Notes on the "Re-Imagining Democracy" project meeting (September 21)
One-day workshop at Maison Francaise, Oxford

Theme: DEMOCRACY AND REVOLUTION: THE KING'S VIEW

The discussion was based on readings from three recent publications by fellows of King's College Cambridge, and their interpretations of the impact of the American and French revolutions on thinking about the relationship between government and society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The key chapters of these publications, and related classic texts, that formed the basis of discussion are listed below.

John Dunn, Setting the People Free (London, 2005) Chapter 2
Gareth Stedman Jones, An End to Poverty (London, 2004) Chapter 1
Istvan Hont, Jealousy of Trade (Cambridge, Mass., 2005) 456-492

The Federalist Papers, 9, 10, 39, 59, 60, 63, 85
Abbe Sieyès, Political Writings ed., Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis, 2003) pp. 9-24, 34-9, 44-56, 94-103, 127-156
Thomas Paine, Rights of Man pt 1 (Declaration of the Rights of Man and Miscellaneous chapter); Rights of Man 2 chapters 3 and 4

Present: Harry Dickinson, Oliver Dowlen, Michael Drolet, John Dunn, Ultan Gillen, Jo Innes, Jessica Kimpell, Tay Lavertue, David Magee, Jon Mee, Mark Philp, John Robertson, Anne Simonin.

Introductions: Mark Philp and Joanna Innes

Philp introduced the re-imagining democracy project as a joint initiative of History and Politics in Oxford and researchers in CNRS and Paris 1 in France. The core concern is the way in which thinking about democracy and democratic institutions was transformed in the period of 1750-1850, when what had been classically thought of as the worst form of government, became increasingly accepted as an inevitable if qualified element of most western political systems. He discussed the different areas the project addresses, such as the history of ideas, and the ways in which ideas were worked out in detail and in particular contexts and institutions. The project is also about conceptual change and the conceptual understandings individuals possessed and brought to bear on government and a range of other institutions during this period (and how they conceptualized their own situations and experiences). We might recognize, for examplethat a set of practices or an institutional arrangement demonstrates features of democracy even if that language is not used. He raised questions for discussion such as: are institutions the structures in which conceptual changes are cashed out or do institutions make it possible to develop new ideas? He also mentioned that part of the re-imagining of democracy project is about developments occurring in this period of political and social change, growing out of equality of condition and a rise in mass public opinion.

Innes began by saying that the hope with the workshops is to get those interested in theory and those interested in practice to talk to each other in constructive ways. The morning session was meant to be a sympathetic discussion of what these historians

are up to and what can be taken from their texts, and the afternoon discussion was meant to focus on what aspects of their stories fail to convince us (including things that we might think need attention if our concern is less with theory than with practice.).

In setting the scene for discussion, Innes identified some common strands in the texts and suggested how each of the recommended reading selections related to its whole. She suggested three elements these authors have in common. First, all accounts, though they take different approaches, identify the American and French revolutions as a conceptual turning point in thinking about the relationship between state and society – not just as a turning point in thinking about politics but also in thinking about state and society. Second, all the authors are Fellows of King's College, Cambridge. This may be of passing interest but it also may help to explain the prominence given to Sieyes. The third point is the prominence they all give to Sieyes (although each book gives slightly different accounts both of what he stands for and why he should be given such prominence).

She then discussed each of the three texts in some detail. Dunn has a habit of asking what seem like obvious questions, though ones that turn out to be difficult to answer intelligently. Simple questions such as: everyone thinks democracy is a good thing, but how has this come to be? How does what we term democracy now relate to what was first called this in the past? What has given democracy its continuing appeal, both as legitimating slogan and as real aspiration? Dunn finds this term's ascendancy to be a contingent product of historical processes. For historical reasons, certain states became powerful and latched on to the term democracy to describe themselves. Yet Dunn says that this is not quite enough to account for its force or appeal,. There needs to be something intrinsically attractive for democracy to have had the historical role it has. Dunn ultimately distinguishes between democracy (and is pessimistic about its potential) and democratization, which is a process that still has something to offer. America is pilloried for never having had to come to grips with democracy the hard way as some European countries have.

Dunn also focuses on the word democracy and its coming into use. This is the period in which the word catches on, but it rather creeps in. It is not a central slogan of the American or French revolutions. In some instances democracy had early purchase as an antonym of aristocracy. Sieyes emerges within this part of Dunn's discussion – although he is also noted to have been wary about democracy. Innes mentioned that the argument of the book takes strong form in the next chapter – when Dunn discusses the "conspiracy of equals," in which the idea of equality is given ethical charge. The significance of the American and French revolutions, in Dunn's account, is that they link the republic with representation. The idea of equality and representation as conjoined goals was introduced in the French Revolution and it is in this context that 'democracy' creeps in.

Stedman Jones offers a foundational history of social democracy and also discusses why, after what he takes to be a promising start in the late eighteenth century, it did not emerge as a continuing presence until later: because of fear of what democracy stood for, as a result of the French Revolution. She mentioned that in this story the key figures are Paine and Condorcet and they have a modern conception of the forms an equalizing policy might take: they suggest redistribution through taxation rather

than redistribution of land. Sieyes is something of a villain in this account. He is portrayed as wanting a clear source of sovereign authority, which seems right, but also as resisting democratization, and advocating the marginalization of a class of passive citizens, which may not be right. Stedman Jones suggests that Paine offers his vision of social democracy in response to Sieyes, but Innes said that it seemed to her that his dissent from Sieyes was on the issue of monarchy. Stedman Jones interestingly draws attention to the links Paine makes between knowledge and power (a Baconian conjunction): he argues that power must be dispersed because knowledge is. As Stedman Jones sees it, the American Revolution was especially critical in establishing the idea of representative democracy. The view in Europe was that such a system was not possible to imitate exactly because of the social equality in America. Paine argued that if one wanted to transplant the American model in the old world, the social conditions of the old world must be addressed.

In Hont's text, Sieyes is portrayed as a sensible voice – sensible for recognizing the dangers inherent in a form of democracy that involves appeals to the people against the government – tending to lead to dictatorship. Hont operates with a different chronology from the other authors: he is interested in the emerging world of nation-states and the development of economic thought, which he traces from the late seventeenth century. He is interested in the emergence of a recognizable modern world in which nation states are key players, characterized both by interdependence and by having discrete interests and a capacity to organize themselves to pursue those interests (whether or not they achieve their ends). Hont's story really takes its rise from the point at which the Dutch Republic emerged as a commercial power: this encouraged older territorial powers to change their agendas. Also, Hont has a particular slant on republicanism and its foreign policy tradition, seeing it largely as aggressive and self-seeking (associated with a Machiavellian tradition). For Hont the effect of the French Revolution is the reanimation of the aggressive republic of the republican tradition, the rise of the militant state The significance of the American and French revolutions is that they set in motion the debate between patriotism and cosmopolitanism.

In conclusion, Innes noted that all three authors see this period as a turning point, involving first, a shift from traditional republicanism; the issue of making the republic work with representation was addressed. Second, the state-society relationship was from this time on conceptualised as a particularly complex and problematic one. Society was conceived of as a semi-autonomous organization with its own logic, resistant to being fully controlled by the state though the two are crucially related. People in political power were expected to try to nurture social happiness because that is a form of generally desired good; but the semi-autonomy of society was recognized to make this a rather complex task. This was, thirdly and finally, the period in which the term democracy caught on.

Discussion topics and questions raised during the morning session:

John Dunn addressed the purpose of his book: it was an attempt to bring alive a question that has been effectively killed off by the last 30-40 years of world politics. While perhaps not of consuming interest to individuals in the United Kingdom, the issue is more vivid in other parts of the world. The book was an attempt to try to persuade people to take seriously the question of why this particular term carries extra

political charge. If one presses this question, however, it is difficult to answer convincingly.

Regarding the prominence given to Sieyes by the three texts, Dunn sees Sieyes as important because of his intellectual force in relation to understanding political constraints and possibilities. In his thinking, one can see a process of deep thought about the political possibilities in the modern era. While Sieyes is neither a deep political reflector more generally nor an enticing stylist, there is reason to believe certain things can be seen in Sieyes that are not seen in the reflections of others.

Discussion then moved to a consideration of Dunn's and Stedman Jones' books as concerning themselves with domestic stories, whereas Hont's text is an attempt to try to see things in an "undomestic" way in the late eighteenth century. It was suggested by Dunn, that Stedman Jones' text is an "if only" history. It is about a lost, better past.

Jon Mee mentioned that he had a problem with what he perceived to be Hont's deterministic reading of what republicanism meant. Hont seemed to present republicanism as either resulting in Jacobinism or Sieyes' republicanism. Mee suggested that Stedman Jones' text might open up a different way of thinking about republicanism that does not end in Jacobinism but also not in a Sieyes-like form. He said that it was hard not to see Hont's reading as a paranoid one.

Discussion turned to how states relate to one another internationally. Dunn suggested it might be useful to distinguish between soft republicanism, which is involves sustaining un-oppressive and secure relationships within one political community with no further agenda (and without much reflection on what resources might be needed for dealing with the external world), and hard republicanism, involving a preoccupation with the ability to maintain, defend and expand internal satisfactions within a multi-state setting. It was suggested that Hont was concerned with how nation-states could co-exist without unleashing potential dangers.

On the relationship between trade and international war, Mee suggested that late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century America showed that aggression was not necessary: it carried on international relations as a non-abstinent trading state, but was not aggressive abroad. Others however argued that to the extent this was true, it was a function of geo-politics; America was aggressive in relation to indigeneous peoples.

Michael Drolet mentioned that Sieyes, Tocqueville and others in France in the nineteenth century thought of the commercial nation-state as peaceable -- that the logic of commerce and trade was against warfare. The conceptual logic running through their thinking was that with commerce, when people acquire habits and trade, they work hard and develop into bourgeois citizens. The outcome is peace and prosperity

Philp added that the positive view of commerce is in many ways associated with the Scottish Enlightenment. Additionally, the endorsement of trade but not conquest is evident in Paine's belief that if those elements against the interests of the people -- kings, churches and the aristocracy -- were expunged, commerce would thrive peacefully (in the interest of the people) .

Dunn suggested that the American example is probably exceptional. It is possible to have peaceful domestic life in a crowded world, but a state would be lucky if it found it could have it for a long period of time (from the European perspective the United States looked lucky).

Discussion turned to how far America (and works such as *The Federalist Papers*) generated interest in Britain and France. The question framing the discussion was why people did not recognize the historical significance of what was being done. Different explanations were offered for why there appeared to be an absence of intellectually adequate discussion of *The Federalist Papers* outside the United States until the late twentieth century. Philp mentioned that the apparent absence of writers taking the American experience seriously is surprising because of the active trans-Atlantic correspondence among major political figures (among Jefferson, Paine and Lafayette, and others). But it also was suggested that there was discussion among Europeans on the differences between America – on issues like size, availability of land, the absence of monarchy and aristocracy (landed, etc), and no mob – and Europe. America looked like an exception. Also, perhaps differences in terminology, such as the novelty of federalism as a term of use in America versus confederacy/confederation, made it harder for American ideas to travel.

Participants also noted the anti-democratic context in which the delegates to the Constitutional Convention met, under the shadow of Shay's rebellion. Nonetheless, it was added that the American model loomed large in popular political imagination as a model of progress, harking back to the Baconian dictum that knowledge is power. America was seen as a paragon of improvement by Paine and others (lasting into the nineteenth century), in which individual citizens were increasingly morally and intellectually capable of pressing for and using their rights and liberties. The view from Europe was that America, because of its societal situation, could have democracy, as its citizens did not constitute a mob but an enlightened citizenry.

It was also mentioned that on the topic of American exceptionalism, recent historiography in the United States is moving America into the European context rather than emphasizing its exceptionalism.

Dunn was asked to clarify the term democratization and the importance of the distinction between democracy and democratization for his book. The discussion centered around the idea that democratization carries more hope than democracy. For instance, if looking at things politically – the organization of state power – there is not much hope. But there is more that can be done, and there is a lot going on elsewhere, at other levels, in the working through of what is an attractive ideal. Democratization has an active energizing force. It is this force that is involved in the creative opening up of politics, institutions and practices. While there are not many instances of the term democratization until recently, it captures a way of thinking.

On the implications of this idea, it was suggested by discussants that perhaps in the eighteenth century the push was not so much for democratic popular participation in the institutions of government, as for the chance to participate in economic and other

institutions of civil society. This larger social picture is one in which individual energy is set free.

Discussion turned to the link between social reforms and democracy. Social reforms were seen as aimed at making good citizens who would then participate in society. Education played an important role in this process for a number of political thinkers. Nonetheless, filters were still added (anti-democratic features like the Electoral College in the U.S. Constitution, which Tocqueville supported because of its filtering of popular sentiment).

The concept of representation and its relationship to participation were then discussed. It was mentioned that the Americans always kept in mind the ancient systems of democracy, which could mean self-rule. Participation questions were always raised by reference to this sort of historical example. The question was asked whether for the Americans the concern was not always about government but about what government form is best. Perhaps, in both America and France, the question for some was what form of government does the least damage to a participatory form of society. Sieyes, for instance, is not terribly interested in political participation. Philp suggested that Sieyes' republicanism is almost mathematical. Representation in Sieyes' material does away with much of the democratic impulse that is a presence in others.

Dunn contrasted Babeuf's view on representation with Sieyes', adding that the latter thought about political theory very differently from Babeuf. Sieyes was similar to Hobbes in this respect, in that he thought politics cannot be done as "lived life." There is a collision in that politics requires a high degree of structure and "lived life" is distinguished by the absence of enforced structure. But what is important about Sieyes is that he worked hard to see through a theory of representation and attempted to confront the problem of interest: people are represented by virtue of what they have in common (in the National Assembly).

Discussion topics and questions raised during the afternoon session:

Philp raised methodological issues regarding the relationship between the materials read for the session and the elements being considered in the project as a whole. One feature absent in the morning discussion was the role of the church. For Paine and Sieyes, the church is part of the ancient regime to be swept away. What is interesting for history and for political theory is the extent to which society's central religious institutions, which had been bound with the state, were undergoing massive transformations and being challenged through anti-force (king) and anti-fraud (church) rhetoric. This transformation leaves us with three different radical outcomes. In France, the church is subject to a civil constitution; in America, religious expression is excluded from the state; and in the United Kingdom, there is interesting work to be done as to how the Anglican church acts in response to certain democratic movements.

On the issue of the relationship between political rhetoric and political thought, he said that Paine's and Sieyes' materials and also *The Federalist Papers* were written with a clear sense of audience and were concerned with making a series of arguments

appealing to that audience. They were driven by attempts to achieve certain kinds of rhetorical effects. Several questions arise in this general area: whether conceptual change produces lasting re-framing central to the creation of the modern republic? In other words, can the story be driven conceptually rather than empirically? How far should these historical texts (and their arguments) be considered as thought independent of rhetoric? There are two potential stories to tell in that the story of conceptual change through history is not always the same as the story about who sells the most pamphlets.

It was also noted that no one had really explored the connection between Condorcet and Paine to the extent that Stedman Jones does and that this is a promising line of inquiry. But, as Innes mentioned, during the discussion, one question to be raised is how far these two should be singled out and whether there were not other significant people working on social reform issues/social insurance schemes.

Philp also mentioned that one might ask whether particular practices, regardless of the rhetoric they might employ, instantiate values consistent with democratic forms (i.e. loyalism). What political theory can make of all this is that the history of a particular government and current conceptual vocabulary may diverge from the ideas to which it gestures. Thus, it brings awareness: yes, we may have democratic institutions but they do not possess the cachet we would expect.

Innes asked how the terms aristocracy and democracy figure in American thought at the time of the revolution. Participants suggested that aristocracy was used as a term of abuse in Americans' political vocabulary. When part of a context that was positive, it meant men of ability, a natural aristocracy – but this meant meritocracy, not what the term would have meant in a European location. Wealth itself was not an accusatory term in America, it was not a vector of political complaint. For instance, the U.S. Constitution allowed for vast material inequalities but not titles.

More generally, aristocracy does appear in people's competitive political discourse, but it is not a form of identification. Almost no one says about themselves that they are aristocrats, whereas that was going on it Europe (and still is). In American thinking, there was no ideological defense of privilege as such. It may be because aristocracy also was just less of an issue in America. Aristocracy was tied not just to wealth and political power but also to land, and the open land in America created a completely different situation from that in Europe. The term aristocracy did not correspond to anything structurally as it did in the European context.

Discussion focused again on the question of why people did not recognize the importance of the changes occurring in America. It was mentioned that it was not the case that America was ignored. There was an active exchange of letters reflecting a knowledge of American everyday life and knowledge about politics was rather widespread. There was a trans-Atlantic culture apart from political circles. It was then offered that perhaps it was not that Europeans did not recognize the importance of what was happening – but that what they could get out of the American experience could not actually be applied in Europe.

Participants also discussed the differing reactions of Jefferson and Paine to happenings in France in 1789. It was mentioned that looking at the material

composed during this time involves examining actors' responses in real time, raising the issue of the relationship between political arguments as quarrelling words and political thinking as something higher.

Discussion moved back to the political use of the term aristocracy in light of anti-Jacobinism. Innes suggested that both the aristocracy and the church reacted to events during this period redefining their missions for the nineteenth century, in this way changing the nature of the challenge facing those who wished to criticize them.

Anne Simonin produced Ferdinand Brunot (ed.), *Histoire de la langue française* (Tome IX), 1937, as a source of information on French uses of this terminology.. (Among other things, with reference back to the morning's discussion of the term 'democratisation', it was noted from Brunot's account that 'aristocratiser' and even 'desaristocratiser' – terms not now current -- were words in use in revolutionary France).

On the issue of the relationship between elites and wisdom, discussion turned to Paine's relationship with the political elite in America. It was mentioned that the elite knew they were using the same language as Paine but for different purposes. One difference between the two was that for Paine, wisdom was everywhere, whereas for Jefferson, Washington and others, it was a property of elites who were controlling the system in a fairly well-organized manner. The federal convention was an elite gathering but relied on pretending it was not the elite in control. This was a way in which this group could co-exist with Paine, tolerating him while not embracing him. This issue may also relate to the distinction between democracy and democratization: democracy is knowable whereas democratization is a process. While for Paine, truth emerged through the exchange of opinion, the elites believed they knew the truth and they would run things on that basis. For Paine, it was important to go to the coffeehouses and plug into the process (the exchange of ideas) from which truth emerges.

If one looks at those involved in the American and French revolutions, its leaders may look as though they emerge from a system of meritocracy but those individuals in the end (under closer examination) appear to be the aristocracy and nobility. Although in America, a political aristocracy existed, it was not a card-carrying aristocracy. Yet, even though there was not an aristocracy (as it was understood in Europe), the elites were still controlling the game in America.

On the different uses of the term aristocracy, when the term was used negatively its target was not always aristocracy per se. There was a moment when the aristocracy became associated with promoting its own private interest. It was when the term aristocracy alone was enough to mean the pursuit of private interest that aristocrats became a target. In other words, for a time it was possible to be an aristocrat and a patriot, though in time, an aristocrat was seen as detrimental to the public good. People with titles were seen as not acting in the public interest and were denounced as factional groups. Also, "the people" became an antonym of aristocracy.

Terms like aristocracy are important for understanding how terminology shapes ideas of democracy. Innes mentioned that democracy for instance today refers to a political form and aristocracy refers to a social class – this was not a distinction the

eighteenth century made. She argued that in the eighteenth century 'aristocracy' meant what we now term 'oligarchy'; it was not equivalent to 'nobility', though the nobility might be perceived to be operating as an aristocracy.

Returning to the Stedman Jones text, Mee mentioned that although Stedman Jones' text may be counterfactual it still comes out of a political situation and that it appears to be an effort to recover a genealogy for the Left that is post-Marxist. It allows us to think about another tradition not carried on but occluded by Marx (or decided against by Marx and others because it made room for commercial society).

Innes suggested that one might pause on the Stedman Jones' story in that the social insurance issue had more advocates than just Condorcet and Paine, and was more ambiguous in its social meanings than Stedman Jones conveys. Efforts to develop a role for friendly societies, which Stedman Jones passes over fairly quickly, involved many people in a complex process, still not fully charted, in practice. Moreover, one issue that was vexing at the time was the debate over whether social schemes should be locally or centrally controlled: both Condorcet and Paine seem to have thought central control of such schemes unproblematic. She added that when looking for ancestors of social democracy, we might therefore wish to look more broadly.

Dunn mentioned that his and Stedman Jones' texts convey a disenchantment with democracy. For his part, Dunn said his was intended to wake people up, in particular to try to show what happens to political terminology in a way that makes people think more critically about the way they think about politics. The point being that there must be something better than this, and we must understand why it has come out the way it has.

Discussion then turned to political thought in the nineteenth century. It was noted that Hont's text leapfrogs the nineteenth century, instead trying to make a connection between eighteenth-century discussions of globalization with similar discussions more recently. The nineteenth century was seen by several participants as a particularly difficult period to study and a period in which a consistent story is difficult to locate. Dunn said he had a strong sense of "losing the thread in the nineteenth century." The issue was raised as to why there appears to be a paucity of great political thinkers and a deficit of comprehension in this period. In other words, there seemed to be few thinkers who really understood what was going on around them, such as understanding what were the big choices being made by those in positions to make them. Dunn said that good political theory requires a high degree of integration and that getting it right is difficult. It seems that in the nineteenth century, large scale misjudgment was going on.

John Robertson asked whether it was the French Revolution that broke the eighteenth century thread, making it more difficult to hold a common discussion.

Dunn mentioned that one could think of political thought as getting warmer and colder in particular decades. The decade of 1770 was a warm one in which people were seeing further and a lot of intellectual headway was being made. In the following decades, while there may have been many important topics of reflection coming up, there may also have been too many, causing confusion. It might be the

case that people lost a cognitive grip because the setting was too unstable and the changes taking place, too drastic. The level of political comprehension in the world today does not appear very high, when compared with biology, for instance.

Harry Dickinson asked whether democratization itself was not at the root of this issue. He suggested that the fragmentation of interests contrasts with the situation in the past in which only a small number of individuals dealt with a small number of problems (and thus the thread is easier to identify). Post-French Revolution and into the nineteenth century, political thought is much harder to grasp comprehensively because thought goes in so many different directions. Democratization allows people to follow different channels.

Dunn said that quantitatively the scale is indeed larger. One can look at the history of political thought and say certain thinkers do know the score and others do not. It is the case that democratization means more of the human content of politics is on the table. Hobbes, however, did not worry about the fact that most people saw the world completely differently from him. He defied a large part of others' experience. Today's Hobbes would have to develop her confidence; to gain cognitive control in the face of vocal others is a heroic feat. Democratization is a challenge for anyone who would be today's Hobbes.

Participants discussed the extent to which political controversy in the nineteenth century crystallized into systematic forms of ideologies, such that when an individual stated a position, one could deduce from that where they stood on others. Independent thinking was not needed much. The degree of constraint has loosened particularly for today's thinkers, but it is difficult to find where to start or to decide how to position oneself so as to be able to offer a commanding synoptic vision of the world as a whole.

Discussion turned to the fact that thinkers constructing the modern republic did not have to confront theological issues, and it was suggested that the evangelical surge of the nineteenth century presents a puzzle. The question was why in the first half or first third of the nineteenth century religious issues suddenly loom much larger than they had. This raised the problem of how to come to terms with the nineteenth century in that much happened that makes it look different, but it is not clear that we have yet understood that difference and understood how it emerges from the eighteenth century context. It was also mentioned that particularly outside Europe, democratization and religious inflammation often go hand-in-hand: perhaps in this respect nineteenth-century Europe was not so unusual.

Future meeting plans:

The next meeting will be held March 23-24, and the theme will be "Claims of Rights." The sessions will include French historians and will deal with relationships among high political theory, political rhetoric and political practice. Participants will be asked to prepare and circulate prior to the meeting statements deriving from their work dealing with these themes. Also, the group is discussing the possibility of creating a web site.

Innes, in concluding remarks, mentioned that the larger idea of the project is that it should grow organically. She said that it would be good if some of the same people returned, so as to make it possible to build on knowledge of past ideas discussed. Moreover, organizers are very open to pursuing ideas that surface and which participants may be interested in examining further. In short, beyond the "Claims of Rights" sessions, the agenda is open.

Scribe: Jessica Kimpell