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Debating societies

DUTHILLE Rémy



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Abstract

Debating societies became well-established institutions in London and provincial cities, catering for the taste for public debate among the lower and middling sorts. Topics could be frivolous, but when societies debated politics, religion, and the economy they were felt to voice threateningly radical opinions. When the reaction against the French Revolution hardened, public political debate became impossible and societies were outlawed. Despite those chequered fortunes they served as places for self-improvement for many men of limited formal education and provided forums for a broad part of the population, including women.

Debating societies were commercial ventures that provided the middling and lower orders with arenas of sociability where a broad range of subjects, both frivolous and serious (moral, social, political, economic, religious, aesthetic) were debated and voted on in public. They can be understood as institutions of the public sphere going further down the social scale than gentlemen's clubs or coffeehouses.

They developed in London, and later in provincial cities, in the second half of the eighteenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, informal discussion groups in taverns had turned into discussion clubs by establishing their own rules and membership dues. Some, in turn, transformed into debating societies in the early 1770s and moved into dedicated rooms. They were run for profit by managers who charged entrance fees (typically sixpence), and advertised debates in the press and in posters on the streets. Debating societies usually met weekly or twice weekly. Two questions would be debated each night; when a topic proved popular, the discussion could be prolonged for one or more nights. Large, commercial debating societies should be distinguished from debating clubs like the Tusculan School of Norwich (gentlemen's clubs comprising few members who mostly read orations prepared in advance, admitted a few visitors and did not advertise their activities). There was overlap in some cases, though: the Select Society of Edinburgh (1754), with its membership of landowners and lawyers, was exclusive and gentlemanly yet rather numerous.¹ Debating societies were distinct from clubs for at least three reasons. Their primary purpose was to promote discussion; most debating societies accepted women while clubs did not; finally, debating societies did not have members but customers and they were open to the general public. Their success is probably due to the public's taste for public speaking and oratory; and to the managers' savvy choice of topics appealing to various intellectual appetites. They promised 'popular rational entertainment'² ; if the two dimensions were probably often conjoined they could part ways: they provided political, diplomatic, and literary-cultural debates to those bent on self-improvement and/or proud of their civic capacity; they also offered lighter subjects on fashion or gossip for those seeking entertainment. An additional attraction was that the debating societies offered opportunities for discussing topics rarely, if ever, treated elsewhere, such as deism and the criticism of Christianity; Mary Thale suggests that the danger of prosecution for blasphemy must have contributed to the excitement of debates on deism in 1754.³

Development and Retreat

What little we know about the activities of the debating societies comes through the very few publications originating from the societies themselves, testimonies of some attendees, spy reports (in the 1790s), and especially advertisements in the press.

Debating Societies were a continuous presence in London from the 1740s to 1792, an episodic though highly contentious one later. Some institutions survived for a few nights or a

few seasons; others were a fixture of city life and became part of the 'sights of London' that visitors wanted to see. The most famous institutions were in London: the Westminster Forum, Coachmakers' Hall, and especially the Robin Hood Society. Imitators of the Robin Hood sprung up in Liverpool in 1768, Dublin by 1771, Limerick⁴, Edinburgh in 1773 (Fawcett 220), Birmingham in 1774.⁵ Those societies seem to have been independent and it is unclear whether they had formal links with the metropolitan society. Other societies existed in Birmingham, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Manchester, Norwich, Reading, Edinburgh, Paisley, Dublin, and probably elsewhere. There were some ten debating societies (and three debating clubs) in eighteenth-century Scotland.⁶

The analysis of press notices has enabled Donna T. Andrew to chart the growth of debating societies in London and to highlight the variety of subjects discussed from 1776 to 1799.⁷

The number of London societies remained stable until 1779, then shot up and reached a peak in 1780 with 35 institutions. At that date debating societies drew crowds (from 400 to 1200 spectators per night at the Robin Hood Society) and venues catering for women opened such as La Belle Assemblée and the Female Parliament, where only women were allowed to speak.

⁸ In 1781, a crackdown on Sunday debating led by Bishop Porteus provoked a fall in the number of societies, which remained rather stable (between 5 and 10) until 1792. In the second half of the century, debating societies constantly discussed religious issues (salvation, the afterlife) and political and international current affairs (the fortunes of war, prospects of war and alliances, the latest parliamentary debates, comparisons between leaders, typically Fox and North in the 1770s, then Fox and Pitt from the 1780s on). Probably in order to meet demand and please mixed audiences and couples who frequented debating societies, an increasing number of nights were devoted to social and family issues like marriage and courtship, with questions like: 'Which is the more eligible for a wife, a lady of fortune without education, or a lady of education without fortune?'⁹

In the 1790s debating societies suffered from governmental repression and loyalist harassment.¹⁰ The Royal Proclamation against seditious writings and meetings in May 1792 was the signal for repression against booksellers, tavern-keepers and debating societies suspected of backing seditious writers like Thomas Paine. The government suspected debating societies to be 'Jacobin' and as dangerous as the London Corresponding Society and other plebeian societies. There were indeed similarities and links, as some debating societies had distinctly radical, Paineite leanings and several LCS leaders were noted orators there, especially John Thelwall at Coachmakers' Hall and John Gale Jones who founded the British Forum in 1804. However, the LCS and similar plebeian societies were definitely not debating societies. Though debating was plentiful in the LCS, it was not its prime objective. The LCS was a not-for-profit structure financed by the members' dues and it diffused its political and ideological agenda; conversely, debating societies were for-profit societies charging customers entrance fees and they did not advocate particular political views (so as not to antagonize any potential customer). Superficial similarities between the LCS and debating societies, the presence of high-profile 'Jacobins' in some debating societies, and especially the fear of any public debate among the rabble, contributed to arousing loyalists' anxieties and convincing them that debating societies, as potential engines of Jacobinism, must be rooted out. Landlords were pressured or frightened out of leasing their premises to debating societies, so much so that there was no debate until October 1793; despite Thelwall's

attempts, no political topics were touched on in 1794. The acquittal of Thomas Hardy and the LCS leaders in November encouraged political discussion in societies such as the Westminster Forum, but their activities were severely curtailed by the Sedition and Treason Acts in December 1795 which imposed licensing and placed debating societies at the mercy of constables. Non-political discussions continued but societies were dissolved following a professedly anti-Jacobin piece of legislation in May 1799.

Topics ranged from the frivolous to the political and the religious. Managers tried to cater to the public taste; some societies specialized in more political topics while others eschewed them. Debates closely followed the burning issues of the day, from John Wilkes's fight with the government to the American War, comparisons between Pitt and Fox (a classic), foreign affairs, the Regency Crisis and the French Revolution. Also debated were issues pertaining to citizenship such as women's suffrage (in female debating societies in 1780 and elsewhere). Though it is very difficult to generalise, some societies had a reputation for daring anti-government criticism, but bold assertions of the common people's worth, anti-aristocratic diatribes, and radical opinions (e.g. against the American War and in support of the Insurgents) were tempered by conservative opinions on other fields (against welfare to the undeserving poor; for traditional gender roles).

Social composition and the issue of respectability

The sixpence entry fee made debating societies affordable to artisans and tradesmen, excluding only the very poor. They attracted masses of men, and some women, of low and middling social status. Debates could be boisterous as beer and liquor were on sale. However, managers were concerned with respectability, as is testified by many elements: the rituals of public speaking arbitrated by a president, many rules on impolite behaviour (including fines for swearing or interrupting speakers), the removal from taverns into dedicated rooms, and the presence of women, who were allowed to attend debates and speak (as in Dublin and Birmingham) (Money 39; Powell 368). Debating societies offered 'rational entertainment' to those who could not afford higher forms, such as a night at the theatre. They could be places of self-improvement for men with little formal learning. They served as schools for rhetoric and clearing houses for news and information. Though the middling and lower ranks of society which formed the bulk of the auditors set the tone, men of higher social standing such as Edmund Burke, Oliver Goldsmith or James Boswell also attended – once, occasionally or for a season but not permanently – in order to deliver speeches and hone their rhetorical skills. There was a clear link between debating societies, elocution and eloquence. There was a market for the taste for eloquence. Elocution masters, and even schools thrived. 'There is some evidence, as well, that schools for the teaching of elocution set up debating societies as arenas in which their pupils could gain practice while publicly displaying their facility (Andrew, ed., *London Debating Societies, 1776-1799*, 'Introduction', viii). A major London debating society was the 'School of Eloquence' at Carlyle House. Debating societies catered for the taste for eloquence which manifested itself in the success of collections of parliamentary speeches such as William Hazlitt's *Eloquence of the British Senate* (1808) and

in the numerous discussions of the eloquence (and not just substantive arguments) of leading MPs in coffeehouses and in the press.¹¹ People flocked to debating societies because they wanted to hear good oratory, and to hear discussions of current political oratory in the Commons. Debating societies also discussed the status of eloquence itself, broaching issues like the links between eloquence and truth (Coachmakers' Hall, 1779); and in 1797, the Ciceronian School asked: 'Ought Eloquence to be encouraged in an enlightened and civilized state?' (Andrew, ed., *London Debating Societies, 1776-1799*, debates n°306, 2109)

The most famous debating society was the Robin Hood Society. Its origins are obscure; it published its own *History of the Robin Hood Society* (1764) but historians dismiss its claims of a foundation in 1613 or 1650, and prefer a much more recent date in the 1740s.¹² The society met in Butcher's Row (eastern part of the Strand) from 1749 to 1779 and advertised its activities by printed bills posted in the city and by newspapers advertisements. The Robin Hood Society was a well-structured society, with officers, a book of rules, rituals, the publication of questions and summaries of debates. It also had a sense of civic responsibility and commitment to broader society since it gave a quarter of its gross income to charity. Though no formal rule excluded women, their absence and a boisterous all-male sociability were hallmarks of the Robin Hood Society. The society had a reputation for political radicalism in the 1760s and 1770s when Wilkite sentiment was voiced in it; for Mary Thale, 'anti-ministeralism' is a better characterization than 'radicalism' (Thale, 'The Robin Hood Society', 47). The quality of the oratory was derided as execrable by many hostile accounts, but some observers compared it to that practised in Parliament. The oratory, the layout of the debating room, somewhat resembling the House of Commons, and some rules imitated from parliamentary procedure, gave the Robin Hood Society the character of a plebeian parliament.

This occasioned much criticism from those who considered that debating societies, when broaching political subjects, usurped the privileges of parliament and encroached on the preserves of the aristocracy and gentry. The eloquence was also castigated as low and inadequate.¹³ Critics relentlessly mocked the low social, and especially educational, level of the attendees. Representations of debating societies are mostly negative; in the mid-1750s Arthur Murphy (in his comedy *The Apprentice*), Henry Fielding (in the *Covent Garden Journal*, 28 January 1752), and a spate of pamphlets satirized the Robin Hood Society. Graphic satire also mocked debating societies, which had become one of the sights of London and a key site where both the plebs' rowdiness and their political pretensions manifested themselves.

Another area of criticism was the way religion was discussed in debating societies (Thale, 'Deists, Papists and Methodists'). In the Robin Hood Society in the 1750s and 1760, some speakers attacked Christianity as a fraud and praised deism, thus giving plebeian audiences access to deist thought they could not encounter otherwise (for lack of access to the writings of John Toland and others). Although other debaters defended the Church of England and its teachings, the Robin Hood smacked of heterodoxy. It banned religious questions in the mid-1760s; other societies followed course, such as Coachmakers' Hall. In addition to deist or freethinking and orthodox Anglicans, debating societies also accommodated the views of

Catholics and Methodists. Both churches tried to use the societies to proselytize, with more success in the case of Methodists. This state of affairs suggests an important degree of religious toleration and liberty of speech. Mary Thale argues that debating societies offered Methodists opportunities ‘to challenge the climate of mockery, contempt and stereotyping’ (Thale, 'Deists, Papists and Methodists', 346) and make their views known to the broader British public.

Further directions of research

New research can start with mapping the locations of debating societies, in order to find correlations with other urban phenomena such as radical taverns in the 1790s, for instance. Donna Andrew’s recension of press advertisements makes such work possible in London. There is no tally of all provincial debating societies (as opposed to exclusive debating clubs) and their chronology of development. International comparison with colonial America and the early American Republic might illustrate differences in public speaking, perceptions of oratory and mixed audiences, between a parliament-centred and an incipient republican culture.

1. Trevor Fawcett, ‘Eighteenth-Century Debating Societies’, *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (3, no. 3, 1 September 1980), p. 216–229.
2. Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies, 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 119.
3. Mary Thale, ‘Deists, Papists and Methodists at London Debating Societies, 1749–1799’, *History* (86, no. 283, 1 July 2001), p. 332.
4. Martyn J. Powell, ‘“Beef, Claret and Communication”: Convivial Clubs in the Public Sphere, 1750-1800’ in James Kelly and Martyn Powell (eds), *Clubs and Societies in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2010), p. 368.
5. John Money, ‘Taverns, Coffee Houses and Clubs: Local Politics and Popular Articulacy in the Birmingham Area, in the Age of the American Revolution’, *Historical Journal* (14, 1971), p.15-47, p. 17 and 37.
6. Davis Dunbar McElroy, *The Literary Clubs and Societies of Eighteenth Century Scotland: and Their Influence on the Literary Productions of the Period from 1700 to 1800* (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1952),
7. Donna T. Andrew (ed.), *London Debating Societies, 1776-1799*, *London Record Society* 30 (London: London Record Society, 1994).
8. Mary Thale, ‘Women in London Debating Societies in 1780’, *Gender & History* 7, no. 1 (1 April 1995), p. 5–24 (<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0424.1995.tb00011.x>).
9. Debate on 27 March, 1788, Coachmakers Hall, n°1336. 'London debates: 1788' in Donna T. Andrew (ed.), *London Debating Societies: 1776-1799* (London: London Record Society, 1994), p. 216-246. *British History Online* (<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/london-record-soc/vol30/pp216-246> [accessed 7 May 2019]).
10. Mary Thale, ‘London Debating Societies in the 1790s’, *Historical Journal* (32, 1989), p. 57–86.
11. Christopher Reid, *Imprison'd Wranglers: The Rhetorical Culture of the House of Commons 1760-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 11-14.
12. Mary Thale, ‘The Robin Hood Society: Debating in 18th Century London’, *London Journal* (22, no. 1, 1997), p.36.

13. Among many attacks, see for instance ‘Memoirs of the Porter-Parliament, or Debates of the Robin Hood Society’ in *London Chronicle*, 8 August 1769.

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Further Reading

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