solution to a logistical problem caused by the organisation's rapid growth; the structure was established

D=T001&docId=CW105965876&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

[184] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty,* 110.

[185] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes*, 59.

[186] Ibid., 58.

simply 'for the sake of Good Order'.[187] This explanation sits comfortably with the societies' pragmatic nature and suggests that even if there was any influence from gentlemanly reformism or France (or both), it was adopted not for ideological motives but reasons of practicality.

In observing the societies' structures, it becomes clear that it is not always necessary to ask whether France, Paine or gentlemanly reformism influenced them, as their primary interest was in what worked; their organisations derived more from their own nature than learnt behaviour. Nevertheless, the organisational structures emphasise the societies' interest in democratisation. Here were unenfranchised, working men experimenting with democracy in a political context. It was a characteristic they shared with their French cousins but their interest was developed in parallel with, rather than in imitation of, France. By observing what the societies did rather than what they said, their own agency becomes clearer

Political Education

The societies' organisational structures provided the means of implementing what they professed to be their primary aim, apparently inherited from gentlemanly reformism, 'simply to give Constitutional Information to the public, particularly and expressly for the purpose of promoting a Parliamentary Reform'.[188] Even the prosecution conceded that political education was a genuine aim of the societies, but argued that the lessons they imparted drew on Paine and France not British constitutionalism.[189] As would be expected, at trial the radicals pleaded the opposite. This section will consider why political education was important to the societies,

[187] 'Plan of the Organisation' reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 54.
[188] Cartwright's explanation of the SCI objectives in *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 1, 453.
[189] *Trial of John Thelwall*, 21.

whether their interest was inherited from gentlemanly reformism, and what they intended to achieve with it. It will do so by analysing content, audience and means of delivery.

The 1780s' reformers had considered education their primary task. Price argued that the people 'are kept in the darkness, and want knowledge' and so 'Our first concern, as lovers of our country, must be to enlighten it'.[190] Cartwright, giving evidence at Tooke's trial, pointed out helpfully that the SCI's objective was 'expressed in the original title of the society'.[191] These were not merely words for the jury; in 1783 the SCI had published a pamphlet called *Tracts published and distributed gratis by the Society for Constitutional Information with a design to convey to the minds of the People a Knowledge of their rights; principally those of representation*, a document that Hardy read in his formative period.[192] It would not be unreasonable to suggest that in promoting political education the societies were following the reform tradition.

The societies' own materials offer ample evidence that education was a primary objective. Hardy wrote that 'gross ignorance and prejudice of the bulk of the nation was the greatest obstacle to obtaining redress. Therefore our aim was to have a well regulated and orderly society formed for the purpose of dispelling that ignorance and prejudice'.[193] He claimed the LCS 'did more in eight or nine years of its existence to diffuse political knowledge among the people of Great Britain and Ireland than all that had ever been done before'.[194] In its letter to the *English Chronicle* seeking contact with the SCI and Tooke, the

[190] R. Price, *A discourse on the love of our country, (*London, 1790), 11-12. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed July 2018. http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW103973806&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE.
[191] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 1, 451.
[192] Thale, *Selections*, 5n.
[193] Thale, *Selections*, 6-7.
[194] Hardy, *Memoir*, vii.

SSCI explained that they had concluded that the barrier to reform was the 'darkness and ignorance in the people'.[195] Thomas Walker, speaking about education generally, asked 'why are the mass of people, the poorer class… so blindly the dupes of their oppressors? Because they are ignorant… Why do the middling class … hesitate…? Because they are at best half-informed.'[196] In March 1792, Norwich resolved that 'instructing the people in political knowledge and in their natural and inherent rights as men, is the only effectual way to obtain the grand object of Reform'.[197] At the British Convention in November 1793, the first substantive motion was 'this Convention adopt some measures for instructing the people at large in the nature, principles and glorious properties of the British constitution'.[198] All these sources suggest that the societies were genuinely committed to achieve reform through political education. Undoubtedly, political education being a prerequisite for reform was learnt from gentlemanly reformism, but the societies' commitment to it derived from members like Hardy, who had had to learn about reform themselves and so understood the practical value political education could bring.

The degree to which the societies were merely following the reform tradition or creating their own agenda can be determined by their means of communication, their audience and the content. Certainly it is hard to maintain that they only intended to preach gentlemanly reformist constitutionalism when their main propaganda weapon was *Rights of Man.* However, many maintained they were interested only in the British constitution. Joseph Gerrald, an LCS delegate to the British Convention, wrote a treatise summarising the Convention's proceedings in which he described the meeting's aims as the restitution of constitutional rights that had been lost and, of which, since the time of William I, the people

[195] Secrecy Committee, Appendix D, 117.
[196] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 124- 127.
[197] Secrecy Committee, Appendix D, 122.
[198] 'Minutes of the General Convention in Edinburgh' reproduced in *The Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 281.

had been in 'profound ignorance'.[199] Hardy argued that political education would allow the people to become the 'heridatory [sic] guardians of the liberties transmitted to them by their forefathers'.[200] Gerrald was defending his liberty as he was about to be tried for his part in the Convention and Hardy was writing during the French wars, and so both might be expected to take a moderate line publicly, however, as Chapter Three will show, the consistency with which lost rights were referenced suggests their claims have some validity. Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for Paine discussed in Chapter One and comments in private correspondence, such as Norwich's mention of instructing people in 'their natural and inherent rights as men' quoted above, suggests that innovation was part of their approach to political education. The content of the Sheffield *Patriot* is instructive; it contained a blend of reform tradition political theory from authors such as Locke and Hulme but also extracts from Paine and Rousseau's *Contrat Social,* and translations of the National Assembly's legislative measures.[201] The *Manchester Herald*, which was all but run by the Manchester Constitutional Society, was less balanced than the *Patriot*: 'The whole tone of the journal was Paineite' with a 'strongly Francophile bias'.[202] The content of the societies' educational materials is therefore ambiguous, another example of the 'curious mixture', but the conflation suggests they were not merely following the reform tradition but trying to find their own voice, with their diversity creating inconsistent messages.

There are further differences from gentlemanly reformism in the audience the societies addressed, a factor that concerned the authorities as much as who was doing the addressing. The societies wanted to engage the masses in the political debate whilst the authorities wished to exclude them, a point encapsulated in the trial of the radical publisher, Daniel Isaac Eaton,

[199] J. Gerrald, *The address of the British Convention, assembled at Edinburgh* (London: Eaton, 1793), 7. Accessed June 2018. http://www.jstor.org/stable/602023514-5.
[200] Thale, *Selections*, 7.
[201] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 223.
[202] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 25; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 229.

for seditious libel in February 1794. The prosecution argued that his publication, *Politics for the People,* represented 'circumstances of public agitation submitted to the consideration of the lowest class of society' which made it 'infinitely more mischievous' than publications targeted at an educated audience; the defence countered 'ought it not to be a subject within the comprehension of every man?'.[203] The same argument was made in relation to Paine. The treason trial prosecutors argued that if the distribution of Paine's writings were to educated men, the state would be unconcerned, but the societies made them available to 'men who cannot possibly understand the distinctions', which clearly intended 'mischief'.[204] Again, it was democratisation that troubled the authorities. The societies' approach was also subtly different from the gentlemanly reformers; they were not just calling for reform from within their societies on behalf of the unenfranchised as their predecessors had, but were attempting to mobilise the unenfranchised public more directly behind their demands. Today this seems an obvious tactic, but at the time this approach was stepping outside the social boundaries in which reform had hitherto been discussed. Democratisation was being applied to the process of seeking reform as well as being the objective of reform itself.

The societies' method of reaching the new audience further emphasises the link between process and democratisation, and marks another subtle shift from gentlemanly reformism. The early SCI and the Association movement were mostly composed of enfranchised, middling types who wished to extend representation on behalf of, but not necessarily with the participation of, those below them. This was reflected in the high membership fees of the SCI (minimum annual subscription of one guinea) and even the MCS (half a guinea), compared with the LCS (a penny a week).[205] The cost of membership

[203] Eaton, *Trial,* 13, 23, 35.
[204] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 2, 258.
[205] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 81; Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 147, Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class,* 19.

reflected the LCS's democratic principles. The societies made political writing and journalism affordable to the working man, through cheap versions of *Rights of Man*, inexpensive newspapers and pamphlets, and free handbills. The Sheffield *Patriot* was established because 'it has long been a matter of complaint that means of information on that most important science, POLITICS… are entirely out of the reach the body of the people, from the very heavy expense attending the purchase of the works of these eminent writers'.[206] The periodical was to 'open a channel of universal communication at a price which is within reach of almost every individual', three pennies a copy.[207] The *Manchester Herald*, was priced at one and a half pennies a week.[208] Political education appears to be a direct link to the gentlemanly reformers but the societies, whilst learning the need for political reform from their predecessors, democratised the process by further extending its reach to unenfranchised working men.

The question arises whether there was any influence from France in the societies' approach to political education. There was a parallel explosion of 'thousands of brochures and pamphlets addressed to the French' from 1788.[209] Newspapers were particularly important, most notably Marat's *L'ami du peuple,* which 'had affected and mobilised the people since 1789', and Hébert's *Père Duchêsne*, but they were more extreme than the British papers.[210] The tone of the *Patriot* was moderate and even the more radical *Manchester Herald* did not plumb the depths of the French newspapers.[211] The (generally) more informative tone of the British radical newspapers supports the societies' claims that they meant to educate the public not to inflame it. The societies had no need to learn from France as they included publishers

[206] Armytage, *Editorial Experiences,* 341.
[207] Ibid.
[208] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 229.
[209] Furet, *The French Revolution*, 57,
[210] Ibid., 131.
[211] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty,* 228-230.

such as Gales and Eaton and writers such as Thelwall, who understood the need for mass communication and had learnt from Paine that it must be couched in language that engaged the working man. The societies' educational materials provide further evidence that they developed more in parallel with, than in imitation of, France.

The evidence supports both the societies' claims that political education was their central objective and, to a lesser degree, the prosecutors' allegations regarding the innovative content of their publications, which was, in reality, the usual 'curious mixture'. But to focus on the message (as the authorities did) is to miss the point; the real innovation was in audience and medium not content – the societies sought to achieve change not on behalf of the people but through them, a subtle departure from the gentlemanly reformers. They were seeking democracy in Parliament but putting democracy into practice in the way they sought it. This approach did not derive from Paine, France or gentlemanly reformism but from their own practical experience; the societies' leaders understood, as they had discovered it themselves, that the only way to engage public opinion was through education. The process the societies adopted to educate the people politically reveal more of their nature than the messages conveyed within the materials.

Petitions

In the first half of 1793 the societies petitioned the House of Commons for parliamentary reform. The motives behind this move are disputed. Ostensibly it was, as Hardy claimed, 'for the purpose of strengthening Mr Grey's motion for Reform' that was to be tabled in Parliament in May.[212] However, there is substantial evidence that many radicals had no faith in the efficacy of petitioning, perhaps because of the failure of the gentlemanly reformers with

[212] Hardy, *Memoir*, 29.

this form of campaign in the 1780s. It is therefore possible that for some petitioning was a means of achieving alternative ends, such as arousing debate in Parliament and the press, and so increasing public awareness of their cause. The government detected more sinister motives, maintaining that the societies petitioned in a way that would ensure failure and so 'enforce the logic of a resort to a convention'.[213] This section will discuss each of these arguments and suggest that the petitioning programme further distances the movement from the French Revolutionaries, aligns it more closely to gentlemanly reformist behaviours, but provides more evidence that the societies were adding their own ingredients to their predecessors' tactics. It will also reveal how elements of the societies' nature undermined its chances of success.

Petitioning had featured in British politics from the Glorious Revolution when law-making passed more fully into the hands of Parliament. It began with small-scale petitions generated by interest groups in response to legislation, but by the 1780s had evolved into mass actions dealing with national issues such as slavery, religious toleration and parliamentary reform.[214] Wyvill's Association movement was part of the trend towards large scale petitions, campaigning for administrative reforms of Parliament in 1780 and for representational changes in 1783, delivering twenty-six petitions from the counties and twelve from larger boroughs in the former campaign.[215] Even at this early stage, some Association members were doubtful of success: 'Mr. Cholmley rose, and declared that he had sat too long

[213] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 278.
[214] P. Loft, 'Public Petitioning and Parliament 1688-1760', in *The History of Parliament*, March 2018. Accessed May 2018. https://thehistoryofparliament.wordpress.com/2018/03/20/public-petitioning-and-parliament-1689-1760
[215] I. Christie, 'The Yorkshire Association, 1780-1784: A study in political organisation' in *The Historical Journal* Volume 3, No.2, 1960, 144, 149; F. O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History, 1688-1832* [1997] (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 238.

in the House, to think that a petition would be productive'.[216] Cartwright echoed this concern, describing 'the inadequacy and inexpediency of petitions'.[217]

There was therefore a history of petitioning and arguably the societies can again be seen as part of the British reform tradition. There are three arguments in favour of this interpretation. Firstly, support for Grey's motion with their own petitions might be seen as an attempt at gentlemanly reformist moderation to bring the societies back into the mainstream after their support for the French Convention had moved them outside it. Secondly, their actions may reflect the societies' residual deference described earlier; here was some 'great man' to lead them, with the societies supporting Grey by demonstrating the weight of public opinion behind reform with their petitions in the gentlemanly reformist tradition. Thirdly, more moderate members may genuinely have seen petitioning as the correct constitutional process for seeking reform and would not go beyond it; the two junior Manchester societies and one at Derby folded after the failure of Grey's motion for this reason.[218]

Whilst the constitutional explanation for petitioning fits some societies, many radicals inherited, or developed with experience, the gentlemanly reformers' doubts about petitioning but unlike their predecessors were prepared to act on it. Sheffield provides an example of committed petitioners who, faced with government intransigence, became cynical about the process. A report to Lord Fitzwilliam, the local grandee, by a Reverend H. Zouch described how in January 1792, the SSCI 'profess[ed]… their sole object is to petition Parliament… and they think that the legislative will attend to the voice of the multitude'.[219] As evidence from an informer, albeit an ecclesiastical one, this document must be treated with care but it does

[216] Wyvill, *Political Papers,* Volume 1, 11.
[217] Cartwright, *Life and Correspondence,* 139-40.
[218] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 282.
[219] 'Account of the Meeting of the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information', 30 January, 1792, reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 51.

reflect the optimism, or naiveté, that infused the societies at this early stage. In January 1793, the SSCI still believed petitioning Parliament was the way to proceed and duly presented a petition with 10,000 signatures which was rejected on 6 May.[220] Consequently on 7 April 1794, at a meeting at Castle Hill, the SSCI publicly rejected 'the monstrous idea of petitioning'.[221] The meeting resolved that 'the People ought to demand as a *Right* not petition as a *Favour* for Universal Representation'.[222] The SSCI's experience demonstrates that some societies were prepared to follow the gentlemanly reformist constitutional route at least until it failed. This approach further distances the societies from the French Revolutionaries who took direct action to accelerate change rather than follow due process, albeit having fewer constitutional routes than the societies open to them.

A further group of societies never considered petitioning as a route to reform but saw tactical advantages in pursuing the process. The LCS in a letter to Sheffield in March 1793 argued that 'With regard to petitioning Parliament, we are unanimous in the opinion, that such a petition will not produce reform' but 'if every society in the island will send forward a petition, we shall ultimately gain ground, for as much as it will force the present members of the Senate to repeatedly discuss the subject, and their deliberations printed in the different newspapers, will most naturally awaken the public mind towards the object of our pursuit'.[223] This evidence undermines Hardy's claim in his memoir that the LCS sought merely to support Grey with their petition; he was perhaps hoping to cast the LCS in a constitutional light for posterity. The SCI shared the LCS's position. In April 1793 they described petitioning the

[220] Secrecy *Committee,* Appendix E, 133; Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 20-21.
[221] Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information, *Proceedings of the public meeting, held at Sheffield*, 1794, 27. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed April 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CB129778081&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.
[222] *Proceedings of the public meeting, held at Sheffield*, 21.
[223] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix E, 139.

King as 'hopeless' and petitioning Parliament likely to lead to an 'absolute negative' but, they argued, petitioning might 'be well worth considering as a warning voice to our present legislators, and as a signal for imitation to the majority of the people', and might, if pursued nationally, show the public that the societies were more than 'a handful of individuals unworthy of attention'.[224] The London societies saw petitioning as another propaganda tool, a way of rehabilitating their reputation, publicising the cause and recruiting new members. This was a departure from gentlemanly reformism where the aim of petitioning was to produce change through weight of public opinion.

The government seized on the tactical interpretation of the societies' intentions but assigned to it darker motives than propaganda. Thirty-six petitions were presented supporting Grey's motion, many of which Parliament rejected on technicalities, the most frequently quoted being the use of 'disrespectful' language.[225] Henry Dundas, in the debate on the Sheffield petition, argued that such language had been used because 'the petitioners had had a desire to offer something to the House which they would be under the necessity of rejecting'.[226] The government believed that by showing petitioning as ineffective the societies wanted to demonstrate that a convention was necessary, and the societies had certainly discussed conventions as an option. The position of many societies was encapsulated in a letter from the Norwich societies to the LCS of 25 June 1793: 'an address to the King – futile; a petition to Parliament (as a conquered people) – tolerable; a National Convention, if circumstances permitted – best of all'.[227] The authorities extrapolated from evidence such as this, that if petitions were rejected then circumstances would indeed 'permit' a convention and that this was a situation the societies were trying to bring about. However, the sentiment of

[224] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 2, 94.
[225] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 135-136.
[226] W. Cobbett, *The Parliamentary History of England*, Published by R. Bagshaw, 1806-20, Volume 30. The Making of the Modern World. Accessed June 2018. 784. http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/92EqK6.
[227] Secrecy Committee, Appendix E, 149.

the societies seemed to be, as the Norwich letter suggests, that there was value in petitioning (even if they disagreed what that was). There is little evidence in the societies' correspondence that they intended their petitions to fail, just that they expected them to. Nevertheless, the petitioning process makes it clear, that even if the societies had less revolutionary motives than the government suggested, some at least, had advanced their conception of the role of petitioning beyond that of the gentlemanly reformers.

However, this development was not consistent across the movement. The petitioning programme was not a strategy but a compromise that accommodated in different ways the diverse opinions across the societies, from those who saw petitioning as an end in itself, to others for whom it was only a tactic. The petitioning process exemplifies the failure of leadership discussed earlier, and the lack of a unifying ideology which might have dictated a common approach. The lack of cohesion prevented a more committed response and supports some historians' claims that the societies' divisions harmed their cause.

Although the societies had confirmed their doubts about the process, petitioning was not abandoned. The societies' next step was indeed to call a convention, but the SCI's draft instructions to their delegates still mandated them to 'assist in bringing forward any petition or petitions to the House of Commons for the purpose of procuring an enquiry into said House, into the state of the representation of the Commons of Great Britain in Parliament', although, as already stated, the LCS persuaded them not to specify that redress should be sought only through petitions.[228] Nevertheless, at the Convention, petitions to the King to end the war and to Parliament demanding reform were debated, although the latter was probably

[228] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 2, 99-100.

an attempt to legitimise the Convention's activities before it was suppressed.[229] The treason trials at the end of 1794, decapitated the societies, setting them back, and in 1795 they returned to a more traditional programme of petitions and remonstrances, but this time supported by mass rallies.[230] Their aim was to demonstrate the weight of public opinion, as the gentlemanly radicals had intended a decade earlier. The return to petitioning, despite its inefficacy, demonstrates that, unlike in France, the radicals were generally unprepared to take actions that were unconstitutional, illegal or outside the traditional British methods of seeking redress. This seems to have been, perhaps subconsciously, a guiding principle behind many of the societies' decisions and shows that, when put under pressure, the societies' instinct was to fall back on the conservative British reform tradition.

The radicals' relationship with petitions suggests three conclusions. It confirms the breadth of opinion, or, more bluntly, the divisions, in the movement, the lack of decisive leadership, and the absence of a guiding ideology, all of which damaged societies. The lack of unanimity prevented the societies from wholeheartedly supporting Grey or from finding alternative strategies to deliver reform. Secondly, the constant return to the constitutional process of petitioning demonstrates a clear delineation between the societies and the French Revolutionaries; the societies retreated to past behaviours when differences of opinion occurred or obstacles were encountered, where the Revolutionaries advanced with more radical steps. Thirdly, some societies' attitudes to petitioning – its use as a tactic to achieve other goals – suggests a further evolution in the approach to reform from gentlemanly reformism, which sought only to demonstrate weight of support for change. The petitioning

[229] 'Minutes of the General Convention in Edinburgh', reproduced in *The Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 1, 282, 291-292, 329.
[230] These were large: St. George's Fields on 29 June, 50,000 -100,000 attendees; Crooke's Moor, Sheffield on 10 August 1795, 10,000; Copenhagen Fields on 26 October 40,000-100,000 (the LCS claimed 150,000); Copenhagen Fields on 12 November, up to 100,000 people (the LCS claimed 300,000). Thale, *Selections*, 252n; Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats,* 31; Thale, *Selections*, 314n, 322n.

phase highlights important if subtle differences between the societies and the gentlemanly reformers and a starker contrast with France, but also emphasises the central weaknesses of division and poor leadership.

Conventions

The failure of Grey's motion convinced some societies that their only remaining option was a convention, although its objectives were vague, partly from fear of the authorities' reaction and partly because the societies were unclear on their aims. The LCS turned to the Scottish radical leader, William Skirving, for advice, as the Scots had already held conventions in December 1792 and April 1793. Hardy informed Skirving in a letter of 17 May 1793 'Our petitions you will have learned have all of them been unsuccessful: our attention must now, therefore, be turned to some more effectual means; from your society we would willingly learn'.[231] The Scots were meeting again in October and the English societies resolved to join them but arrived after the convention had adjourned. The Scots reassembled and the first British Convention began. The event culminated in a confrontation with the authorities when the convention was suppressed and the leaders arrested, given show trials, convicted and deported. This draconian response provoked fury amongst the societies and led to the consideration of a second convention which Pitt's government forestalled by arresting the leading radicals for treason. What these two conventions intended and from where they drew their inspiration was hotly contested at the subsequent trials with the prosecution arguing the societies' plans were modelled on France with the treasonable intention of assuming power, whilst the societies maintained they were following the example of the gentlemanly reformers and intended only to debate at a national level how they should proceed. This section will consider whether the structures and procedures of the British Convention, and the plans for a

[231] *Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 1, 148.

second convention, follow the French or British example, or provide further evidence of the societies' creation of their own model.

The societies were justified in claiming there was a tradition of convention politics in Britain. The idea of association and the creation of an 'anti-parliament' were developed in the 1770s by the political theorists Obadiah Hulme and James Burgh, and Major Cartwright.[232] The anti-parliament was envisaged by some 1780s' reformers as a body to petition from a position of unity and strength, and by others as a nationally representative structure that could challenge the legislature, for example, in December 1779, Dr John Jebb, a founding member of the SCI, argued for a convention which would have the power to 'new model the constitution'.[233] The moderate County Associations' national meeting in 1780 might be construed as a convention and the 1790s' reformers met in a form resembling a convention in May 1782, at which Wyvill and Cartwright, and even Richmond and Pitt, were delegates. The playwright and MP, Richard Sheridan, explained at Tooke's trial that the reformers convened as 'Delegates of counties, towns and different parts, to promote the object of Parliamentary reform'.[234] The societies used these examples as precedent for their own activities but could not evade the fact that their conventions were organised not by enfranchised gentlemanly reformers but by a largely unenfranchised class, a class responsible for usurping power in France with their own Convention.

It did not help the societies that Paine was the first to demand a convention in the 1790s, initially in *Rights of Man*, and again in June 1792 in a response to the Royal Proclamation against seditious writing. He argued that a convention was necessary to assess

[232] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty,* 50-51.
[233] Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death,* 142; in Jebb's 'Address to the Freeholders of Middlesex' quoted in Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty,* 60-61.
[234] *Trial of John Horne Tooke,* Volume 2, 74.

'the general WILL, whether to reform or not, or what the reform shall be, or how far it shall extend'.[235] Conventions became taboo with the replacement of the French National Assembly by the republican Convention in September 1792. The provenance of these examples contributed further to the polarisation of political thought in Britain, with conventionism, and therefore, from November 1793, the societies, increasingly associated with Revolutionary France.

The societies' calls for a convention coincided with the inauguration of the French institution suggesting it was indeed a trigger. Conventions were first mentioned by Stockport in a letter to the LCS on 17 September 1792, during the elections for the French Convention. Stockport seemed enthused by events in France for they chastised the LCS's timidity, suggesting they 'hardly rise to that height we expect from men, sensible of their full claims for absolute and uncontroulable liberty, ie unaccountable to any power which they have not immediately constituted and appointed' as the French were in the process of doing.[236] On 28 November 1792, John Frost of the SCI and Joel Barlow, an American radical, presented the SCI's Address to the French Convention and in their introduction to it suggested that 'It would not be strange if, in a period far short of what we venture to predict, addresses of felicitation should cross the seas to a National Convention in England'.[237] Norwich wrote to the SCI about a convention in March 1793 with the SCI responding: 'As to a Convention, we regard it as a plan the most desirable and the most practicable', but that 'Hitherto, we have no reason to believe that the time is arrived for that purpose'.[238] The SSCI even proposed a

[235] T. Paine, *Letter addressed to the addressers, on the late proclamation* (London, 1792), 47. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed April 2019. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW104573269&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.
[236] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix D, 125.
[237] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 128.
[238] Ibid., 141; Ibid., Volume 2, 94.

convention to Grey to assess the mood of the nation before the petitions were laid before Parliament.[239] Paine and events in France had put conventions at the forefront of the societies' thinking, although there was, as the SCI's letter hints, the same disagreement and uncertainty on when it should be convened as there had been on the efficacy of petitioning.

The conception of the British Convention was another 'curious mixture'. The previous generations' thoughts on the subject gave the idea legitimacy, the calls by Paine inspired the societies, and the French example made the concept more immediate. The mix of retrospective and innovative influences would become apparent in the structure and procedures of the British Convention held in Edinburgh in November 1793.

The first British Convention

The establishment of a British Convention so soon after the French Convention's inauguration was bound to raise parallels in the minds of contemporaries. To compare the French and British experiences of conventionism it is important to understand events in France. In 1789 Louis summoned the *états généraux* – the clergy, the nobility and the people – to authorise new taxes to save the bankrupt French state. The third estate, the people, with some clergy and a few aristocrats left the main proceedings and reconvened as the National Assembly denying that the king had authority over them. Eventually Louis accepted their legitimacy and the Assembly proceeded to dismantle France's quasi-feudal society but with Louis remaining as titular head of state. In 1792, the National Assembly was itself usurped. The *sans-culottes* of the Paris Sections overthrew the Paris Commune, the city's governing body, on 10 August and set up the Insurrectionary Commune with 'delegates' from each Section. The Commune informed the National Assembly it controlled Paris, stormed the Tuileries, and demanded the

[239] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 211.

removal of Louis and the election of a new Assembly.[240] This body, renamed the Convention, was elected by universal male suffrage.[241] The voters elected Electors who in turn voted for Deputies who attended the Convention.[242] The Convention came to power immediately after the September Massacres and presided over the introduction of the republic, the abolition of the monarchy and the king's execution.

The treason trial prosecutors argued that the British Convention was established with the same objectives and in a similar form to the French Revolutionary institutions. They claimed at Hardy's trial that the British Convention met 'upon the principles of the French system, which took place upon the 10th of August 1792'.[243] At Tooke's trial 'a strong resemblance' to the National Assembly was noted, as attendees to the British Convention styled themselves 'Delegates of the People' as the Third Estate had done in France.[244] They claimed 'this proceeding in Scotland, is a complete copy' of what transpired in France in 1789.[245] At Thelwall's trial the British Convention was likened to 'their sister Convention in France' with comparable committees of secrecy, safety and finance.[246] In reality, there were few similarities between the evolution of the French legislative bodies and the British Convention, the former being voted for by the people whilst the latter represented only the societies, and not even all of those. They also behaved differently. The National Assembly immediately assumed legislative powers and denied the king's authority; the British Convention assumed no powers and resolved to petition the king. Two factors, however, unite

[240] Davidson, *The French Revolution*, 99-101.
[241] Ibid., 104.
[242] Ibid., 119. The ballot was, however, open so that pressure could be imposed to elect the 'right' candidate: only ten per cent of the electorate voted and only two working men were elected. Ibid., 104, 119-123.
[243] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 161-162.
[244] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 1, 58-9.
[245] Ibid.
[246] *Trial of John Thelwall*, 28.

the French and British experiences – representation of the unenfranchised and a focus on democratic processes.

In fact, the British Convention seemed to imitate many of the French Convention's democratic processes, procedures and forms, and more so as the meeting progressed. There was a proposal to divide the country into 'departments' and hold 'provincial Conventions'. The Convention's divisions were renamed 'Sections' echoing the Parisian organisations. A secret committee was planned in the event of a government crackdown, which would go into permanent session as the Paris Sections had done in 1790. The chairman was renamed President. A dual dating system was adopted, 1793 being styled 'first year of the British Convention', although this was not used consistently.[247] A final, symbolic imitation may have occurred when the convention was closed down. The chairman, Maurice Margarot, refused to yield to the magistrate unless he was removed by token force, recalling perhaps the aristocratic Revolutionary, Mirabeau, who reportedly replied to the king's dismissal of the Estates General by saying: 'we are here by the wishes of the people; only physical force can make us leave'.[248]

Superficially then, the British Convention seemed to imitate France, but there is no evidence that the societies wanted to emulate the French by replacing the British legislature. The imitation of French forms again suggests a romantic attachment to the Revolution not an ideological commitment, a superficial adoption of popular jargon, rather than a signal of revolutionary intent. The British Convention does not demonstrate an abandonment of the principles of gentlemanly reformism in favour of French innovation after the failure of the

[247] 'Minutes of the General Convention in Edinburgh' reproduced in *The Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 1, 312, 313, 322, 322, 324, 326, 330, 332, 311.
[248] Davidson, *The French Revolution,* 20.

petitioning campaign, rather it shows a continuation of the theme that has been identified throughout: the societies actions were grounded in the example of their British predecessors but were coloured by their romantic vision of the French Revolution.

The second British Convention

The LCS and SCI appointed a joint committee in early April 1794 to agree a plan for a second convention but little came of it. The committee apparently met only twice and agreed no more than a convention was 'very desirable' and that they should seek the views of the regional societies, and debated whether the meeting should be called a convention or an assembly, suggesting that they were fully cognisant of the danger of this word whether they had ambitions to emulate the French Convention or not.[249] The regional societies were contacted but responses were 'very few, slow to arrive and by no means unanimous'.[250] Bristol wrote that they 'applaud and approve your resolution of forming another General Convention' but 'cannot yet make a positive promise on that head'.[251] Norwich, keen pursuers in 1793, equivocated in 1794: 'Many of our friends are fully convinced of the necessity, legality, and rationality of a convention: but, query whether the time is expedient'.[252] The Sheffield Castle Hill meeting, called to consider the matter, resolved that before a convention was summoned the political education of the people must be completed, which would 'shortly be the case', as a convention would be ineffective unless 'the confidence of the people had been gained'.[253] An LCS meeting at Chalk Farm failed to call for a convention and Thelwall's' biographer asserted that a resolution to do so was rejected by the LCS committee.[254] Thelwall's wife claimed that at the joint committee Thelwall spoke against a convention; he 'gave his

[249] Secrecy Committee, Appendix C, 115; Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical*, 146.
[250] Barrell, *Imagining the Kings Death*, 190.
[251] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 410.
[252] Ibid.
[253] *Proceedings of the public meeting, held at Sheffield,* 36.
[254] Thelwall, *Life of Thelwall,* 171-172.

complete accord to the opinion of the steadiest and most discerning of his associates, that they had already gone as far as the temper of the times would justify; and had occasion in some degree to retrace their steps… In short the proposition was… decisively negatived'.[255] This, however, may be Mrs. Thelwall protecting her husband's reputation. It seems that whilst there may have been theoretical acceptance of a second convention, when it came to action the societies baulked. Unlike in France, taking the next step was beyond them and the most they were prepared to do was to delay a decision. This is undoubtedly a gentlemanly reformist rather than Jacobin response, mirroring the frequent reversion to 'safe' petitioning.

The question remains, however, whether the vague plans for a convention intended a usurpation of power on the French lines or a gentlemanly reformist demonstration of the scale of support for change. Evidence from before the arrests for treason, when the societies may have been less guarded, suggests the possibility of a theoretical acceptance that a convention might challenge Parliament. Prior to the Edinburgh meeting, Gerrald had written a tract which indirectly suggested that a convention would assume power: not only would the people be free they would 'have the power of *keeping* themselves so', the deputies will 'be really [the people's] representatives'.[256] As Barrell observed: 'what Gerrald has in mind, though he will not quite say so, was a legislative body which would come to assume sovereignty itself'.[257] Yorke, at Castle Hill in April 1794, hinted at the same: 'the commanding voice of the whole people shall *recommend* the Five Hundred and Fifty Eight Gentleman in St Stephen's Chapel, to go about their business'.[258] The communications between the LCS, who initiated the call

[255] Ibid., 150-1.
[256] J. Gerrald, *A convention the only means of saving us from ruin,* London [1794], 117. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed June 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CB130216631&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.
[257] Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death,* 145.
[258] Ibid., 18.

for a convention, and the SCI, are ambiguous. The ambiguity was undoubtedly deliberate as this was no longer Gerrald's theory or Yorke's rhetoric but a tangible, potentially treasonous, plan. On 27 March 1794 the LCS requested of the SCI 'whether they concur with us in seeing the necessity of a speedy Convention, for the purpose of obtaining, in a constitutional and legal method, a redress of those grievances under which we at present labour'.[259] The SCI replied 'there ought to be *immediately* a CONVENTION of the PEOPLE, by delegates deputed for that purpose from the different societies' but without specifying to what end.[260] As the reality of a convention materialised, the societies either became more cautious or were overawed by what it might entail.

Unsurprisingly, evidence from after the arrests for treason suggests that a second convention was not intended to usurp the government. In the LCS's angry response to Hardy's arrest they claimed 'That we intended to call a convention is a truth… But the purport ascribed to that convention, viz, the assuming of legislative power is a groundless falsehood'.[261] The convention intended merely 'to devise means of obtaining a representative body on the principles of universal suffrage, equal personal representation, and annual election'.[262] The convention was about planning not implementation. As has been seen, the emotion of this document lends it credibility, and its recklessness on other points supports the veracity of this claim. However, the LCS concluded ominously 'whenever, or however, such a body can be obtained, it will not be in the power of all the placemen and pensioners in St. Stephens Chapel to dispute its legislative authority', suggesting any subsequent implementation might involve usurpation.[263] Thelwall, in a speech he intended to make if found guilty of treason, and which he published in early 1795, denied the government's

[259] Secrecy Committee, Appendix C, 114.
[260] Ibid.
[261] LCS, *An Account of the Seizure*, 5.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid.

allegation: 'The idea that it was to act either as a National Convention, or a Constituent Assembly was never stated in our deliberations.'[264] He argued that the French Convention 'resulted from local circumstances peculiar to the French nation' and that the planned British Convention was 'a mere convention of Delegates from the different patriotic societies, for the purpose of comparing their sentiments upon the necessity for Reform, and giving weight, by their cooperation, to any applications that might be made to Parliament or the Throne.'[265] This statement replicates the gentlemanly reformer's concept of conventionism as a method to demonstrate weight of public opinion and holds none of the threat of the LCS, but its context is very different, intended as it was as a vindication of Thelwall before his execution. The one point of agreement, and the one conclusion historians can draw, is that the second convention was about planning not implementation.

This conclusion and the societies' overall engagement with conventionism encapsulate the nature of the movement. Though they were inspired by France the societies did not go beyond superficial imitation of their forms and procedures and could not adopt their tactics; they returned instead to their default position of gentlemanly reformism. Unlike the French, their instinct was to consult and plan, not act. Their behaviour is partly due to the diversity of views within the movement (although this never stopped the Revolutionaries) but also to the lack of leadership. But it also derives from their nature which would not allow them to take a significant step beyond the constitutional process due to a natural (perhaps native) conservatism, which emanated from (or chimed with) their prioritisation of practicality over ideology. However, the societies' flirtation with conventions does illustrate, again, an interest

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[264] J. Thelwall, *The natural and constitutional right of Britons to annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage, and the freedom of popular association* (London, 1795), 16. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed May 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW124734119&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

[265] Ibid.

in democracy, and a willingness to experiment with it within their own structures, but always within the context of British constitutionalism; this is the essence of the 'curious mixture'.

Arming the people

The societies' reaction to reverses and disagreements demonstrates the gap between the French Revolutionaries and the British radicals; where the societies retreated into more moderate tactics, the Revolutionaries advanced with more extreme measures. The gap is made wider by comparing the two countries' attitudes to violence. The difference is so great that there may seem little value in making the comparison, however, the British movement's pacifism is more apparent when contrasted with France, and is an important part of the societies' nature, anchoring them in the British tradition and providing a guiding principle for their decisions and actions. This section will therefore contrast crowd behaviour and the use of arms in the two countries.

Crowds were the French Revolution's dynamic core; they were active, volatile and violent, often going beyond the organisers' intentions.[266] Their impact is visible from the storming of the Bastille and the march on Versailles, to the Paris Insurrection and the September Massacres, with the violence escalating as the Revolution advanced. The enormous attendance at the mass rallies of 1795 in Britain was important enough to precipitate the Two Acts, however, in contrast to France, British crowds were relatively passive listeners, pupils of the societies' political education programme. These outdoor meetings were a departure from the gentlemanly reformers' tactics but the crowds' passivity shows that their aim still resonated with gentlemanly reformism – to demonstrate to Parliament the weight of popular support rather than take direct action. Even a crowd that

[266] The definitive study is George Rudé's *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1959).

attacked the royal carriage in 1795 and the Food Riots of the same year were, in comparison to France, mild. There is little evidence that the societies' approach was driven by timidity, rather the absence of violence suggests a pacific approach was central to their nature.

The difference between the two countries is also reflected in the attitude to arms. In France, the people armed themselves from the beginning. In July 1789, when it appeared that the King was bringing troops to Paris, crowds raided Les Invalides, acquiring 32,000 muskets, and then stormed the Bastille where cannons, guns, gunpowder and ammunition were added to their arsenal.[267] In contrast, the British societies emphasised from the start that they foreswore arms. The LCS's Address of April 1792 declared 'That this society do express their *Abhorrence* of Tumult and Violence… Reason, Firmness and Unanimity are the only Arms they themselves will employ'.[268] The Manchester Patriotic Society echoed this sentiment: 'the arms of reason are our only weapons' whilst for the Manchester Reformation Society 'REASON and TRUTH are the only arms'.[269] Sheffield would act 'without having recourse to the least efforts of violence'.[270] These professions of pacifism may have been partly intended to distance the societies from French violence, but they also signalled a genuine commitment to peaceful change. The societies' actions supported their words with few threats of violence and just five instances of the potential use of arms that the prosecution felt worth presenting at the treason trials.

The societies' reaction to the conviction of the British Convention delegates was the closest they came to inciting violence. The normally sober SCI declared: 'The law ceases to be an object of obedience, whenever it becomes an instrument of oppression' reminding

[267] Furet, *The French Revolution,* 67.
[268] Thale, *Selections*, 10.
[269] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 34, 37.
[270] 'Address… to the Public' in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats,* 48.

readers that Judge Jeffries had been 'torn to pieces' by the populace and proclaimed that those who 'imitate his example deserve his fate', and threatening that tyranny would be opposed 'by the same means by which it is exercised'.[271] Margarot wrote to Hardy in January 1794 on the subject of their loyalist opponents: 'Armed associations are… set on foot by the rich, wherefore should not the poor do the same?'.[272] He added, reflecting the societies' fear that the government would deploy mercenaries to control the country, 'are you to wait patiently until 20,000 Hessians and Hanoverians come to cut your throats?'.[273] Margarot's questions suggest he advocated arming the societies but at that time he was awaiting deportation after an unfair trial and consequently had less to lose and more anger to vent than those still unmolested by the law. The societies' pragmatism made them realise that violent actions might result in the German garrisons Margarot feared and encourage further repressive actions from the government that would end any chance of reform.

The treason trial prosecutors attempted to prove that the societies were arming in preparation for an insurrection. However, the evidence they produced was minimal - the manufacture of pikes in Sheffield, the use of arms by Walker in Manchester, some drilling in London, the existence of specially made knives, and the odd plot of Watt in Scotland. Erskine demolished these cases at Hardy's trial, to the extent that by Thelwall's trial, the prosecutors were forced back on the argument 'To what extent [arming] might have been carried had they not been checked at the beginning, human sagacity cannot foresee'.[274] The reason for arming, or, more accurately, the consideration of arming, seems to have been restricted to self-defence against the loyalists. That these instances were the sole response to loyalist harassment confirms that the societies' pacifistic professions were genuine.

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[271] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix C, 112.
[272] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 173.
[273] Ibid.
[274] *Trial of John Thelwall*, 30.

In France 'the pike became the symbol of popular protest; as Robespierre said: "This weapon is in a sense sacred"'.[275] The case involving the manufacture of pike-heads in Sheffield therefore had a symbolic link to France as well as posing a threat to government cavalry. The SSCI sent a much-disputed letter to Hardy regarding the provision of pikes in April 1794. Even taken at face value it stated no more than that the administration 'has made it necessary that we should be prepared to act on the defensive against any attack they may command their newly-armed minions to make on us', the 'minions' being the loyalists.[276] Under cross-examination it became clear that only three dozen pike-heads were made, and that the two key leaders in Sheffield, Yorke and Gales, advocated their use only in self-defence.[277] In Thomas Walker's case, his house having been attacked by a Church and King mob, he thereafter kept a few weapons to hand. The prosecution focused on the arms at Walker's trial, but witness after witness testified that they were for self-defence only.[278]

The London case was similarly unthreatening in scale. The so-called Lambeth Loyal Association, a rogue division of the LCS, was shown to be practising with muskets. The prosecution revealed that they had a uniform in French colours and wore a cockade in the French style. The defence responded with the society's constitution which stated they were organised solely to deal with 'fire, tumults, commotions and riots but not beyond the Parish of St. Mary's Lambeth'.[279] The prosecution produced two witnesses who claimed that 'If they could not get a Reform of Parliament without it, they would endeavour to have it got by force

[275] Davidson, *The French Revolution,* 91.
[276] *The Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 2, 144-5.
[277] Ibid., 144-154.
[278] T. Walker, *The whole proceedings of the Trial of Indictment Thomas Walker of Manchester*, (Philadelphia, 1794), 52-100. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed July 2018. http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CB132247517&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.
[279] *The Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 2, 316

of arms', and that they intended to 'obtain a Parliamentary Reform at the point of a bayonet', but it was proven that both witnesses were spies and therefore unreliable.[280]

The evidence in Watt's case also involved spies. Watt proposed an insurrection in Scotland to a committee of the British Convention, but was voted down. Watt, who was executed, was an agent provocateur, who as Erskine put it 'in endeavouring to urge innocent men into a project which never entered into their imaginations, he was obliged to shew himself ready to do what he recommended to others; and the tables being turned upon him he was hanged by his employers'.[281] The prosecution argued that the planned uprising in Scotland was to signal a wider insurrection in Britain but the key piece of evidence was a letter from Watt to Hardy which the prosecution could not produce. The prosecutors limply protested he 'wished' to send it but Erskine dismissed the evidence claiming Watt was 'wholly unknown' to Hardy.[282]

The final episode was perhaps the most ridiculous with the prosecution attempting to prove that special knives had been produced for the societies. They had only one sighting of such a knife, at the LCS's Chalk Farm meeting, where a society member was using it to eat with. Having demolished the cases cited above, Erskine concluded dismissively: 'we have got this miserable, solitary knife held up to us as the engine which was to destroy the Constitution of this Country'.[283] Tooke had similar fun with his prosecutors. He argued that the SCI was practically bankrupt and concluded that, after expenses, 'there was about ten pounds a year left to overturn the Government'.[284] The levity with which Erskine and Tooke dealt with the

[280] Ibid., 318, 332.
[281] Ibid., Volume 3, 290.
[282] Ibid., 139-150, 291.
[283] Ibid., 286.
[284] *Trial of John Horne Tooke,* Volume 1, 101.

charges of arming was deserved; it is clear that in this facet of behaviour the societies never intended to imitate their French counterparts.

The triviality of these examples illustrates the prosecution's desperation and emphasises the societies' pacifism, however it does not explain the latter. It is likely that their behaviour was driven by a genuine adherence to the peaceful methods of gentlemanly reformism but there are possible Paineite ideological reasons to explain their approach. Paine argued that representative government would end war, as war was never in the people's interests, as they paid for it and died in it; the natural extension of this argument was that *any* violence was against the people's interest.[285] There are though more practical reasons for the societies' pacifism. The avoidance of violence was in their interests as it distanced them from the increasingly violent French Revolution, so helping to retain moderate support and mitigating the threat of foreign mercenaries being garrisoned in Britain, or of other repressive government actions. Furthermore, the societies, consisting almost entirely of working men, were aware that war threatened their livelihoods. For some, religion may have contributed to their pacifism, as many radicals had a non-conformist background. Once again there is a 'curious mixture' of reasons to explain the societies' behaviour and it is likely that different members had different motives. Regardless of the variety of reasons, the societies were united in their rejection of violence, and this provides the starkest evidence that the societies' relationship with France was as a symbol not a model. The societies' non-violent approach is one of the defining characteristics of their nature, a trait that is (as the prosecution found) even more evident in the societies actions than their words.

[285] T. Paine, *Rights of Man* [1791 and 1792] (New York and London: Penguin 1984), 145-146.

Conclusion

The societies' structures and campaigning methods strengthen the assertion made in Chapter One that France was a romantic inspiration not an ideological model. In particular, the societies' non-violent approach and their instinct to retrench when confronted with obstacles, differentiate them from France. The adoption of French forms was superficial and where there are similarities between the two countries it can be shown that developments were made more in parallel than in imitation of France. The societies' behaviours were not learnt from France.

The societies' structures and campaigning methods also confirm that gentlemanly reformism was a stronger influence than France. Political education and peaceful change mirror their predecessors' behaviour and petitions and conventionism are certainly techniques inherited from the gentlemanly reformers, but there is evidence that the societies' own character strongly influenced their behaviour and the way they absorbed and adapted their inheritance from the previous generation. Pacifism was so embedded it feels like a commitment that was important to them in its own right. They understood the importance of political education as a prerequisite for reform having been through the process themselves. Mass rallies were a distinct departure from gentlemanly reformism. Their instinctive interest in democracy and willingness to experiment with it within their organisations, and their drive to achieve democratic reform by using democratic processes, was undoubtedly stimulated by gentlemanly reformism, Paine and France but it also indicates the maturing political consciousness of their class. Much of their behaviour was therefore determined by who they were and this is evident in the methodical, practical and pragmatic approach they adopted in these areas; their interest was in what worked not the ideology behind it.

The danger in this summary is that it paints the radicals as a homogenous group. As the petitioning process and approach to conventions show, it was frequently differences between societies and individual members that prevented progress and caused the regression towards gentlemanly reformism. The chapter further highlights that this fragmentation was not helped by a lack of leadership, which derived from the residual deference of their nature. The societies' nature contributed positively to their behaviours but it also contained weaknesses that undermined their chances of success.

The benefit of analysing the societies' structures and campaigning methods is that actions are less likely to lie than words. This chapter therefore provides a working hypothesis against which their words can be judged in the next chapter. It suggests, like the first, that the societies were grounded in gentlemanly reformism and inspired by France and Paine, but it provides stronger evidence of their own agency in their development.

3. Objectives and Messages

The first two chapters have shown through analysis of their personal connections and modes of operation how the societies were grounded in gentlemanly reformism, empowered by Paine and inspired by the French Revolution, but with their own nature contributing to the way these influences were adopted. Both chapters have suggested that a key element of their nature was the pragmatic and practical approach of people unencumbered by ideology. This chapter will confirm the importance of pragmatism in shaping the societies' objectives and the language they used to demand them. Although their grievances were disparate in detail, the societies could agree that they were all broadly economic in nature. Although they had different visions of how their grievances might be redressed, they could agree that it must involve political reform. Whilst they disagreed what reform might look like they united under the banner of universal suffrage. Each of these compromises was driven by pragmatism and an interest in ends not means. With their objectives settled, pragmatism further allowed them to adapt their arguments for political reform according to changing circumstances without being hampered by ideological dogma, thus creating the 'curious mixture'.

To explore these ideas, this chapter is divided into two sections. The first will demonstrate the consistency with which the societies adhered to their objective of improving their economic and social conditions through the introduction of universal suffrage and annual parliaments. It will argue that, despite the movement's diversity and the disagreements their differences caused, the societies' common objective became a point of cohesion across the period. The second section will ask why this simple, consistent objective was supported by such diverse arguments which mingled retrospective, constitutional doctrine and innovative, Paineite and French ideology without apparent concern for any contradiction. It will argue that the inconsistency of the supporting arguments, the 'curious mixture', was shaped by a

pragmatic response to external events, the need for discretion in the way the societies expressed themselves under the government's sedition laws, the different audiences they were addressing, and their lack of ideological attachment. It will however contend but that beneath the shifting forms of expression, the societies' demands remained grounded in gentlemanly reformism even when they were couched in Paineite or Revolutionary terms. As this chapter focuses on how the societies expressed their objectives and supporting arguments, both sections will draw on the societies' public pronouncements and private correspondence, as presented in the evidence of the Committee of Secrecy and the treason trials.

Economic motives and political solutions

The societies' grievances varied by individual and location as did their views on how they could be redressed, and yet they found common ground in both areas. Initially they could agree that the root of their various grievances was economic and resulted from excessive taxation by a corrupt government. Across the period the grievance evolved as taxation was gradually overshadowed by the war's economic impact, although the conflict was also seen as the product of a corrupt government and therefore requiring the same solution as excessive taxation. That solution was, the societies agreed, the eradication of corruption via improved representation. However, there were different views on what improved representation meant. In May 1792 the Manchester Constitutional Society called for 'free suffrage of the people at large' together with the repeal of the Septennial Act. [286] The Manchester Reformation Society was more conservative demanding only for a Commons '*chosen* by the *majority of the people'* [287] The Hertford society was equally moderate: 'with regard to the rights of Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments, we do not pledge ourselves to demand them.'[288] The lack

[286] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events,* 27.
[287] Ibid., 36.
[288] Secrecy Committee, Appendix E, 150.

of consensus was encapsulated at Thomas Walker's trial by witness George Wakefield who was asked 'What was the reform you sought and by what means?' to which he answered 'That is a point on which few people are agreed, but it was a parliamentary reform'.[289] Nevertheless, the societies understood the need to present a united front; as Joseph Gerrald argued at the British Convention 'whatever difference of opinion might exist in these walls, we can never forget that our friends and enemies are in common and that our object is equally the same.'[290] Therefore, despite their differences, the societies' pragmatism created common ground in the objective of improving their economic and social circumstances through the introduction of universal suffrage and annual parliaments, the former to ensure the people's voice was heard, the latter to improve parliamentary accountability.

This section will consider the nature of the societies' grievances, why they believed they would be cured by political reform and how this link was expressed. It will demonstrate the consistency with which they adhered to universal suffrage and annual parliaments, so providing cohesion and direction, and explore the nature of the pragmatism that made this cohesion possible.

The link between representation and taxation

The societies' belief that economic grievances were best redressed by political reform came from both the gentlemanly reformers and Thomas Paine. Christopher Wyvill's Associations had complained that 'much public money has been improvidently squandered' through government corruption and concluded that the solution was the 'shortening the duration of parliaments' and 'obtaining a more equal representation of the people'.[291] Richmond had

[289] *Trial of Thomas Walker*, 53.
[290] 'Minutes of the General Convention in Edinburgh' in *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 307.
[291] Wyvill, *Political Papers,* Volume 1, 7-9, 67.

stated 'I know of no man, let him be ever so poor… who does not pay taxes' and as such deserved 'his just share in [Britain's] government'.[292] In its first incarnation the Society for Constitutional Information demanded that an Englishman should have '*an actual share* either in Legislation itself, or in the electing of those who are to frame the laws', noting that 'The Poor then, have an *equal Right*, but *more Need*, to elect Representatives than the Rich'.[293] Major Cartwright joked in 1782 that 'it was surely as easy to allow every man a right in elections, as to tax him in the minute articles in his food and raiment'.[294] The gentlemanly reformers had made the link between corruption, taxation and political reform plain.

Paine made the same arguments. In *Rights of Man*, Part 1 he stated that the country's economic grievances stemmed from 'the quantity of corruption necessary to solder the parts' of the British constitution together.[295] In Part 2, he produced a detailed analysis of the increase in taxation from the Norman Conquest to the 1790s. He identified a tenfold escalation between 1666 and 1791, during which period he claimed that costs had remained unchanged, the difference being spent on 'extravagance, corruption and intrigue'.[296] His analysis of government expenditure in 1791 showed £8m accounted for by expenses against his estimated costs of £2m. He demonstrated how the £6m balance could be spent on eliminating social ills, directly linking government taxation and the existence and possible removal of those ills in readers' minds.[297] He also challenged the nature of taxation, highlighting the imbalance between wealth and land taxes paid by the rich, and indirect taxes on consumption that affected everybody. He argued that before the Hanoverian period taxes had been equally divided between 'land and articles of consumption' but since then £13m of

[292] Lennox, *A letter ... to Lieutenant Colonel Sharman,* 10.
[293] Society for Constitutional Information, *Declaration.*
[294] Cartwright, *Life and Correspondence,* 146.
[295] Paine, *Rights of Man*, 141.
[296] Ibid., 231.
[297] Ibid., 232-259.

extra tax had been imposed on consumption causing 'a constant increase in number and wretchedness of the poor', once again linking economic hardship directly to taxation.[298] He gave as an example tax on beer, which the aristocracy rarely paid because they brewed their own, and which brought in more than land taxes in total. [299] His solutions included a progressive tax on wealth, 'luxury' as he called it, which would have the effect of 'removing the burden to where it can best be borne'.[300] Statistics confirm Paine's analysis. In 1775 total taxation accounted for £10m per annum from a population of 6.9m (1776 data); by 1795 it had doubled to £20m, from a population of 8.2m (1796 data).[301] Recent analysis by economist Ron Harris confirmed Paine's conclusions: 'The composition of tax revenues was changing. The most remarkable change was the decline of direct taxation on manifestations of wealth and income and the rise of excise, levied on the purchase of consumption goods', with customs and excise contributing 70 to 80 per cent of all tax between 1775 and 1795, on a rapidly increasing base.[302] There were therefore good reasons for the people to complain about tax. Paine had identified taxation raised to fund corruption as the sole cause of the people's economic hardship and he concluded by hinting at a solution: 'though all the people of England pay taxes, not an hundredth part of them are electors'.[303] Both Paine and the gentlemanly reformers has identified corruption as the cause of economic grievance and political reform as the solution; it is unsurprising therefore that the societies consistently adhered to this formula.

[298] Ibid., 225.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Ibid., 252-256, 250.
[301] R. Harris, 'Government and the economy, 1688-1850' in R. Floud and P. Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain,* Volume 1, 215; E.A. Wrigley, 'British Population during the 'long' eighteenth century, 1680-1840' in R. Floud & P. Johnson (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain*, Volume 1, 64.
[302] Harris, 'Government and the economy, 1688-1850', 215, 218.
[303] Paine, *Rights of Man,* 265.

Economic grievance and the origins of the societies

Two sources demonstrate the importance of the connection between economic grievance and political reform in the establishment of the societies. The first is the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information's letter to the editors of the *English Chronicle* in January 1792, asking how they might contact John Horne Tooke. Introducing themselves, they explained that they began as a small group of 'mechanics' who met to discuss '*the enormous high price of provisions*' and the 'the waste and lavish of the public property by placemen and pensioners … together with the mock representation of the people'.[304] The second source is Thomas Hardy's account of the London Corresponding Society's establishment in the same month. As his recollections were made after the events, they are subject to post-rationalisation, but their resemblance to the SSCI letter is remarkable, and therefore suggests a common theme behind the societies' emergence. Hardy claimed the LCS evolved from meetings of tradesmen who were 'condoling with each other on the miserable and wretched state the people were reduced to, merely as we believed from the want of a fair and equal representation'.[305] Hardy complained of 'daily accumulating taxes and the consequent rise in prices of all the necessaries of life' and attributed it to 'the corrupt practices of men falsely calling themselves the representatives of the people.'[306] The primary grievance in both accounts is tax and its impact on prices, the cause being the lack of fair representation and government corruption. The similarity between these two sources demonstrates the centrality of economic motives to the societies' establishment.

[304] Secrecy Committee, Appendix D, 116-118.
[305] Thale, *Selections*, 6.
[306] Hardy, *Memoir*, 10.

Paine's impact on the economic argument

The publication of *Rights of Man,* Part 2 in February 1792 corroborated the fledgling societies' analysis and gave them the confidence and the vocabulary to express the need for reform publicly and in their own voice, not the inherited language of the gentlemanly reformers. Paine's impact is encapsulated in an SCI resolution which argued that his analysis of 'the excessive taxes which this country pays' provided an '*additional motive'* to examine the 'principles and systems of government' [my emphasis].[307] In March, the MCS praised Paine for showing how to go about 'lessening GREATLY, and WITHOUT DELAY, the enormous Load of Taxes under which this country at present labours'.[308] In April, Southwark described 'exorbitant and unnecessary taxation' and complained of 'Taxes multiplied upon Taxes for purposes unknown to us'.[309] The LCS's April Address complained 'that in Consequence of a *partial, unequal* and therefore *inadequate Representation,* together with the *corrupt* Method in which Representatives are elected, *oppressive taxes, unjust Laws, restrictions of Liberty,* and *wasting of the Public Money,* have ensued'.[310] Their May Address reiterated the link between 'the very numerous and burthensome and unnecessary taxes' and inadequate representation and complained specifically of 'the 'private profit of Members of Parliament', extracted from taxes that 'will go on increasing, in as much as they will furnish more Bribes, and Places, and Pensions'.[311] The LCS's August Address was stronger still. The problem was caused by, 'the all-devouring locusts', whose rapacity caused the populace to 'painfully feel the consequences; increased taxes'. The solution was political reform: 'If we once regain an annually elected parliament, and that parliament to be fairly chosen by all, the

[307] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix C, 93.
[308] Ibid., 84.
[309] *Trial of John Horne Tooke,* Volume 1, 183.
[310] Thale, *Selections,* 10.
[311] Ibid., 11.

people will again share in the government of their country'.[312] Tax remained the societies' central complaint, but *Rights of Man* gave them the licence and the language to articulate it, and its solution, in their own voice and in public.

The impact of loyalism and the war on the economic argument

Economic grievance remained central to the societies' programme but the way it was expressed and its content changed in late 1792 in response to the emergence of the loyalist associations and the imminent war with France. Loyalism forced a change in tone of the societies' materials. The loyalists protested that Britain's constitution made it prosperous, a claim the LCS challenged - 'is it that our taxes are less burthensome? or that our provisions are less expensive? Is it from the various productions of our soil that we are rich?... Certainly not.'[313] The emphasis remained on taxes and their impact on prices, but the rhetorical questions suggest the societies now had to defend their claims rather than merely state them, and extend their arguments to encompass the wider economic analysis made by the loyalists.[314]

The impending war also necessitated a broadening of the economic argument. In December 1792 an MCS Address asked what effect the war would have, whether 'funded property [would] become more valuable? Will landed property be increased by it? Will it diminish the excise, or the land tax, or the house tax, or the window tax, or the commutation tax, or any of the long, long catalogue of taxes?'. The MCS predicted a trade slump, increased prices, more taxes, reduced exports, increased costs, and the loss of colonies and their markets. In particular, smaller businesses and artisans would suffer, in other words the

[312] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 214-220.
[313] Secrecy Committee, Appendix D, 131, 132.
[314] Goodrich's account of this trend is comprehensive; see chapters 3 and 4 in Goodrich, *Debating England's Aristocracy.*

societies' members, and the Address demonstrated the impact on each of Manchester's trades.[315] Loyalism and the war extended the economic debate beyond the impact of tax to a wider analysis of the economy but the solution remained political reform. Events forced the radicals to adapt and, unhampered by ideology, the pragmatic societies were able to make such adjustments.

The petitions and the focus on tax

The arguments made in the petitions of Spring 1793 further reflect the societies' flexibility as they approached this formal, constitutional procedure by reverting entirely to taxation and the consequent need for reform. Sheffield's petition argued that Parliament was elected by a 'very small portion' of the population, in a 'partial manner', for 'a long continuance there'. The petitioners had no freehold land and therefore no vote but they paid taxes. However, their complaint was 'not merely because heavy and grievous taxes oppress us' but 'as much on account of the application of money, as the money itself'. The society's programme was more sophisticated than a simple protest about high taxes; their interest extended to how the money was disbursed and, by implication, participation in those decisions. They did not demand universal suffrage directly but argued that they saw 'no reason why they should not be consulted with respect to the common interests of their common country'. Nor did they request annual parliaments, just that MPs 'should be chosen for short terms'.[316] The LCS petition also made taxation its primary focus: 'We conceive the following principle "That no man shall be taxed but by the consent of himself, or his Representative, freely chosen by himself" to be among the most valuable of our Rights' and described the 'wide departure'

[315] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 50-54.
[316] *Parliamentary History of England*, Volume 30, 775-777.

from that principle that had occurred. Their solution, if they were asked 'to state a specific Plan', was Richmond's, so indirectly proposing universal suffrage and annual parliaments.[317]

The narrow focus on taxation and coded demands for universal suffrage can be ascribed to the formal context of petitioning which imposed procedural conventions on submissions including one that prevented petitioners from recommending solutions.[318] Parliament was a different audience to the societies' membership or the people at large; they did not want to antagonise Parliamentarians with intemperate phraseology, excessive demands or mentions of the war, or give them a reason to dismiss their petitions (which they did anyway). The societies were varying their argument according to the circumstances they faced and the audience they addressed. Nevertheless, the focus on tax emphasises that taxation was their primary, long-term, structural grievance, and universal suffrage remained the solution.

An LCS Address in July, following the petitioning campaign's failure, confirmed the petitions' language was tactical. The LCS emphasised that they had used 'the course prescribed by the Constitution' to obtain reform but their economic arguments had been rejected 'by those whose interest it was to perpetuate abuses'. They now returned to the impact of the 'Ruinous and Disgraceful War' and the disastrous effect it was having on the economy: 'Commerce is nearly stopped! Failures innumerable take place! Manufacturers are ruined! Provisions rise in price! the Revenue decreases and fresh Taxes are wanting!'. They claimed that there was little support for the war and that a representative Parliament 'would

[317] Society for Constitutional Information, *Universal suffrage and annual Parliaments… also the petition, of the London Corresponding Society, for a reform in Parliament* (London, 1793), 15-16. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed August 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CB127736125&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

[318] Goodwin *Friends of Liberty*, 281.

have refuted the fictitious idea of it being popular, necessary or just'.[319] As a further sign of their pragmatism, the societies had co-opted the war as a weapon to gain popular support describing, in Paineite terms, the conflict as another product of corrupt government and another reason for reform.[320] Economic arguments remained central to their cause but the societies, unencumbered by ideological dogma, adapted their arguments according to circumstances and when events dictated. Political reform however, remained unwaveringly the solution.

Late 1793 and 1794: the changing economic message – fragmentation or pragmatism?

In late 1793 and 1794, the economic arguments become more diverse. This section will assess through five examples whether the diversity reveals a movement fragmenting under the pressure of war, government repression, and the trials for treason and sedition of their leaders, or the application of a pragmatic response to multiple circumstances and different audiences. Economic grievances were raised only once at the British Convention, but their absence is understandable as the audience, society delegates, needed no convincing of causes and wanted only to discuss actions.[321] At Sheffield's Castle Hill meeting in April, arranged (like the convention) to discuss next steps, Henry Redhead Yorke returned (unlike the convention) to the original economic argument of taxation and representation, although in a lower key, raising it only in the meeting's fourth resolution: 'That in every country where the people have no share in representation, taxation is tyranny', and in the Address that emanated from the meeting which stated that those who pay 'cruel and unequal taxes' are unrepresented. Their complaint 'was not, could not be answered unless Annual Parliaments and General

[319] London Corresponding Society, *Address to the nation* (London, 1793). The Making Of The Modern World. Accessed March 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/mome/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=MOME&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=U102497357&type=multipage&contentSet=MOMEArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

[320] Paine, *Rights of Man*, 145-146.

[321] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 307.

Suffrage were restored'.[322] The variation from the convention, despite similar objectives, is explained by the audience – society supporters but not as sophisticated as the convention's delegates.

At an LCS meeting at the Globe Tavern in January 1794 the war, not tax, was the central focus. The war was deplored, partly because 'immense numbers of our countrymen have been slaughtered' (a rare appearance of a humanitarian argument) but also because 'a vast expence has been incurred; our Trade, Commerce and Manufactories, are almost destroyed, and many of our Manufacturers and Artists are ruined, and their families starving… other taxes will soon be added'. However, the answer remained 'A FAIR, FREE AND FULL REPRESENTATION' as corrupt government was responsible for the war and therefore the nation's financial woes.[323] Similarly, in the *Rights of Swine: An Address to the Poor*, a tract emanating from Stockport, the writer also put the economic argument against the war but in terms 'the poor' would understand. The starvation endured by 'Thousands of honest and industrious people' was the responsibility of the 'wealthy and voluptuous', who raised rents in good times when wages were high but kept them up when wages fell as war disrupted commerce. The writer also raised wider social arguments that affected his audience: the Game Laws and Riot Act were tools of the rich to protect property at the expense of the poor. Even for this wider range of grievances the solution remained that: 'the *Poor* ought to have a Parliament of their *own chusing*… claim as your inalienable right, universal suffrage and annual parliaments'.[324] The tract made similar arguments to the societies' publications but tailored to a different audience.

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[322] *Proceedings of the public meeting, held at Sheffield*, 21, 43, 13.
[323] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 351-352, 356.
[324] 'A Friend to the Poor', *The Rights of Swine, An Address to the Poor* [London, 1795?]. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed April 2018.
<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabl

In the LCS's proposed new constitution of 1794, the society, like Yorke at Castle Hill, sought to restate the case for reform but, like *Rights of Swine*, enumerated a wider list of grievances than in earlier documents and demonstrated how each was caused by unfair representation. The Corn Act 'is a grievance immediately resulting from the restriction of the choice of representatives to men of landed property' who gained by high prices; the Game Laws 'may in general be attributed to the same restriction'; taxes were the 'engines of corporation influence' for the benefit the placemen collectors; the Mutiny Act 'would never have existed, had not the bulk of the people been excluded from representation'; and the Impress Service was 'another effect of partial representation'. Consequently 'an equal representation by universal and annual suffrage, would tend immediately to redress them'.[325] The new constitution is perhaps the most articulate and broadest exposition of the link between economic and social grievances and unequal representation and might have formed a unifying manifesto for 1790s' radicalism had circumstances – the decapitation of the societies, the war and the Two Acts – allowed. It was also unfortunate that due to internal disagreement it was never introduced; its first iteration was rejected and the second never implemented, its imposition from above being seen as 'aristocratic'.[326]

The diversity of arguments at this time reflects a combination of different audiences, a further broadening of the economic argument to include social complaints, and reaction to the war, not fragmentation of the movement. The change shows the pragmatic adaptation of the societies' arguments to fit changing circumstances. However, the country's mounting

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D=T001&docId=CW104979941&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

[325] London Corresponding Society, *The Report of the Committee of Constitution of The London Corresponding Society* (London, 1794), 2-3. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed June 2018. http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW104354504&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE.

[326] Philp, *Reforming Ideas*, 297-305.

problems were all attributed to corrupt government and so the solution remained resolutely unchanged, universal suffrage, a central point around which the societies could unite.

1795 – Return to Petitioning

After their decapitation by the treason trials, the societies, under largely new leadership, returned to petitioning, supported by mass rallies to demonstrate the weight of opinion behind the societies' demands. Although tactics and leadership had changed, the content of their messages followed the pattern of 1794 by varying according to circumstances and audience, although the economic impact of the war, its effects now exacerbated by poor harvests, became more prominent. For instance, in August, a meeting at Crookesmoor, Sheffield, bemoaned 'the utter ruin' of many businesses 'whereby innumerable families have been reduced to beggary for want of employ', through business failure, and crimping and call-ups removing wage earners from the household. The economic complaint which had broadened initially from taxation to the impact of the war on the wider economy, now refocused on the devastation the war visited on families and individuals. The cure, however, remained 'UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE AND ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS'.[327] The LCS held the first of two meetings at Copenhagen Fields on 26 October. The meeting was told that a good harvest had been undermined by 'Monopoly, stimulated by insatiable avarice, and uncontrouled by those equitable laws, which we might expect from EQUAL REPRESENTATION', the LCS now pragmatically co-opting poor harvests to their cause as they had the war.[328] The grievances continued to vary but the solution remained the same.

[327] 'Resolutions passed at the meeting on Crookesmoor, 10 August 1795' reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 76-8
[328] Thale, *Selections,* 315.

At the end of 1795 the government introduced the Two Acts to curb the societies' activities. The LCS made a final attempt to rally the people against the bills with a meeting in Marylebone Fields on 7 December, two weeks before they became law. It was rightly called 'the last free meeting of the people under the existing constitution' by its chairman.[329] The catalogue of grievances reflects the breadth of the rejected LCS constitution (as well as echoing *Rights of Man*): 'war, standing armies and the inordinate waste of public money, begot Excise, the Riot Act … the Impress Service and the Mutiny Bill; … the national property [is] diverted from the healthful channels of trade, and poured through those of corruption'. It catalogued the expenditure on the French war and also the American war, arguing (again with Paine) that all conflicts caused prices to rise, causing hardship for the poor. However, strikingly, in this final pronouncement, there is no call for universal suffrage, just 'a radical reform of the House of Commons'.[330] At the point when the societies were about to be crushed, the LCS presented a more sophisticated rationale for change and a more restrained call for reform through a more constitutional process. It was, however, too late.

Conclusion

The grievances that the societies identified evolved over the period to reflect prevailing circumstances. They began with a narrow focus on taxation, reflecting their own experiences. They were forced by the loyalist argument to broaden their analysis to address the effects of unfair representation on the nation's finances, a theme that was soon overtaken by the crippling effects of war, firstly on the general economy and then, as it worsened, on their members' families. Finally, their analysis widened to include broader social issues. As circumstances created each new grievance, they were pragmatically harnessed to the need for political reform as, the societies argued, they had the same cause as the miseries of taxation:

[329] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 394.
[330] 'To the people of Britain', reproduced as an appendix in Thelwall, *Life of Thelwall,* 471-475.

corrupt government. The societies' exploitation of prevailing circumstances (even when they were not in control of them) demonstrates that they were more concerned with the practical than the ideological; they were less interested in reform for the sake of equality than in what equality would deliver economically and socially. However, their commitment to universal suffrage and annual parliaments as the solution remained unwavering, acting as a unifying force across the disparate movement, at least until the final LCS address.

The 'Curious Mixture'

The societies were unwavering in their commitment to ending parliamentary corruption through universal suffrage and annual parliaments in order to cure their social and economic ills, even when the nature of those grievances evolved. However, the clarity and singularity of the societies' central demand was contrasted by the 'curious mixture' of their supporting arguments. This section will begin by defining the doctrines that contributed to the 'curious mixture' – gentlemanly reformism, France and Paine – and then examine how they were deployed. It will suggest that the content of the 'curious mixture', like the societies' grievances, was responsive to changing circumstances, but that beneath the shifting modes of expression, the societies' demands remained grounded in gentlemanly reformist concepts even when they were couched in Paineite or Revolutionary terms. The reliance of gentlemanly reformism was driven by their strong connection to their predecessors, the need for discretion in the expression of their demands, and their own cautious nature. However, the relationship with gentlemanly reformism was more practical than ideological which explains why the societies were entirely comfortable expressing gentlemanly reformist concepts with Paineite 'attitude' and terminology in order to make their demands in their own voice, and why the continuing inspiration of the Revolution caused French flourishes to appear in their materials. Thus was created the 'curious mixture'.

Retrospective and Innovative Influences

The gentlemanly reformist contribution to the 'curious mixture' consisted of two strands that were not necessarily consistent with each other. The first was the imagined Anglo-Saxon constitution in which all 'free-born Englishmen' could participate in the election of leaders and meet annually to discuss matters of government. A keen proponent of this theory was Cartwright who argued that universal suffrage 'was a sacred inheritance enjoyed by [the people's] forefathers' and that 'Parliaments of one session were the immemorial usage of England from the earliest antiquity… from the time of the immortal Alfred'.[331] The proponents of this form of constitutionalism maintained that these hereditary rights had been removed by William I and were only partially reinstated by Magna Carta and the 1688 settlement.[332] The 1688 settlement was the substance of the second strand and its thrust is exemplified by Richard Price's *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* of November 1789, in which he argued that in 1688 'the rights of the people were asserted… and a Sovereign of our own choice appointed'.[333] He enumerated three 'principles of the Revolution': religious freedom, 'the right to resist power when abused', and 'the right to chuse our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves'.[334] The third principle was interpreted as the right of universal suffrage and the second was often cited in

[331] J. Cartwright, *Give us our rights! Or, a letter to the present electors of Middlesex and the Metropolis* (London, 1782), 8. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed May 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CW104145947&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE
[332] Gerrald's *Address of the British Convention* gives an admirable summary of this argument.
[333] Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, 31-32.
[334] Ibid., 34.

the face of government repression.[335] The first was important to some societies, such as the MCS, where the radicals were attacked as much for their non-conformism as their politics. The essence of the gentlemanly reformist argument was that political reform was necessary to restore existing rights that had been lost, a concept that recurs frequently in the 'curious mixture'.

This section will continue to argue that France had a symbolic impact on the societies which did not extend to the adoption of its ideology, even though its vocabulary contributed to the 'curious mixture'. The radicals' own interpretation of France's influence varied. John Binns, an Irish nationalist, republican and LCS leader in the mid-1790s, argued for 'the early and continued effects of the Revolution in France on the people of England'.[336] Thelwall's wife claimed that 'The changes which had now commenced in France… operated with peculiar force on Thelwall' but 'he was never known to vindicate the sanguinary proceedings which soon followed'.[337] He believed the Revolution represented an 'unprecedented attempt to form a philosophical system of government, not upon military violence and temporary expedients, but upon digested principles of reason and humanity'.[338] Thelwall's appears a philosophical attachment, although his biography was written long after the events and is therefore subject to sanitisation. Writing during the Revolution in 1794, Walker offered an explanation closer to the symbolism referenced in earlier chapters: 'In the affairs of France we saw, as we thought, the most perfect and yet the most peaceful revolution to be found in the history of mankind.'[339] More generally, France presented a live example of reform to add to the more theoretical, historical arguments of gentlemanly reformism; as the radical James

[335] Although Price was not personally in favour of universal suffrage. I. Hampshire-Monk (ed.), *The Impact of the French Revolution*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 39.
[336] Binns, J., *Recollections of the Life of John Binns* (Philadelphia, 1854), 52. http://access.bl.uk/item/viewer/ark:/81055/vdc_100024105181.0x000001
[337] Thelwall, *Life of Thelwall,* 56-7, 58.
[338] Ibid., 59.
[339] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 19-20.

Mackintosh argued 'It is not because we *have been* free, but because we *have a right to be free* that we ought to demand freedom'.[340] As already noted, the authorities detected something more than a symbolic relationship with France, claiming the societies sought to introduce 'the system of anarchy and confusion that has so lately prevailed in France' and 'by the same means, to proceed upon the same principles to the same end, and by the same acts to execute the same purposes'.[341] However, the government's accusations were founded in their desire to secure convictions not reality. The appearance of Gallicisms in the 'curious mixture' reflects its presence in the radicals' minds as an inspirational symbol not a model; the societies were more likely to adopt its ideology through the prism of Paine's writing than from Jacobinism itself.

Paine's defence of the French Revolution, his interpretation of its principles, his personal vision of democracy and his application of these themes to the British context, provided the societies with a menu of innovative, democratic concepts. The radicals drew on Paine's natural rights arguments for universal suffrage, his economic analysis, his ridicule of the aristocracy, his argument that war was a product of aristocratic corruption, and (less consistently) his plans for welfare reform. Paine's influence was significant; Francis Place's misleading statement, referenced earlier, that 'all the leading members of the London Corresponding Society were Republicans' is illuminated by his observation that 'this they were taught by the writings of Thomas Paine'.[342] However, few radicals became Paineite ideologues since, as a witness at Tooke's trial, the SSCI's George Widdison, admitted, that though 'we approved of a great part of [Paine's] works… there were great parts of it which

[340] J. Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* (Philadelphia, 1792), 152. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed March 2018. <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CB129784727&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>.

[341] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 3, 64. See also *Trial of Thom.as Walker,* 13.

[342] Thale, *Autobiography of Francis Place,* 196, 196n.

none of us understood'.[343] For this reason, the societies drew more from Paine's attitude than his ideology, and used his arguments piecemeal whenever they supported their own. In so doing, the societies appeared to be demanding new rights as well as the restitution of the gentlemanly reformers' lost rights.

These three sources therefore influenced the societies in different ways and their conflation produced the 'curious mixture'. However, the mixture is further complicated by the differing motives of those doing the conflating. For some it may have been expedient – unhampered by ideology, any argument for reform was a good argument, so producing more confused expressions of the 'curious mixture'. Others saw genuine compatibility between the sources and made coherent connections between the old and the new, for example, Price's interpretation of the 1688 settlement logically aligned it with the principles of France in 1789, a connection Burke spotted, and realising its power, attacked it in *Reflections*. Further complexity is added by the impact of events, for instance, the publication of *Rights of* Man introduced Paineite 'attitude', whilst the war with France toned down French references. A final complicating factor was the need for the discreet use of language to avoid prosecution, court moderate opinion or obfuscate more radical aims – a method that was learnt partly from necessity and partly from the societies' mentor, John Horne Tooke. The resultant 'curious mixture' caused confusion in the movement (as much as it has with historians), as revealed by a letter from Norwich to the SCI in November 1793 which complained:

> publications are covered with a sort of obscurity in its language, as the Sheffield people's declaration, which seemed determined to support the Duke of Richmond's plan , but since we find… they mean to abide by some moderate reform… Again we

[343] *Trial of John Horne Tooke,* Volume 1, 337.

> find the Friends of the People and the Society for Constitutional Information do not exactly agree… while the Manchester people seem to intimate, by addressing Mr Paine, as though they were intent on democratic principles only... it is only desired to know whether the generality of the Societies mean to rest satisfied with the Duke of Richmond's plan only… or… to rip up Monarchy by its roots and place Democracy in its stead?[344]

The rest of this section will demonstrate that beneath the 'curious mixture' there are some consistent themes that reveal more of the societies' nature.

Tooke's influence

The societies' chief mentor, John Horne Tooke, probably contributed to the 'curious mixture'. He was himself publicly circumspect, possibly due to having been previously convicted of libel, and his own ideological position is hard to pin down, especially as he 'never made a comprehensive statement about his political creed'.[345] Analysis of the available materials, can cast him as a moderate, a firebrand, or a pragmatist who believed that any tool which might achieve reform should be utilised. This final interpretation is attractive because it epitomised the societies' approach or, perhaps, was responsible for it. Given his influence, it is important to attempt to understand his true position.

Tooke's public behaviour conformed to the moderate interpretation of his beliefs and reflected the views of gentlemanly reformism. In 1782, he responded to Dunning's motion against the king's increasing power by arguing against universal suffrage, claiming that whilst all have the right to be free, that right does not necessitate having 'a share in the

[344] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 222-3 [NB there is a pagination error in this edition this should be 228-9].
[345] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 107.

government'.[346] In 1785, at a meeting of the 'Friends of Reform', after the failure of Pitt's reform bill, Tooke continued to urge that Pitt's moderate plans be adopted.[347] In 1790 he moved a qualification to Lord Stanhope's resolution at a Revolution Society meeting in praise of France, to add 'the people of England by the virtuous exertions of their ancestors, have not so hard a task to perform as the French are engaged in, but have only to maintain and improve the Constitution which their ancestors have transmitted to them'.[348] These examples were put forward by the defence at Tooke's trial at which he himself maintained his intention was solely to reinstate the principles of 1688. One witness, William Sharp, confirmed 'you said every thing would be right if the Commons House was settled according to the principles of the Revolution'.[349] However, he was on trial for his life so pleading moderation was in his interests and, as his prosecutors argued, these examples precede 1792.

His private dealings reveal a few instances that suggest less moderation. There were the subscriptions for the French army discussed in Chapter One. In November 1790, Tooke moved that aristocratic members joining the SCI should be admitted under family names not titles.[350] He was known for his enthusiastic singing of the Revolutionary song *Ca Ira* and 'ribald' renderings of the national anthem at society dinners.[351] And, in a letter to the SSCI, he thundered 'Freedom though an infant, makes Herculean efforts, and the vipers, Aristocracy and Monarchy, are panting and writhing within its grasp'.[352] As Tooke may have believed these episodes would not be exposed publicly, they might be a better gauge of his views.

[346] *Trial of John Horne Tooke,* Volume 1, 446-7.
[347] Ibid., Volume 2, 52-4.
[348] Ibid., Volume 1, 443.
[349] Ibid., 356.
[350] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 96.
[351] Ibid., 123.
[352] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 1, 38.

The contradictions in Tooke's behaviour are also apparent in his colleagues' reminiscences. Cartwright, writing to his wife, attested to Tooke's relative conservatism, stating 'I have invariably found [him] in favour of the monarchical and aristocratic part, although against the encroachments of those branches on the democratic'.[353] However, Tooke is described in Thelwall's biography as 'one of the violent spirits of the age. He did not actually sanction the proceedings that had lately taken place in France, but his principles led him to excuse them'. [354] Mrs Thelwall reproduced an inscription made by her husband which stated 'Tooke… was always a strenuous advocate of the decapitation party… He was for having Kings but for *cutting off the head of one of them every fifty or one hundred years*.'[355] She also quoted Tooke as saying: 'I am too old to rebel – I am too gouty to rebel: but if the people choose to rebel I will sit in my easy chair and pray for their success'.[356] Mrs Thelwall's comments must be treated with caution; her husband had quarrelled with Tooke and therefore neither he nor she had reason to be generous. Cartwright's comments seem more reliable as he was unlikely to support a man who had abandoned the SCI's principles. The evidence is, however, frustratingly inconclusive.

John Barrell was probably right when he suggested 'Tooke's overt discretion may have concealed his secret activism', so producing the contradictions in his behaviour.[357] In public he was never effusive about France but organised subscriptions for the Revolutionaries.[358] He professed to want only to restore the 1688 settlement, and supported Pitt's limited reforms, but presided over the resurrected SCI which promoted universal suffrage. His SCI promulgated *Rights of Man* but Tooke claimed he disagreed with its anti-

[353] Cartwright, *Life and Correspondence*, 205-6.
[354] Thelwall, *The Life of John Thelwall,* 242-243.
[355] Ibid., 243.
[356] Ibid., 243-244.
[357] Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death*, 183.
[358] Bewley and Bewley, *Gentleman Radical,* 133.

monarchical sentiments.[359] The evidence suggests that Tooke's experience persuaded him to mask his true beliefs and that 'political realism' led him to adopt whatever tactic might achieve parliamentary reform.[360] Tooke's approach was reflected in, and almost certainly influenced, the societies' behaviour (certainly that of the London-based LCS). The societies' pragmatism led them to adopt the discretion and political realism of their mentor in the way they expressed their demands, so contributing to the 'curious mixture'.

The establishment of the societies and the 'curious mixture'

The societies' earliest proclamations show little evidence of the 'curious mixture' and suggest discretion dominated their modes of expression at this point. Public statements are couched in reform tradition terms but private dealings exhibit wider influences. The SSCI's first public Address of 19 December 1791 explained they sought 'a REFORMATION, by the Revival of our ancient Privileges in the Constitution of our Government'. They stressed their adherence to the constitution: 'all our Political Evils, arising from the Abuse of the Practice, and not from Defect of Principle, the Original Purity of its Spirit may be restored'.[361] In private the tone was less restrained, as the report by Reverend Zouch to Fitzwilliam in January 1792 showed. The SSCI asked 'who were to obtain a reform? *The nobility*? No. Would *Parliament*? No. It must be the *middle* class of People who pay taxes'. However, even in private, the closest they came at this point to referencing innovative principles was a discussion of 'equity'.[362]

[359] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 2, 270.
[360] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 116.
[361] 'Address from the Society of Constitutional Information in Sheffield to the Public', reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 48.
[362] 'Account of the Meeting of the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information', 30 January, 1792, reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 50.

Sheffield were not alone in speaking differently in public and in private. The MCS's Address of 15 May 1792, claimed they wanted change consonant with the reform tradition: 'to restore the constitution to its original purity by removing the corruptions and abuses that deform it'.[363] In private Walker's beliefs were more radical, Williams dubbing him 'the most thorough-going Painite in England'.[364] Walkers' adherence to Paine is evident in an introductory letter he wrote for Cooper to Pétion, the Mayor of Paris, in which he expressed his hope that *Rights of Man* 'might produce some material alteration in our system'. He continued 'Aristocracy [Paine] has wounded mortally… Taxes can go no further, and monarchy will not, I think, continue long'. He concluded: 'he has pointed out to the people that their own interest is so closely connected with the principles he lays down that these cannot fail to act upon them ere long'.[365]

The contrast in public and private statements proves Philp's point that it is hard to gauge the societies' beliefs from public pronouncements. However, the reasons behind the contradictions are different in each case. Walker, an experienced campaigner and an important figure in Manchester society, was hiding his radical leanings to protect his public profile, avoid unnecessary clashes with the authorities, and court moderate opinion. The last two reasons hold true for the SSCI but there was doubtless also a degree of inexperience and trepidation at entering the political debate for the first time; the societies had not yet found their voice and so borrowed from the gentlemanly reformers' vocabulary. For both Walker and the SSCI, the language of gentlemanly reformism was deemed at this point to be the appropriate means of public communication, with the innovative half of the 'curious mixture' reserved for private situations; 'overt discretion' was being applied.

[363] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events,* 26-27.
[364] Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes*, 18.
[365] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 201.

Rights of Man Part 2, published in February 1792, produced a significant change in the tone of the societies' output. Paine's work encouraged the societies to introduce innovative concepts and terminology into their materials just as it had given them the confidence and language to articulate the economic argument publicly. Nevertheless, many of the arguments remained constitutional even when expressed in Paineite language; as Philp maintained, Paine provided 'attitude' more than ideology. Thus the 'curious mixture' first appeared – based on gentlemanly reformism, infused with Paineite phrases but tempered by discretion and political realism. The evolution of the societies' output through 1792, after *Rights of Man* was published, was gradual, inconsistent but irresistible. The change is epitomised by the LCS's Addresses of 1792. Their April Address opened with the Paineite concept that men are born with equal rights but relinquish some when they enter society, whilst always retaining the right 'of sharing in the Government of [their] Country'.[366] The language was not particularly Paineite bar this introduction, but the tone of the Address moved away from the restrained, gentlemanly reformist phraseology of the MCS and SSCI. Reflecting Paine's 'attitude', the Address was expressed in the plain and blunt language which would define many societies' future pronouncements. By August the LCS had fully absorbed *Rights of Man* Part 2, but its influence was still conflated with reform tradition arguments. They talked of restoring the 'impaired' Constitution to its 'pristine vigour' and invoked the names of Pitt and Richmond, but those who would deliver reform were 'Citizens', and the benefits that would accrue were a recapitulation of Paine's plans and welfare programme, with 'our liberties restored… needless places and pensions retrenched, immoderate salaries reduced… taxes diminished, and the necessaries of life more within the reach of the poor, youth better educated, prisons

[366] Thale, *Selections*, 10; Paine, *Rights of Man*, 68-69.

less crowded, old as provided for…'.[367] Paineite ideas were present but stated within the context of the gentlemanly reformist aim of restoring lost rights.

The regional societies' output in 1792 demonstrates the inconsistency of the adoption of the new style. The Norwich Revolution Society, in their introductory letter to the SCI in April 1792, echoed Price by evoking the 'extraordinary Convocation, in 1688… elected representatives of the people, assisted by the hereditary counsellors of the nation… which CONSTITUTING Assembly cashiered for misconduct a King of the House of Stuart'. However, they then eulogised Macintosh's *Vindiciae Galliciae* which 'explained, defended and commended the French Revolution', and praised Paine for identifying the 'abuses' and 'prejudices' in Parliament.[368] A more determinedly Paineite tone was struck by Southwark in their constitution of April 1792. Their aim was to assert the 'Rights of Men' 'the ignorance, forgetfulness or contempt' of which are the 'sole causes of public grievances and of the corruption of Government'. They mixed Enlightenment ideas of 'calm and rational enquiry' and 'GENERAL HAPPINESS' with Paineite concepts of 'Civil and Political Authority [being] derived from the people'.[369] Although the tone in Norwich and Southwark was less discreet than the LCS (explained for Norwich perhaps by their distance from London and Tooke), the themes are similar, and equally demonstrate that the societies were beginning to acquire Paine's attitude. In contrast, the two junior societies in Manchester, who operated under the eye of the guarded MCS, followed the moderate, gentlemanly reformist public line of their masters and show little evidence of the 'curious mixture'. In their founding statement the Patriotic Society demanded meekly 'a fair and adequate representation' echoing (or copying) the original MCS resolutions.[370] The Reformation Society also mimicked the full,

[367] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 214-220.
[368] *Secrecy Committee,* Appendix C, 89-91.
[369] *Trial of John Horne Tooke*, Volume 1, 182-4.
[370] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 34.

fair and adequate representation of the MCS and copied a number of its resolutions almost verbatim.[371] Both societies appear to have had the individuality apparent in Norwich and Southwark suppressed by the MCS. The diversity of the movement is apparent in these examples; there was at this early stage, before much contact had occurred between the societies, little consistency of approach although most adopted some form of the 'curious mixture' combining the gentlemanly reformers' ideas and Paine's attitude.

The impact of events on the 'curious mixture': Loyalism and France

As already noted, the emergence of the loyalist associations in November 1792 provided a formidable popular alternative to the radicals' narrative, forcing the societies to deploy their arguments defensively. The LCS's answering Address of 29 November 1792 used the now characteristic formula of the 'curious mixture'. It opened by paraphrasing Paine's quotation of the French general and politician, Lafayette: 'that a nation like Britain should be free, it is requisite only that Britons should will it to become so'.[372] The Address echoed the gentlemanly reformers' complaint of 'the abuses of our original constitution' before attesting to their support for the Paineite or French 'RIGHTS OF MAN, to LIBERTY, EQUALITY'. So far, so 'curious mixture'. However, when it came to addressing the loyalists' assertions, the LCS reverted entirely to gentlemanly reformism. The loyalists wanted to prevent 'Britons from reclaiming the rightful constitution of their country' and that 'if at the Revolution this country was adequately represented, it is now so no longer'.[373] When challenged, the societies reverted to gentlemanly reformism feeling that native, conservative arguments were more effective in countering their opponents' challenges than a Paineite or French-influenced defence. This approach was sensible and pragmatic as it recognised where public opinion

[371] Ibid., 36-38.
[372] 'For a nation to be free it is sufficient that she wills it': Paine, *Rights of Man*, 121; Secrecy Committee, Appendix D, 130.
[373] Secrecy Committee, Appendix D, 131.

stood at this point. However, perhaps it also indicates that the societies were more comfortable with these retrospective arguments.

Events in Manchester replicated the experience in London. The MCS were physically attacked by loyalists with raids on the *Manchester Herald* and Walker's home and business in December 1792. Walker responded with two open letters in which he reaffirmed his commitment to gentlemanly reformism but did so with rhetorical questions which suggested he too was on the defensive. He asked if it was a crime to 'to enlighten the minds of the people respecting their just rights… … to wish the British Constitution restored to its original purity…?'.[374] In the second letter Walker pleaded gentlemanly reformist moderation: 'my sole object… is not to *innovate* but to *renovate* and restore the Constitution to its ANCIENT PURITY'.[375] The loyalists pushed the societies back to the (more) acceptable face of radicalism, causing an adjustment to the 'curious mixture' in favour of gentlemanly reformism, a concession the societies were able to make being unfettered by ideological dogma, and seeing constitutionalism as supporting their demand for universal suffrage equally well as democratic principles.

As has been seen, the adoption of France as a symbol of liberty just when British public opinion was turning against it was counter to the societies' pragmatism, and caused by the emotional nature of the attachment. France's contribution to the 'curious mixture' is consequently often defensive. Walker had already had to defend his position in May 1792 having been harassed by Church and King supporters, the forerunners of the loyalist movement. He distanced the MCS from France, 'to prevent mistake and misrepresentation' by arguing 'Though we rejoice at the Revolution that has lately taken place in France, we do not

[374] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 69-70.
[375] Ibid., 77.

pledge ourselves to an approbation of all the measures which have been there adopted'.[376] The LCS's response to the loyalists in November 1792 reveals a change from their Address to the Convention in the way they referenced France. It is a defence of France but also defensive about the society's attitude to France, repeating Walker's stance. The LCS clung to the view, prevalent in Britain until mid-1792 but now waning, that France was merely catching Britain up constitutionally: 'like our brave ancestors of the last century' they had expelled a corrupt royal family. They acknowledged that 'cruelty and revenge' had occurred but argued it was limited to 'few inhabitants'. They put distance between Britain and France: 'we have never yet been cast so low at the foot of despotism, so it is not requisite that we should appeal to the same awful tribunal'.[377] In Manchester, Walker was still on the defensive in early 1793. On the day before war was declared, he offered a similarly caveated defence of France: 'Is it a crime to rejoice in the emancipation of so many millions of the human race from the yoke of the most degrading slavery? – Is it probable that so great a good could be obtained without some excesses being committed?'[378] For both societies France was a hindrance to public acceptability and yet they continued to defend it because of their emotional attachment, rendering France's contribution to the 'curious mixture' at this time defensive in nature.

Sheffield was an exception, supporting France openly well into November, underlining the movements' inconsistency. The SSCI, in commemorating 1688 on 5 November 1792, toasted 'The Members of the National Convention of France' and 'The armies of France'.[379] On 27 November a fete celebrated French military victories with a procession attended by an 'immense concourse of people' at which the *Manchester Herald* noted 'The national cockade of France, inscribed 'Liberty or Death' was very distinguishable'

[376] Ibid., 25-26, 29.
[377] Secrecy Committee, Appendix D, 132.
[378] Walker, *Review of some of the Political Events*, 79-81.
[379] 'The celebration of the Glorious Revolution at Sheffield on 5 November 1792' reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats,* 57-8.

amongst the crowd. The account noted that there were 'few aristocrats in the town' perhaps suggesting that Sheffield was less molested by loyalists than other locations, thus giving the society more leeway to celebrate the Revolution.[380] The fete was the counterpoint to the LCS's Address to the Convention that was marked with bitterness at Brunswick's advance; Brunswick was now retreating and the SSCI displayed the 'euphoria' Barrell noted in the Addresses to the Convention.

With war being declared in February, France rarely featured in the societies' materials in 1793. France had been a damaging blind spot in the societies' pragmatism, their emotional attachment to the ideal of the Revolution compelling them to defend it in their public statements; pacifistic themselves, they even defended the violence of late 1792. Loyalism and the French Revolution therefore contributed to the 'curious mixture' in conflicting ways; the former forced a more conservative tone whilst the latter seemed to associate the societies with more radical politics, the seeming contradiction weakening their arguments by making the 'mixture' more 'curious'. However, both underline the societies' natural tendency to retreat into gentlemanly reformism when under pressure, further indicating that the beliefs of their predecessors were instinctively more comfortable territory than France and Paine.

The British Convention and the 'curious mixture'

The British Convention is a microcosm of the development of the societies' engagement with constitutional and democratic ideas and of the evolution of the 'curious mixture'; it began as moderate, became more radical in tone but not in intent, and was finally suppressed by the authorities. It confirms that the essence of the 'curious mixture' remained unchanged,

[380] 'Account of the fete to celebrate the victories pf the French Republican armies, 27 November 1792' reproduced in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 59-60.

grounded in gentlemanly reformism but with France and Paine providing language and inspiration.

The third Scottish Convention met on 29 October 1793, its actions conforming entirely to the reform tradition. Their start-point was 'the constitution' as determined by the Glorious Revolution, although a motion was made to drop the word 'glorious' and recast the concept in Cartwrightian terms as 'the purity of the constitution'. They debated whether the 1688 settlement mandated universal suffrage and annual parliaments or if they should look further back in history for such justification. It was proposed that they used Richmond's phraseology in a motion on this subject. A chapter from Johnson's history of the Magna Carta on the origins of the folkmote (the Anglo-Saxon tradition that the gentlemanly reformers used to justify universal suffrage and annual parliaments) was read out. Delegates were addressed as 'Mr.'.[381] So far, so gentlemanly reformist.

Proceedings were less in the reform tradition after the English arrived and the convention was reconvened on the 19th November. To explain this change it is instructive again to consider the guidelines to the SCI and LCS delegates. As already noted, the SCI draft instructions were different to the final version. The draft ordered the delegates to help bring forward petitions and to discuss a 'remedy' for the 'abuses in the *present* system'. The delegates were to use Pitt, Richmond and Flood's models to guide them and were given detailed instructions on objectives - universal suffrage, voting by constituency residents only, the shortest possible election period, annual parliaments, and pay for MPs.[382] The instructions and the language in which they were couched reflected the 1780s' reformers' rhetoric. The final instructions, after the possible LCS intervention, did not specify petitioning and

[381] 'Minutes of the General Convention in Edinburgh' reproduced in *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 280-296.
[382] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 2, 99-100.

mentioned only 'the two essential principles', universal suffrage and annual parliaments, albeit still to 'remedy the abuses in the existing system', but also demanded recognition of the 'unalienable right… to reform'.[383] Whether due to a change of mind or LCS interference, the amendments feel more radical with 'unalienable' echoing the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the American Declaration of Independence. The LCS's instructions simply insisted on universal suffrage and annual parliaments but added belligerently that 'it is the duty of the people to resist any act of parliament repugnant to the original principles of the constitution'.[384] The delegates had objectives that were not ostensibly counter to the Scots' aims but were couched more in the language of democracy than gentlemanly reformism.[385]

The democratic tone of the delegates' instructions was gradually adopted by the Convention which became increasingly infused with Gallic linguistic influences, alongside the introduction of French procedures discussed in Chapter Two. The 'curious mixture' at the Convention was not constitutionalism and Paine, but constitutionalism and France. As *Rights of Man* had infused the societies' 1792 statements with Paineite attitude, so the French Convention provided a democratic idiom for the British Convention in 1793. Being at war with Britain, France is however never mentioned directly nor its actions defended, but the symbolically-laden term 'citizen' gradually inserted itself in proceedings. 'Citizen' appeared just once in the first day's minutes of the combined Convention instead of 'Mr.', to which it then reverted until day 4 when 'citizen' reappeared, and dominated the minutes from day 5. On Day 12 Gerrald 'shewed the insipidity of the title Gentleman and the propriety of the term Citizen'.[386] Unsurprisingly, at trial Gerrald argued that 'citizen' was a 'term of peace' denoting 'that relationship in which we stand to each other, as members of the same

[383] Ibid., 100.
[384] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 159.
[385] The delegates were Gerrald and Margarot from the LCS, the latter also representing Norwich, Charles Sinclair from the SCI and Matthew Campbell Brown, editor of the *Patriot*, from Sheffield.
[386] 'Minutes of the General Convention in Edinburgh', in *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1 297, 309, 311, 327.

community, for the performance of our civil duties', whilst the Scottish leader Skirving dismissed its use as 'wit and humour', but this does not chime with the tenor of the Convention.[387]

The other tonal development is the increasingly belligerent phraseology which peaked on Day 9. This day's minutes contain a blank page where a resolution should have appeared but was considered too dangerous to put into the public domain (the proceedings being reported in the press).[388] The missing resolution stated that if the government took actions that deprived the people of the right to convene, they would 'follow the wholesome example of former times by paying no regard to any act that should militate against the Constitution of our country, and shall continue to assemble… until compelled to desist by superior force'. Furthermore, if the government passed a bill banning conventions as had happened in Ireland, or suspended habeas corpus, or 'in case of invasion, or the admission of any foreign troops whatsoever into Great Britain or Ireland', a meeting of a secret committee would be triggered which could then declare the sitting of the Convention permanent, as the Sections of Paris had done.[389] It is possible to read into these later minutes something approaching revolutionary intent and a willingness to support a French invasion, but such conclusions are mistaken. The increasingly frenzied atmosphere which generated the belligerent tone, was probably created by a siege mentality caused by increasing interference from the authorities and their spies. Specifically, the invasion clause was almost certainly aimed at the stationing of German mercenaries in Britain, not a French incursion.[390] Nevertheless, the belligerent tone reveals a new ingredient in the societies' expression of their demands, caused by anger and frustration at the government's refusal to engage.

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[387] Barrell, *Imagining the King's death*, 159; Epstein, *Rereading the Constitution*, 40.
[388] Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death,* 154. Goodwin claimed this was merely procedural but conceded it looked suspicious: Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty,* 301.
[389] 'Minutes of the General Convention in Edinburgh', in *Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 1, 333-334.
[390] Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 313.

However, only the tone and language of the 'curious mixture' were changing, not the content; gentlemanly reformism was not abandoned in favour of innovative policies. Gerrald championed the Anglo-Saxon constitution and 'fully proved the rights of the people to [universal suffrage and annual parliaments] by their ancient constitution' and 'made many remarks on the revolution settlement, and the benefits gained by the last revolution, and demonstrated clearly, that they are now totally taken away'. The convention agreed to re-publish the Bill of Rights and recommended it form part of each society's constitution to remind members they were doing what 'the constitution avows and admits'.[391] Gerrald reiterated this rationale in *The Address of the British Convention*; the societies wished only to 'restore the principles of our Saxon ancestors'. The closest he came to referencing Paineite (or Enlightenment) principles was to claim, 'Our rights have the twofold sanction of reason and antiquity', neatly conjoining 'the old and the new'.[392] Whilst the pamphlet was an attempt to legitimise his cause ahead of his trial, Gerrald was nevertheless consistent in promoting the arguments of gentlemanly reformism. The societies were still grounding their demands in constitutionalism.

Arguably, the meeting's objectives were also gentlemanly reformist. Margarot claimed that the societies, and therefore the Convention, represented 6-700,000 Britons.[393] This was a substantial over-claim but it suggests that, for Margarot at least, the Convention's aim may have been to demonstrate the scale of support for the radical cause, as the 1780s' reformers intended. At Hardy's trial, Erskine, unsurprisingly, pleaded this mild interpretation of the Convention's aims suggesting to a witness 'that when you had got the sentiments of a great

[391] 'Minutes of the General Convention in Edinburgh', in *Trial of Thomas Hardy,* Volume 1, 307, 317.
[392] Gerrald, *The address of the British Convention,* 13, 15.
[393] *Trial of Thomas Hardy*, Volume 1, 160.

number of a respectable part of the people, and then were to petition, at a Convention, that the House of Commons would attend your petition'.[394]

The evidence confirms that despite the Convention's apparent democratic tone, its content and objectives were in fact in accordance with the reform tradition model of conventionism not the French version; the use of 'citizen' and other Gallicisms were symbolic only. Although the expression of the 'curious mixture' had changed again, innovative language – this time French – was still being used only in the context of gentlemanly reformist demands. Nevertheless, the Convention does reveal a new tone, of anger and frustration at the authorities' refusal to listen to the movement, foreshadowing the mood that dominated the societies' proceedings after the convention was suppressed.

1794 - the Aftermath of the British Convention

1794 is a year of contrasts with emotional outbursts at the government's actions balanced by more considered expositions of the 'curious mixture'. The London societies responded to the convictions of their convention delegates angrily, but even in this state the substance of their pronouncements remained gentlemanly reformist, with France and Paine featuring prominently only in more emotional moments. At the LCS's meeting at the Globe Tavern in January the society evoked 'MAGNA CHARTA, and the BILL OF RIGHTS, and the glorious REVOLUTION', and complained that 'of the venerable Constitution of our ancestors, hardly a vestige remains'. Only in a series of toasts did they reference their more innovative influences - 'THE RIGHTS OF MAN', 'success to the arms of *Freedom*', '*Citizen Thomas Paine*', and peace with the '*brave Republic of France*'.[395] The SCI displayed the same emotional response at a dinner on 2 May, where a band played the French Revolutionary

[394] Ibid., Volume 2, 162.
[395] Ibid., Volume 1, 352, 357-358.

songs *Ca Ira*, the *Carmagnole*, and the *Marseillaise*, and the toasts included natural rights, Paine and the French Army.[396]

The LCS's public response to their Secretary's' arrest for treason in May, *The Seizure of Thomas Hardy*, displays an escalation in the society's anger. The publication is visceral, furious and plain-speaking. As already noted, the lack of caution it displays gives some reassurance to the contents' validity, although anger may also have caused some overstatement. The LCS attacked the three main charges against Hardy – the motives for demanding universal suffrage, the alleged plan to arm the LCS and links to France. Their instinct remained to look back in British history to defend their aims, but their interpretation marks a re-evaluation of the reform tradition, coloured by their disillusionment. They maintained that James II's 'ABDICATION… may either be understood to mean his expulsion by popular authority, or his voluntary resignation; if the former it sanctions the doctrine we have already advanced, [universal suffrage]; if the latter we scruple not to call it a national lie', a claim reminiscent of Price's assertion of the people's right to cashier the monarch. However, the LCS maintained that the expulsion was not the people's decision but 'the act of a number of persons calling themselves a convention but not authorised by popular delegation'; it was a 'faction'. The faction disguised James's removal as an 'abdication' 'which duplicity has entangled the politics of Englishmen ever since'. This masquerade of democracy was soon confirmed as 'nearly all the constitutional guards… were… annulled'.[397] This conclusion suggests the authors now saw 1688 as a betrayal of the people by the aristocracy, rather than a step towards regaining lost rights, and confirmation of the necessity of universal suffrage to prevent similar occurrences in future. The authors' sense of betrayal in the present led them to re-evaluate the past, but it was still the British past to which they

[396] Ibid., Volume 2, 119-121.
[397] LCS, *Seizure*, 6.

turned, not Paine and France. The past also justified the alleged arming of the societies, the LCS maintaining that 'Alfred, justly stiled the Great, encouraged all the nation to have arms' whereas William 'disarmed all but his own adherents'.[398] These statements must be considered in context. The anger that had been simmering after Margarot and Gerrald's convictions boiled over when the societies' leaders were arrested for treason and it seemed that Scottish history was repeating itself in England. Equally importantly, the societies' decapitation meant that this ill-considered defence was not censored by wiser heads. The arguments are atypical, but they demonstrate that the events of 1794 compelled some members to reinterpret the beliefs inherited from gentlemanly reformism, but, importantly, still to advance the new interpretation in Hardy's defence; gentlemanly reformism, in revisionist form, remained central to their arguments.

The LCS did not therefore abandon the reform tradition or adopt innovative ideology. *Seizure* addressed the accusations of support for France not by defending it but by claiming Britain was equally culpable; they now felt betrayed not only by their own country but by the Revolution: 'we dislike a mutilated convention as much as the rump of the House of Commons… we think a court of justiciary and a revolutionary tribunal, nearly parallels, and a lawless privy council as bad as either… we detest alike, the authors of massacres, whether the developing hand of time proves their names to be Marat, Pitt, Danton, Dundas, or Robespierre'.[399] This marks a definitive change in the approach to France; the Revolution had now descended into anarchy and even the LCS saw flaws similar to those they detected in the British government in the Revolution's leadership. 1792's optimism had been replaced by disillusionment, but even in their disillusionment, the prominence of gentlemanly reformism in this document and at the societies' angry meetings, consigning references to Paine and

[398] Ibid.
[399] Ibid., 6-7.

France to more emotional toasts and resolutions, reveals the relationship with each of these influences more truthfully that the societies' more considered public pronouncements – gentlemanly reformism was their foundation, Paine and France their inspiration, but with the latter's symbolism now tarnished. Although the expression of the 'curious mixture' had changed again, its underlying structure remained unaltered.

In addition to these emotional responses, some radicals attempted a more sophisticated reconciliation of 'the old and the new', to justify Paine's innovative ideology in the context of gentlemanly reformism. At the SSCI's April Castle Hill meeting, Yorke, the main speaker, pleaded 'the antient rights of their country' and complemented this retrospective sentiment by lauding Penn for having 'revived the simplicity of the primitive ages of society', primitivism being one of the main criticisms of Paineite ideology by its opponents. He demanded in Paineite terms 'the restitution of the original rights of human nature' but conjoined it with an evocation of the earlier English advocates of reform 'Sydney, Hampden and Locke'. Yorke, like Gerrald, eulogised 'the antient Constitution as established by Alfred', bemoaned the ills of the Norman Yoke, and praised 'the Revolution in 1688', but then, seemingly abandoning any further attempt at reconciliation, thundered: 'Enough of precedent… the machine of state should be guided by the polar star of Reason alone…THE WILL OF THE MAJORITY OF THE PEOPLE SHOULD BE, AT ALL TIMES, THE SUPREME LAW'.[400] Yorke was at least attempting to reconcile Paine's ideology with gentlemanly reformism as Price had done more successfully with 1688 and the French Revolution.

A more coherent attempt at reconciling innovative and retrospective ideologies was made in the LCS's new constitution which has already been shown to provide the most

[400] *Proceedings of the public meeting, held at Sheffield,* 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 27.

compelling linkage of economic and social ills and the lack of fair representation. Its list of 'PRINCIPLES and WISHES', exhibits the strongest adoption of democratic ideas so far. The first principle claimed 'men are by nature free'; the second reprised Paine's argument that individuals give up only so much of their rights to the state as to provide for the protection of all; points three and four discussed 'civil rights' arguing for 'equality of voice in the making of laws, and in the choice of persons by whom those laws are administered'. However, the seventh point claimed 'the foregoing are not new but are the original principles of English government'.[401] The LCS were citing democratic principles as a reassertion of ancient rights; they were becoming more overtly Paineite but still seeking to ground his principles in gentlemanly reformism.

It was however Gerrald who had best articulated the reconciliation of the 'curious mixture' at his trial earlier in 1794. At trial, he combined the Anglo-Saxon argument with the natural rights of Paine and the Enlightenment: 'we may justly claim it as our inheritance from nature; but we can with confidence… appeal to antiquity for our title to this right; and it will be found to have been exercised by our ancestors in its fullest extent'; as Epstein put it Gerrald sought 'quasi-historical ground for rational liberty'.[402] Defiantly, he appeared dressed and coiffured in the French fashion.[403] His defence remained grounded in gentlemanly reformism, demonstrated the societies' increasingly successful reconciliation of innovative and retrospective ideologies, and epitomised the romantic rather than ideological link to France. As the reconciliation of 'the old and the new' became increasingly successful, so the first hint of a structural change to the 'curious mixture' is revealed, as Paine (if not

[401] 'The Report of the Committee of Constitution', 7.
[402] J. Gerrald, *The trial of Joseph Gerrald,* (Edinburgh, 1794), 19. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Accessed June 2018. http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=bham_uk&tabID=T001&docId=CB132229616&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE; Epstein, J. in Vernon. *Rereading the Constitution*, 49.
[403] Epstein, *Rereading the Constitution*, 41.

anarchic France) was able to be more fully integrated into their arguments. However, the war, the societies' decapitation and government repression prevented this embryonic change taking hold more widely than Gerrald and the LCS.

1795 – the end of the 'curious mixture'

Circumstances in 1795 dictated a regression in the 'curious mixture'. Decapitation was a significant factor as illustrated by the absence of minutes for the LCS in the first half of 1795.[404] When Thelwall visited Sheffield in 1796 he described the SSCI as 'a body without a head. They have unfortunately no leaders' which might be applied to the societies generally in early 1795.[405] Despite this, there was a surge in membership after the treason trial acquittals, but the new leadership took time to establish itself. The societies reverted to the gentlemanly reformist tactic of petitioning to demonstrate the weight of public support for their cause, but underpinned by huge demonstrations of support through the mass rallies. At these meetings the societies' aims remained unchanged but they were expressed in almost exclusively gentlemanly reformist terms, largely because the audience for the petitions was the government and the king, and so discretion was advisable.[406] The LCS rally at Copenhagen Fields on 12 November argued the government's actions were counter to Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights. The king was urged not to 'extend your authority beyond that prescribed at the Revolution'. Parliament was warned that 'what remains of' the 1688 settlement was threatened and measures last taken by the Stuarts were being reintroduced.[407] At the LCS's final rally at Marylebone Fields in December, the Two Acts were described as 'fabricated not on models of the glorious revolution, but in direct hostility to the Bill of Rights'.[408] The

[404] Thale, *Selections*, 241.
[405] Quoted in Stevenson, *Artisans and Democrats*, 33.
[406] The societies collected 94 petitions containing 130,000 signatures in protest at the Two Acts: Goodwin, *Friends of Liberty*, 391.
[407] Thale, *Selections*, 323-324.
[408] 'To the people of Britain' reproduced as an appendix in Thelwall, *Life of Thelwall,* 471-5.

overwhelming impression of these Addresses is that the societies were going backwards, fighting not to improve conditions but to protect the unsatisfactory status quo. The war and poor harvests had worsened their economic problems and the Two Acts would remove existing rights not grant new ones. In particular, the societies feared they were losing any benefit gained in 1688 and they were forced back to petitioning to protect the settlement. Paine and France were not mentioned; the 'curious mixture' had been replaced by the language of the1780s.

Conclusion

Despite many differences in detail, the societies' grievances found common ground in economic and social injustice arising from 'aristocratic' corruption in Parliament. The societies were therefore able to agree that political reform was the only solution to their issues, and even if there was little agreement on what reform should look like, the societies' were able to unite behind the standard of universal suffrage and annual parliaments. In America, the slogan 'no taxation without representation' was an economic pretext for the political aim of separation from Britain, but it could be used in Britain's case as a genuine reflection of the societies' early demands. As Dickinson put it; 'It was the unequal distribution of power, rather than the unequal distribution of wealth, that was the chief source of the economic grievances of the people'.[409] Over the period the nature of the societies' grievances broadened from the burden of taxation on the individual to encompass a wider analysis of the economy in response to the loyalists' arguments, to include the increasing hardship the war was causing, and eventually to take account of wider social issues. However, the cause remained corruption in Parliament and the solution political reform. The ability to unite behind this objective, despite the movement's diversity, was only possible

[409] Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution*, 16.

because their lack of ideological attachment allowed the societies to behave pragmatically in the interest of improving conditions. Given the strains the societies were under it is still remarkable that they held to their demand of universal suffrage and annual parliaments, demonstrating a degree of cohesion and unity that much of the historiography denies. This is not to suggest that that the societies became a movement in the sense of a single body acting in unison, but rather that they found a way in which they could work together despite their disparity.

The expression of the societies' demands varied according to the fluctuating influence of France, Paine and gentlemanly reformism which was determined by the impact of events, the need for discretion, and the audience being addressed. The societies, being unhampered by ideological baggage, pragmatically accepted the need to change their mode of expression when it was forced upon them or grasped it when they saw an opportunity to advance their cause. However, beneath the shifting expression of their demands, the structure of the resultant 'curious mixture' remained largely constant, being grounded in gentlemanly reformism, with innovative influences usually being expressed within this context. The adherence to the British tradition was not ideological, it was a pragmatic choice of what was most likely to work; it was what the societies were familiar with, its practitioners were still available to counsel them, and it was conservative and pacifistic, which appealed to their own nature and was appropriate to their non-ideological aim of improving conditions rather than the revolutionary imposition of ideological equality. Nevertheless, they were enthused by Paine's 'attitude' and empowered by his language, whilst France provided the inspiration of members of their own class fighting for political liberty, hence their incorporation, sometimes naively, in their expression of fundamentally constitutional demands. Thus was created the 'curious mixture'.

Conclusion

This study has analysed the same primary sources as earlier historians – Committee of Secrecy papers, trial transcripts, correspondence between the societies and individuals within them, public statements, and personal memoirs – but, it has considered them from a wider perspective than was the norm for political analysis at the end of the last millennium when the subject of this thesis was last at the centre of the historiographical debate. Some of the strongest evidence for the insights made in this thesis has come not from the traditional analysis of what the societies said and wrote, but from studying their organisations, tactics and personal connections. The societies' relationship with the gentlemanly reformers, Paine and France cannot be fully appreciated by considering their written materials alone because their adoption of these sources was often determined by events, circumstances and audience rather than than their ideological content, and is therefore an unreliable guide to what they believed. A broader understanding of their engagement with gentlemanly reformism, Paine and France can only be gained by also assessing how the societies assimilated the influence of these sources in their structures and campaigning methods and exploring the role personal connections played in the societies' development, as these aspects are less encumbered by the influence of external factors. This approach presents a new way of looking at the societies, and reveals the importance of their own nature in the decisions they made, explains the 'curious mixture', and indicates greater cohesion than the historiography suggests.

The societies' nature was moulded as much by their newness to the debate, their reasons for entering it and their class, as the external political influences of gentlemanly reformism, Paine and France. They were roused to join the debate by their deteriorating personal economic circumstances which, they believed, were caused by corruption in

Parliament, an ill that could only be cured by political reform. This objective was their sole focus; they were less interested in ideological reasons for change and more concerned with the improvements change could bring. The decisions they took were therefore pragmatic and practical, based on what worked, and, being political novices, they learnt and adapted as they went. This pragmatic approach attracted them to gentlemanly reformism as the line of least resistance to their objective, but their class drew them towards the language and attitude of Paine, and created a sense of fellowship with the Revolutionaries. To understand the societies it is therefore more productive to look at how their nature affected the way they adopted the external political sources, than analysing their output for evidence of political influence.

The societies' nature explains why the strongest influence was gentlemanly reformism. Their general adherence to gentlemanly reformism was not ideological but practical; the societies' inexperience attracted them to an existing model with which they were familiar, from which they could learn, and some of whose proponents were available to provide advice. Gentlemanly reformism was understandable, tangible, and accessible, all factors likely to appeal to novice reformers, as was the fact that it was native, tested in Britain, and therefore a safer option, and one more likely to succeed, than the exotic idealism of the *philosophes*. It is therefore unsurprising that the societies adopted political education as a primary tool, returned frequently to petitioning, and approached reform pacifistically, as well as favouring the arguments of the Anglo-Saxon constitution and 1688 over the innovative ideologies of Paine and France, especially in times of crisis. However, it would be wrong to suggest that gentlemanly reformism was adopted by rote; the societies' character influenced the way they absorbed gentlemanly reformist tactics. Political education was central to their aims not because of gentlemanly reformism but because, the societies' pioneers, exemplified by Hardy, had undergone the process themselves and knew they had to understand the

political debate to participate in it; the commitment to political education was the practical application of their own experience. Similarly, their commitment to pacific measures was not simply learnt from gentlemanly reformism but came from their class and their pragmatism. As self-employed artisans and wage earners they understood that violence would be counterproductive, encouraging further government repression, which would worsen not improve their economic position by threatening their livelihoods; where arguably the French had nothing to lose by violence, the societies realised they did – they were seeking to renovate an existing constitution not impose a new one. The societies also adapted gentlemanly reformist tactics to reflect their own nature, in particular, bringing together representatives of their class, the unenfranchised, in a convention which the gentlemanly reformers would have baulked at, and organising mass rallies which would have alarmed the previous generation as a potential repetition of the Gordon Riots. Gentlemanly reformism provided the closest fit to the societies' needs and their nature but they adopted it on their own terms.

However, gentlemanly reformism was couched in the language of the 1780s' political debate which had been conducted by the classes above the working men of the societies and its language was therefore inauthentic and out of tune with their nature. In *Rights of Man*, Paine turned political rhetoric into an idiom that resonated with the societies' members; he gave them a means of participating on their own terms and, to a lesser degree, a new series of arguments for change. The adoption of Paine was therefore, again, a practical rather than ideological response; the societies were generally not Paineite but he provided them with useful tools. His economic critique deepened their understanding of the link between taxation, corruption and reform; as the SCI said, it gave them an 'additional motive' to pursue this argument. Natural rights, taken at its simplest level as emanating from man's natural state, resonated with the demand to return to the purity of the Anglo-Saxon constitution. Paine's

laceration of the aristocracy provided a vocabulary that the societies could use against the ruling class. His perception of war as a product of corruption provided them with another argument to strengthen their call for reform. Above all though, Paine supplied what Philp termed 'attitude', a direct and unmannered approach to reform that felt authentic for their class and unique to them; it gave the societies an idiom in which they could couch their constitutional arguments in a democratic tone.

France was the influence that contradicted pragmatism but it nevertheless emanated directly from two aspects of the societies' nature – their inexperience and their class. The similarities between the societies and France seem superficially strong – class and the objective of political liberty – however, it is the contrasts, not resemblances, that make France a useful tool for understanding the British radicals. The two movements behaved differently; where the *sans-culottes* defied their social betters the societies retained a degree of deference, where the French were violent the British were pacific, and when the French took more radical actions when checked, the societies retrenched in the safety of gentlemanly reformism. Furthermore, there was no adoption of French ideology by the societies or acceptance of help from France, merely fraternal encouragement, approbation and commiseration. The attraction of the Revolution was not as a model but a symbol of working people successfully fighting for political liberty, and the societies' conception of it was narrowly restricted to this romantic interpretation, with the increasingly bloody excesses ignored or excused. France provided inspiration and encouragement that the societies' objective could be achieved but there was no sign of a desire to follow its methods. Nowhere is the role of France better shown than in Gerrald's appearance in the French style at his trial; France was, quite literally, dressing only, the substance of his defence being anchored in gentlemanly reformism. The romantic and emotional attachment to the symbol of liberty and their political inexperience blinded the

societies to the British public's increasing alarm at the Revolution and led them to support the Revolutionaries with immensely damaging consequences. Political inexperience, a key part of the societies' make-up which drove their practicality and pragmatism, therefore also proved to be a fatal flaw.

Political inexperience was not the only aspect of the societies' make-up that cut both ways. The societies' class was central to their nature and their behaviour; it distinguished them from the preceding generation and was responsible for the departures from gentlemanly reformist tactics, it provided a fit for Paine's attitude and language, and it explains the symbolic link to France. However, one contribution their class made to their nature was central to their failure. The relationship with gentlemanly reformism was double-edged; it provided a foundation to the societies' arguments and a degree of legitimacy to their actions, but it was also accompanied by, and even encouraged, the residual deference for their 'betters' that caused the societies to expect to be led. The gentlemanly reformers were unable or unwilling to give such leadership, being prepared only to mentor the societies; ultimately even Tooke would only sit in his 'easy chair and pray for their success'. Any leadership from above would have provided a point of cohesion as the pragmatic societies were more interested in the direction of travel than the detail of any leader's proposed reform. The absence of leadership provides a better explanation of the societies' failure than disagreement on policy or disparate backgrounds; they were as Thelwall put it 'a body without a head'. The inability of the societies to lead themselves undermines Thompson's claim that the societies represented the first British working-class political movement; undoubtedly this was the period when 'the people entered politics' but they were not yet equipped to become a self-supporting movement. The societies' nature was central to their identity but it also contributed to their failure.

The way the societies engaged with gentlemanly reformism, Paine and France created the 'curious mixture'. Inexperience, the lack of ideological commitment and the focus on ends not means, meant that the conflation of these three conflicting sources was not incongruous to the societies as their aim matched the societies' goal of improved representation and the consequent removal of their grievances, rendering the arguments interchangeable. The same characteristics of the societies' nature also explain why the content of the 'curious mixture' fluctuated over time as the societies' pragmatically adapted – of necessity or by choice – to the impact of events, in particular the war and the loyalist challenge. The three political influences fulfilled different roles in the societies' development of their arguments; gentlemanly reformism being the pragmatic choice most likely to achieve change; Paine's language providing a practical tool that allowed them to engage in the debate and an authentic tone in which to do so; and France providing inspiration. With each fulfilling a different function, the conflation of the three in the societies' materials no longer seems a 'curious mixture' but a practical and pragmatic, if flawed, approach to achieving political reform. The 'curious mixture' of the societies' output exemplifies why it is difficult to gauge the societies' beliefs from what they said and wrote alone, as they were interested in the result their arguments might achieve not the ideological content, so producing materials as diametrically opposed as the petitions and some of the more inflammatory private correspondence; this emphasises the importance of also looking at their actions and their relationships for evidence of their engagement with the three sources.

Finally, this new perspective suggests that it is wrong, as some historians have done, to maintain that the absence of a consistent ideology, combined with the disparate backgrounds of the societies' members, created a fatal lack of cohesion. The societies'

practical and pragmatic approach removed the need for a unifying ideology and reduced the significance of their differences, allowing them to focus on the single issue that united them – improved conditions delivered by fuller representation. This unifying factor was all they needed to move forward; as Gerrald reminded the British Convention: – 'whatever difference of opinion might exist in these walls, we can never forget that our friends and enemies are in common and that our object is equally the same.' This shared sense of exclusion, as Philp termed it, further enhanced the need for pragmatism and forced the societies to unite behind the demand for universal suffrage and annual parliaments, even if some wanted less (improved but not perfect representation) and some wanted more (a republic). This rallying cry was the one element of the societies' demands and modes of expression that remained constant across the period, providing the cohesion that the recent historiographical consensus denies.

The danger in such overarching conclusions is that they suggest that the societies' approach was consistent, conscious and planned. It was not. It was inconsistent, instinctive, reactive and evolutionary. Nevertheless, the conclusions drawn above are based on factors that are common across the movement if not for all individuals within it – political inexperience, a lack of ideological attachment, class, the desire to improve economic conditions, the belief that their troubles were caused by corruption, that political reform was the only solution, and the collective pragmatism that these factors forced upon the societies' resulting in the unifying banner of universal suffrage. These common factors allow the above conclusions to be drawn even for such a diverse movement. By looking beyond what the societies wrote and said, to how they operated and the personal connections they made, this thesis brings new insights to the historiography of the British corresponding societies of the 1790s. It reveals the importance of the societies own character in determining why and how

they pursued reform in the way they did, and in particular in how they engaged with gentlemanly reformism, Paine and France. This in turn explains the 'curious mixture' as the outcome of pragmatic decisions made by a movement unhampered by ideological baggage. This same pragmatism reduces the significance of the societies' diversity, and allows for a more cohesive entity than is generally accepted by the later historiography. Above all, it gives the societies an identity of their own rather than one seen through the prism of gentlemanly reformism or Paine and France.

This thesis raises further questions for the understanding of the period. The societies did not exist in isolation. As this thesis has touched on, the societies' fortunes were linked with those of the loyalist movement; any change in the appreciation of one has implications for understanding the other. The same holds true for the government. Pitt's administration is dismissed as an autocratic, repressive force by left-wing historians and treated with complacency by the inheritors of the Whig tradition, resulting in a lack of analysis of its attitudes to the societies. In establishing that the societies were a more cohesive force than has been recently accepted, and therefore more of a threat, exploration of the administration's attitude may add to the understanding of the movement. Finally, this study suggests that lack of leadership was more of a factor in the societies' failure than diversity or disagreement on direction. Consideration of the societies' propensity for deference, the impact of decapitation and the consequent loss of potential leaders like Gerrald and mentors like Tooke, as well as the attitudes of the 'great men' such as Fox towards the societies, would enhance the understanding of the societies' nature and the reasons for their failure.

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