

The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England

Review Number:

530

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 June, 2006

Author:

Matthew McCormack

ISBN:

0719070546

Date of Publication:

2005

Price:

£55.00

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

Karen Harvey

In Georgian England, 'manly independence' was the most important qualification for political virtue and thus for electoral citizenship. Connoting a particularly English libertarianism, this 'independence' infused a man's political, social and gendered being, and manifested itself in sincere and straightforward forms of bodily presentation and behaviour. Thus, 'politics and masculinity were inseparable in this period: manliness was important in political situations, but politics was also central to the business of being a man' (p. 33). In exploring the relationship between gendered ideas of masculine behaviour and concepts of the political individual, this important book fills a yawning gap in both political history and gender history of the eighteenth century. Some works have focused on individual political actors from a gendered perspective (notably on John Wilkes), but accounts which speak generally about men outside the political elite (as this book claims to) are rare for this period. Though the important work of Anna Clark has achieved this for the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there really is very little work on gendered Georgian politics and masculinity. This book promises to be important for eighteenth-century political history; certainly for gender history of this period (an area on which I am more qualified to comment) this is a turning point. It is a curious historiographical feature that a thorough and lengthy engagement with Joan Scott's programmatic statements about gender and politics of 1986 should not be made for men until Matthew McCormack's book of 2005. *The Independent Man* is therefore very welcome. This book makes the case that the key question in Georgian political life was who was qualified for the vote, and that the decisions were based upon an individual's claims to independence. Crucially, this was a deeply gendered idea, although the importance of gender to independence changed over time. After a short positioning introduction, the book falls into two parts. Chapters 1 and 2 establish contemporary understandings of independence, addressing thematically the issues of political virtue and political performance respectively. In political theory, 'independence' was the only condition in which an individual was free from obligation and in which that individual could act freely

and with virtue. This was obtainable only by heads of patriarchal household. Such classical republican ideals of political virtue melded with late-eighteenth-century languages of feminine sentimental domesticity, reinforcing the authority – and independence – of the male household head. Political entitlement was thereby equated with 'the stations of husband, father and householder' (p. 27). In early-nineteenth-century conduct texts for both working and middling readers, men were counseled how to live an 'independent' life. This manly condition was thus woven through men's domestic, social, and leisure activities; and so, McCormack argues, 'politics was ... central to the business of being a man' (p. 33). In a fascinating section, McCormack describes the ways in which 'independence' had to be performed through bodily behaviour. In the theatre of Georgian politics, the political identity of the 'independent' man was thus formed from posture, speech, dress and declamatory style. Elections consisted of a series of ritualised moments in which the political man could enact his 'independence': a condition that McCormack refers to as 'a lived role' (p. 49).

In the second part of the book, chapters 3–8 construct a chronological narrative of the changing meanings of 'independence' from the British Civil Wars to the First Reform Act of 1832. The key shift was in who was thought to be capable of 'independence': once a state accessible only to legislators and those of rank, it came to consist of inner qualities considered critical for 'the electoral citizenry, and even the national repository of 'manhood' itself' (p. 56). In this way, gender became more rather than less important in discussions of political obligation and virtue. A swift analysis in chapter 3 of English politics from James Harrington's neo-classical *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656) to William Pitt the Elder and the Seven Years War (1756–63) is attuned to the changing meanings of 'independence', but prioritises the consistencies in this 100-year period. 'Martial valour, patriotism and political efficacy' (p. 76), available to only those of property and rank, remained key throughout. In this period, '[c]onstitutional action could be based only upon a political personality that was independent: the condition of non-obligation in which manly virtue was possible' (p. 76). In the early decades of the eighteenth century, it was tied closely to 'a 'Country' culture that privileged property, rural virtue, straightforward manliness and personal autonomy'. Independence was also closely aligned with patriotism (p. 72).

The period 1760–1832 is given more thorough attention in chapters 4–8. Indeed, for a study of 'Georgian England' this book gives an unexplained amount of space to the late-Georgian period: only chapter 3 considers the period prior to 1760. The intention is clearly to construct a prequel to the 1832 Reform Act, and this is achieved most securely in the latter half of the book. As McCormack claims, '[t]he manly, independent citizen-voter – such an important figure in Victorian politics – was a creation of the last third of the eighteenth century' (p. 80). The political uncertainty after the accession of George III in October 1760 led the Whigs and their supporters to radicalise oppositional politics in part by detaching manly independence from the 'Country' culture. The resultant freeborn Englishman was still a gentleman, though, and it was only through the effects of the American Revolution that manly independence could be legitimately claimed by the electorate as well as their representatives.

The 1780s and 1790s were crucial decades in what McCormack refers to as the 'shift in style and psychology of English politics' in this period (p. 105). Independence became more socially accessible, defined more in terms of 'inner' qualities, and connected in various ways to the idealised figures of the man of simplicity, the man of gentility, and the man of rights. In this vein, independence was linked to radicalism. Not surprisingly, for anti-Jacobins 'independence' was at first contested, yet from the early years of the nineteenth century this radical quality of independence was revived. McCormack here questions the historical right's recent conflation of patriotism (for country), loyalism (for governor) and social consensus. The later phase of anti-Jacobin patriotism was distinct from earlier discussions of obedience to a governor, McCormack insists; this rejuvenated the independent man, a character long compatible with that of patriot. The final two substantive chapters of this book show the significance of 'independence' in nineteenth-century reform debates. Though given particularly early-nineteenth-century inflections – from domestic ideology and chivalry, for example – it was an eighteenth-century notion of independence that held sway in the years immediately prior to the 1832 Act. In contrast to Whiggish narratives of greater inclusion, we see how reforms were predicated on exclusion: 'The reformers of 1832 – like so many of their predecessors – believed that politics should be a world only for independent men' (p. 198).

Methodologically this is a convincing account of the concept of independence. The book draws on sources ranging from political treatises, diaries and newspapers to caricatures, novels and songs. This is a cultural history, then, that explores the ways in which ideas about 'independence' shifted over time and through a number of different types of evidence. The relatively narrow focus on just one concept guards against some of the problems of depth and attention to the specificity of sources that such a project may have faced had the focus been conceptually (as well as evidentially) broad. McCormack is thus able to achieve a thorough and convincing analysis of subtle transformations in language across a broad cultural canvas.

Indeed, McCormack's handling of change over time is nuanced. On the one hand, there are startling continuities. The work of J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner, both of whom stress the longevity of the classically derived model of political action of virtue and corruption, is important here. McCormack argues that '[w]here the questions of political virtue, action and entitlement were concerned, 'independence' was the dominant consideration and the one that endured well beyond the early Georgian debate on manners' (p. 57). Independence, and the classical political model of which it was a part, endured into the Victorian period. On the other hand, however, the terms on which 'independence' was constructed transformed. Prior to mid-century, 'independence' was built on landed property and rank: virtue and freedom from corruption required the necessary preconditions of wealth and status that freed men from indigence and obligation (p. 76). In this sense, it was a value of the squirearchy. Increasingly, however, citizenship could be founded upon

smaller freehold property, a receptive sensibility and simple virtues such as rurality, industry and abstemiousness. As such, independence began to be equated less with property and rank, and more with masculinity itself (p. 100).

Perhaps the key argument of this book is that after mid century, 'citizenship would continue to be conceived in terms of virtue and obligation, but it would move from a paradigm of rank to one of gender' (p. 77). McCormack points out that only with the Third Reform Act of 1832 is political 'independence' equated with manhood, rather than elite masculinity. He concludes that '[o]ver two centuries, therefore, 'independence' shifts from being the apogee of manliness to becoming equated with maleness' (p. 208). This account of gendered citizenship skillfully combines endurance and transformation: as McCormack puts it, the book considers 'both broad traditions of usage and long-term shifts in meaning' (p. 56).

As a contribution to the history of masculinity, McCormack develops our diachronic understanding of various styles of manhood. Currently this field is dominated by politeness, and in much published work politeness is equated with the modernity of eighteenth-century England. However, McCormack is adamant that independence was not a 'traditional' style vying with newer, more dominant, qualities (p. 57). 'Mid-Georgian England', McCormack argues, 'would have a 'Country' political culture, not a polite one, in which the independent man would take centre stage' (p. 67). One important contribution of this book is to focus on

less obviously colourful male characters than the polite man of coffee houses or the fop of the town, making others – the patriotic country squire or the backbench Tory, for example – the subjects of a gendered analysis.

While making claims for the wide reach of independence, this book is also sensitive to the way independence excluded certain groups. Though these changed over time, but women and poor, non-English or homosexual men were excluded. As McCormack writes, 'independence' was 'the dominant masculine ideal of the day' (p. 34). In this way, *The Independent Man* seems to owe a debt to Robert Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity. Connell's argument that a hegemonic masculinity exists through which some men gain dominance, to which many men aspire and against which other men are measured has been remarkably influential in this field. This is echoed in McCormack's analysis of independence as the most exalted manly virtue in the political realm. "Dependence' upon a patron, an employer, a landlord, or the parish was enough to call an individual's manliness and freedom into question, and could undermine a claim to political legitimacy' (p. 13). But some of the criticisms of Connell's work (notably by Alexandra Shepard) raise questions here. If manliness equates with independence, and (at least in the first half of the eighteenth century, and perhaps later) this is linked to status and property, then surely most men cannot be independent? And if this is the case, then these men cannot make claims to manliness. This claim seems untenable, given what we know about the formation of gendered identity for men more generally in the early decades of the century (from Randolph Trumbach, for example). My point is not to undermine McCormack's key point that in political debates about citizenship 'independence' is crucial, but to suggest that the reader needs to bear in mind the limitations of the book: it opens up debates about political manliness (something we know little about), but clearly there were other legitimate ways to be manly throughout this period. One important question that might be addressed as the field develops is the relationship between these rival (and apparently class-based) ideals of manliness.

Matthew McCormack's intention in this book is to make a step towards 'a new narrative in English political history, where gendered subjectivity is at the centre of the political historian's enquiry' (p. 9). Certainly, this book successfully brings together recent cultural histories of citizenship with gender history, demonstrating how politics and manliness were mutually dependent in the eighteenth century. It promises to shift debates in British political history, and will certainly help revive the political history of Georgian England for a new generation of historians.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/530#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2940>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>