

BOOK REVIEW

Matthew Roberts. *Democratic Passions: The Politics of Feeling in British Popular Radicalism, 1809–48*

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Joining the growing body of works in the history of emotions, in *Democratic Passions: The Politics of Feeling in British Popular Radicalism, 1809–48*, Matthew Roberts reexamines early nineteenth-century British radicalism through the use of emotion by key radical figures in the shaping of their political message in the public sphere. Histories of popular radicalism in the period (specifically the 1810s through 1840s) have often continued the assumptions and understandings of earlier scholars that there was a shift toward rationalization in response to the upheaval before the turn of the century, which led to a political movement stripped of emotion and passion. Roberts does not dismiss the shift, but instead argues that this rationalization was an affective, performative aspect of radical politics, used with intention, by the figures of his study. Roberts does not seek to delve into the emotions themselves, but rather each chapter is a case study of an individual's use of certain rules of feeling in their rhetoric (7).

To set the groundwork for his study, Roberts uses specific sets of feelings rules, which he has identified as ascetic radicalism and sentimental radicalism. Ascetic radicalism focused on rationality and the tempering of emotion as a way of advocating for working-class participation in politics. Sentimental radicalism, on the other hand, was “an affective politics that not only appealed to intense feelings, but often sought to exacerbate those feelings, and channel them towards radical goals” (9). Roberts uses these terms throughout the chapters as a way of further outlining how each leader defined themselves and their arguments, though there are times when the overlap between the two can become confusing.

Four chapters are devoted to figures that Roberts argues created some form of ascetic radicalism. He begins with William Cobbett, who stood firmly against any ideas of extreme rationalization within radical politics and instead argued that it was the politically corrupt elite that were cold and unfeeling. Roberts argues that Cobbett used expressions of indignation and disgust to highlight the hypocrisy and cruelty of Old Corruption. More so than some of the figures in the following chapters, Cobbett had to “walk an affective tightrope on behalf of the poor—a man of feeling, but not a creature of his passions,” (30) a familiar hardship for many working-classes in the period. The next two chapters look at Richard Carlile and Robert Owen. Carlile's political message was based in pure rationalization, though Roberts argues that it was doomed to fail, as it was affective and not based either within the reality of the radicals as a whole, or even in Carlile's own life and work. The third ascetic radical is Robert Owen, who Roberts contends sought a form of rationalization intending to bring happiness to all, and harmony between classes.

Chapters 4 and 5 are focused on sentimental radicalism, using Richard Oastler and J.R. Stephens as case studies. The interdisciplinary methodologies Roberts uses throughout

the book really shine in these chapters, most clearly in using the framework of the Gothic to explore Oastler's use of drama, theatricality, and romanticism in his fight for factory reform and against the New Poor Law. Oastler purposely evoked emotion in his speeches and in the crafting of his rhetoric, weeping in sorrow or in anger, using disgust and horror in his descriptions of the elite who held the working classes in "bondage" (136). He evoked images of hellish workplaces for children and lamented the loss of their souls to purgatory, described skeletal poor bereft of their humanity, cannibalistic factory owners rife with greed, and even produced material evidence to his audiences like straps used for discipline. These uses of shock value, very much in tune with a Victorian Industrial Gothic, Roberts argues, ended up being "counterproductive, provoking anger and resentment in those he was trying to induce to mend their ways" (138). Oastler's extreme affective politics certainly drew in crowds, but overwhelmed the senses, and left him vulnerable to accusations of being overdramatic and conveying conflicting messages.

Roberts shows similar tactics informing the emotions in chapter 5, where he argues that Methodist minister and "political preacher" J. R. Stephens used an affective politics from the pulpit, where his accusations against the propertied classes sought to evoke fear and shame. Stephens imagined himself a prophet, with a calling to speak out against what he saw as political injustices and empower the working classes. The sentimental use of emotion by each of these radicals did not set aside their passions, though sought to use them strategically as an affective politics weaponized against their opposition.

Chapter 6 moves back into ascetic radicalism, a little later in the period, focusing on William Lovett and the early Chartist movement. Roberts argues that the movement was in part shaped around the control of feelings and how to use them in the right time and place. The majority of moral-force Chartists were focused on education, improvement, and the cultivation of a rational and respected voting working class, which Lovett hoped to move out of the pub and into the coffee shop and debate club. The Chartist movement as a whole, and Lovett individually, had to contend with the accusation of fanning the flames of anger and violence of working-class radicals.

The last main chapter continues in discussion of the Chartist movement, but the methodology takes a different direction. In chapter 7, Roberts analyzes the public rivalry between Daniel O'Connell and Feargus O'Connor. Specifically, he argues that Chartists used anger toward O'Connell, carefully and purposely expressed as indignation, as a way of shaping how their political movement was viewed by elites. Their anger was shaped into a sedate and mature emotion, "a higher sensibility that transcended mere anger and rage and thereby demonstrated the fitness of working men for the franchise" (227–28). Roberts acknowledges the cultural and political differences between the Chartist movement in England and the Repeal movement in Ireland, though that takes a back seat to the similarities and uses of affective expression in the public sphere.

Roberts's use of multiple frameworks and methodologies is skillful and engaging, giving the work relevance well beyond the histories of politics or emotions, done particularly well in his chapters on sentimental radicalism. The shift in the final chapter to explore anger between the Chartists and O'Connell lacked some depth, which could have been remedied with more context for each side, though that would have required more than a single chapter. As a scholar of class, I also would have liked to have seen Roberts more fully address his own call in the introduction to recover more nonelite voices. Overall, *Democratic Passions* is an important foray into the emotional side of politics in the period, opening up new questions about familiar figures and topics ripe for new examination.