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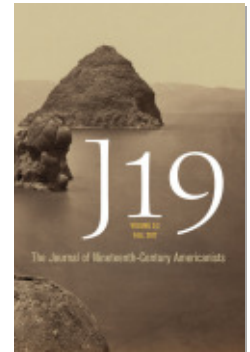
## Democracy and Disgust

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University Press, 2003). Charlotte Canning addresses issues of race in *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005). Carl Bode's *The American Lyceum: Town Meeting of the Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956) is still useful.

12. Rieser estimates the number of participants in the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles over the years in *The Chautauqua Moment*, 167–68.

13. Noble, "The Chautauqua as a New Factor in American Life," 99.

## Democracy and Disgust

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In a 1794 letter to Thomas Dwight, Fisher Ames expressed disgust at the proliferating "cancer" of the Democratic-Republican Societies. Ames characterized the societies as the "root of an extracted cancer, which will soon eat again and destroy. Any taint of that poison, left behind, will infect the seemingly cured body; therefore the knife should now be used to cut off the tubercles."<sup>1</sup> This was not the only time that Ames employed metaphors of ulcers, cancers, and open wounds to describe popular enactment within the body politic, and he was not alone among Federalists in recurring to metaphors of bodily disfiguration to describe the radical democratizing undercurrents of the 1790s. "Our disease is democracy," Ames wrote, "it is not the skin that festers—our very bones are carious and their marrow blackens with gangrene."<sup>2</sup>

Edmund Burke mobilized a similar host of metaphors in his antirevolutionary writings. For Burke, the French Revolution was about more than the replacement of royal political authority with democratic republicanism. It initiated "a system which is by its essence inimical to all other governments," not just the legal institutions of the state but the manifold subordination of human conduct to "the discipline of social life."<sup>3</sup> This democratic disorder was felt "throughout all the relations of life . . . [It] inverted the natural order in all things, setting up high in the air what is required to be low on the ground."<sup>4</sup> Like Ames, Burke invoked natural disgust to defend the inherited social order from the incursions of the "swinish multitude." Their widely shared depiction of democracy as a monstrous violation of the order, proportion, and norms dictated by God or nature suggests an inner entailment between democracy and disgust in the conservative writing from this revolutionary era and beyond.

The conservative pairing of democracy with disgust often drew on the canonical association of political order with health and popular politics with disease in Western political thought and its governing metaphor of the body politic, a metaphor “which assigned a proper place to each person and group so that all could perform functions in maintaining the whole.”<sup>5</sup> According to Livy, Agrippa Menenius Lanatus invoked the fable of the body politic to bring the seceding plebs of Aventine back into the reigning order of Rome. Thomas Hobbes mobilized it during the English Civil War when he analogized the powers that tend to “weaken” or “dissolve” the “Common-wealth” with “diseases of a natural body,” “biles and scabs,” “Worms,” “Wounds,” and “Wens.”<sup>6</sup> During the constitutional ratifying debates, Alexander Hamilton described “seditions and insurrections” as “unhappy maladies as inseparable from the body politic, as tumours and eruptions from the natural body.”<sup>7</sup> Antidemocratic writers tapped into this long history of conceptualizing insurgent egalitarian politics through the grotesque figure of the disorganized and deterritorialized body.

Body metaphors, in this sense, offer a compelling historical index to the naturalization of social and political relations democratic movements sought to contest. Disgust has an uncomfortably symbiotic relationship with democracy because the latter is so closely associated with defiling or contaminating powers, with those who speak when they are not to speak, who “part-take” in what they have no part in, who through enacting displacements refigure the authoritative “allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying.”<sup>8</sup> We may learn something important about democracy itself, in other words, if we listen to the eloquent hatred of democracy’s critics—figures such as Ames, Burke, and, as we will see below, William Cobbett—because they suggest that democracy was rightly understood to threaten the hierarchical unity anchored in the God-given naturalness of the body, a unity in which every part had its proper place. The relationship between democracy and disgust in a period of radical democratic transition corroborates democracy’s close historical association with the absence of the proper qualification for rule enacted by “subjects that do not coincide with the parties of the state or of society, floating subjects that deregulate all representation of places and portions.”<sup>9</sup>

Nothing can more reliably elicit disgust than a body whose parts are no longer found in their proper place, and democracy invariably deals with “matter out of place.”<sup>10</sup> As a disruption of the reigning configuration of political arrangements, democracy was greeted in the 1790s with

a moralizing disgust by those policing the inherited order. Like Burke, American Federalists saw democratic disorder in the political world as necessarily connected to democratic disorder in the moral, aesthetic, and economic worlds. "The people have become impatient of government restraint," Archibald Henderson wrote, "and have lost all reverence for established usages and the settled order of things."<sup>11</sup> "Established usages" in daily behavior animated and sustained the governing order, and conservatives sought to preserve these rules of propriety and authorization in not only formal legal institutions but also the deportment and composure of everyday life. They fought against the multifaceted threat democracy posed to "the habit of subordination," which "served to cement a functional society more effectively than legislative restraints or constitutional restrictions. The dropping of a curtsy, the doffing of a cap, the raising of a deferential finger to the brow—these were the superficial symbols of a spirit which ran deep and strong in the minds and hearts of men."<sup>12</sup> Conservatives have always been acutely attuned to the practical nuances and affective textures of the politics of the ordinary.

As an aversive passion, disgust is particularly well-suited to combat challenges to these everyday "habits of subordination." Disgust entered the English language in the seventeenth century, but it flourished in the eighteenth with emerging discourses of moral sentimentalism and aesthetic concerns with taste. The word disgust (or *degout* in French) literally means bad taste. It is sharply, viscerally evaluative and involves immediate and unreflective judgment, which makes it such an important affect for political consideration. Disgust is a judgment backed by the body, viscerally certain, and free of ambivalence. Moreover, it demands the assent of others, which leads William Ian Miller to emphasize disgust's "communalizing" tendency. "The avowal of disgust expects concurrence," Miller writes. "It carries with it the notion of its own indisputability . . . the sheer obviousness of the claim."<sup>13</sup> If someone is indifferent to something that disgusts, it is unlikely that I will be able to persuade them into sharing it. To the contrary, this indifference, and the person expressing it, may also become an object of disgust. Disgust enjoins us not only to reject its object but to demand that others join us in that rejection.

The proliferation of disgust in the conservative political discourses of the 1790s emerged as egalitarian pressures challenged the established hierarchies of the social and political order. Disgust, like contempt, plays an important role in securing and maintaining status and class distinc-

tions, but where contempt remains removed and detached, even coolly indifferent, disgust mingles with threat and surprise and cannot tolerate or remain in the proximity of its object. Contempt is an aversive passion that works to reinforce existing social hierarchies, but disgust is a passion elicited by social hierarchies under duress. Disgust asserts “a claim to superiority that at the same time recognizes the vulnerability of that superiority to the defiling powers of the low.”<sup>14</sup> “We are sliding down into the mire of a democracy,” Ames wrote, “which pollutes the morals of the citizens before it swallows up their liberties.”<sup>15</sup>

Few writers relied more fulsomely on the rhetorical elicitation of disgust than William Cobbett, radical social conservative, anti-Semite, defender of the “right” of slavery, and arguably the most popular writer in America during the era of the French Revolution. The later radical publicist in monarchical Britain was a High Tory pamphleteer in republican America. In the nineteenth century, Cobbett would rage against the social dislocations and injustices of industrial capitalism, but in America during the 1790s, often writing under the pseudonym “Peter Porcupine,” Cobbett was the most vehement critic of the French Revolution’s contaminating influences. In both instances, Cobbett’s criticism was philosophically conservative, defending an inherited social order threatened by the industrial revolution, on the one hand, and democratic revolution, on the other. His nostalgic longing for a lost social organicism animated a flurry of publications in which he sought to police the boundaries of propriety against democratic incursions, especially as enacted by women, Jews, blacks, purported homosexuals, and just about anybody else who Cobbett thought might contaminate the healthy body politic. As William Hazlitt argued, Cobbett’s primary “principle is repulsion, his nature contradiction; he is made up of mere antipathies, an Ishmaelite indeed without a fellow.”<sup>16</sup>

Like Ames and Burke, Cobbett believed that democracy’s “crawling demagogues and popular parasites” revolutionized the political, economic, social, moral, and aesthetic spheres of daily life. Just as democracy disrupted property relations in society, argued Cobbett, so did it undermine the Christian basis of morality essential to civilized behavior. Democracy threatened the sanctity and patriarchal authority of the family, and democrats were, therefore, typically cast by Cobbett as social miscreants. As Raymond Williams notes, “It was difficult to find [in Cobbett’s writing] a democrat or rebel who was not also a bad husband, father, brother, or son.”<sup>17</sup> “Thus Paine was not only ‘the prince of demagogues’ but ‘infamous’, an ‘old ruffian’, a poor, mean-spirited miscreant’

and a 'vile wretch.'"<sup>18</sup> At the conclusion of one of his many diatribes against Paine, Cobbett wed the disgust of Paine's situation in revolutionary France to political or moral approbation in the most obvious of ways. Describing Paine's imprisonment under the Convention, Cobbett links this degraded and degrading image to Paine's political positions and principles:

Let us now return to the blasphemer at the bottom of his dungeon. There he lies! Manacled, besmeared in filth, crawling with vermin, loaded with years of infamy. This, reader, whatever you may think of him, is the author of the Rights of Man, the eulogist of French liberty . . . Look at him! Do you think now, in your conscience, that he has the appearance of a legislator, a civilian, a constitution maker?

In appealing to the "conscience" of his public, Cobbett is actually invoking their aesthetic response: "Look at him!" Paine's disgusting appearance—"besmeared in filth, crawling with vermin, loaded with years of infamy"—serves as a criterion of his moral fitness to be "a legislator, a civilian, a constitution maker."<sup>19</sup> The collapse of the moral and aesthetic registers here and elsewhere indicates Cobbett's broader attempt to engender a particular mood or disposition in his reading public—repulsion and disgust—and to marshal these responses against reform and in service of the existing political order.

Cobbett argued that democratic efforts to reform social institutions, economic arrangements, and daily behavior resulted in a general disorganization of the body politic, which he described as a "natural oeconomy," and which he asserted must be combated simultaneously and on all fronts.<sup>20</sup> In his very first American publication, "On the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley," Cobbett presented a fable to exemplify democracy's relationship to a disruption of the existing distribution of orders and roles within the body politic. In this overwrought tale, a cabinet filled with china, ceramics, water pitchers, and chamber pots is thrown into disorienting insurrection. The pitchers and the ceramics—which Cobbett, referring to the specter of revolutionary slave rebellion in Haiti, refers to as the "brown brethren"—challenge the traditional authority of the ever-white china. Time and again in his writing, Cobbett connected the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century to the specter of future insurrections among slaves. In Cobbett's allegory, at the insurrection's end, the glistening wet chamber pot shines upon the table, long-

ing to “kiss the lip and ornament the cup-board.” As the reigning order is thrown into disarray by democratically self-created authorities (the ceramics in the fable make a constituent claim to transformative political power), the container for defecation becomes a vessel for drinking. The belabored moral of the story is provided by the “wise water pitcher,” who echoes Agrippa Menenius Lanatus at Aventine: “We are all of the same clay, ‘tis true; but he who made us, formed different functions. One is for ornament, another for use. The posts the least important are often the most necessary.”<sup>21</sup>

Cobbett had a particular revulsion for those Democratic Republicans who formed clubs modeled—or so Cobbett and other Federalists continually insisted—on the Jacobin clubs in France. He likened American Jacobins to a “sort of flesh flies that naturally settle on the excremental and corrupted parts of the body politic.”<sup>22</sup> If French Jacobins were “bloodthirsty cannibals,” who sat in judgment with “their shirt sleeves tucked up to their elbows; their arms and hands, and even the goblets they were drinking out of . . . besmeared with human blood,”<sup>23</sup> American Jacobins were similarly “Bacchanalians whose beverage is the blood of their benefactors,” and whose mouths catch “anarchical belches.”<sup>24</sup>

Like Burke, Cobbett repeatedly returned to the egalitarian violation of gender and sexual norms. Miscegenation, “French” sexual mores, emasculated men, and masculine women are central figures in Cobbett’s portrayals of the democratic opposition. Cobbett converts the much-touted fraternity, camaraderie, and conviviality of republican citizens of different races and sexes into sexualized improprieties and promiscuities meant to elicit a defensive disgust in his readers. Parodying the revolutionary French reception of insurgent slaves from Saint Domingue, for example, Cobbett writes, “The *white* man first flew into his arms, and was embraced most tenderly—the *mulatto* was hugged with still more affection—but when it came to the *negro*, had it been a *mistress*, he could not have pressed her more ardently! The next day they voted the *emancipation of the slaves*, and declared, that they would form with *all negroes and mulattoes* a ‘tri-coloured coalition,’ which would soon destroy the combined powers of aristocracy and tyranny.”<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, during Citizen Genet’s notorious term as the French ambassador to the United States, Cobbett accused the Jacobin clubs of “licking” and “saluting” the Citizen’s body (in all its parts) as a part of his general attack on the suspiciously erotic fraternization of their members and democrats more broadly. “If they stood ever so fair in the

opinion of the ladies," Cobbett wrote, "must not their gander-frolicks, and their squeezing, and hugging, and kissing one another be expected to cause a good deal of pouting and jealousy?"<sup>26</sup> Just as the clubs were figured as dangerous aberrations within the constitutional political order—George Washington derided them as "self-created" societies and blamed them for instigating the Whiskey Rebellion—their behavior and manners seemed to simultaneously challenge a natural sexual order. Jacobin effeminacy and "gander-frolicks" were conversely related to the ugly masculinity of republican women. "The instant a lady turns to politics say farewell to smiles," goes one typical formulation.<sup>27</sup> Like many other conservatives, Cobbett assailed Mary Wollstonecraft with particular venom, emphasizing her monstrously hermaphroditic character, "masculine, feminine, and neuter all at once."<sup>28</sup>

These close associations of democracy and disgust should not be understood as merely reactionary aberrations, because they vividly illuminate the egalitarian challenge democracy posed to defenders of the inherited order during this period of revolutionary transition. This rhetoric recalls the radicalism of democracy's basic claims, usually buried beneath encomiums and platitudes, because democracy involves "forms of subjectification through which any order of distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their 'nature' and places corresponding to their functions is undermined and thrown back on its contingency."<sup>29</sup> In contrast to normative arguments against disgust in contemporary democratic theory, the historical entanglement of democracy and disgust suggests that the relationship might be constitutive and irresolvable. Because democracy enacts a reconfiguration of the sensible that elicits order-preserving disgust, disgust cannot be finally overcome, but politically confronted and tactically engaged.

### Notes

1. Fisher Ames, "Letter to Thomas Dwight, September 11, 1794," in *The Works of Fisher Ames: Volume II*, ed. W.B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 1048–50.

2. Fisher Ames, "Letter to Timothy Pickering, March 10, 1806," in *The Works of Fisher Ames: Volume II*, 1516–18.

3. Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1999), L 250.

4. *Ibid.*, L 325.

5. Judith N. Shklar, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 198–99.

6. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 221–30.

7. Alexander Hamilton, "Federalist No. 28," in Jacob E. Cooke, ed., *The Federalist* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 176.

8. Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 29.

9. *Ibid.*, 100–101.



10. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Routledge, 1966).
11. Cited in Linda K. Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Imagery and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 213.
12. David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), xiv.
13. William Ian Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 194.
14. *Ibid.*, 9.
15. Fisher Ames, "Political Thoughts," in *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review II* (November 1805), 565–66.
16. Hazlitt, "Character of Cobbett," in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1931), 8:54–55.
17. Raymond Williams, *Cobbett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 9.
18. William Cobbett, "Cobbett on Thomas Paine," in *Peter Porcupine in America: Pamphlets on Republicanism and Revolution*, ed. David A. Wilson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 219–23.
19. *Ibid.*, 219–23, 296.
20. William Cobbett, "A Bone to Gnaw, for the Democrats," in *Peter Porcupine in America*, 91.
21. William Cobbett, "Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley: To Which is Added a Comprehensive Story of a Farmer's Bull," in *Peter Porcupine in America*, 76.
22. William Cobbett, "History of the American Jacobins, Commonly Denominated Democrats," in *Peter Porcupine in America*, 185.
23. Cobbett, "Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley," 63.
24. Cobbett, "A Bone to Gnaw," 97, 110.
25. Cobbett, "A Picture of France in 1794, in a Letter from a Gentleman in Switzerland, to his Friend in America," *Porcupine's Gazette*, 25 April 1797. Reprinted in William Cobbett, ed. *Porcupine's Works*, 12 vols. (London: Cobbett and Morgan, 1801), 5:183.
26. Cobbett, "A Bone to Gnaw," 113.
27. *Ibid.*, 90.
28. Cobbett, "A Kick for a Bite," in *Peter Porcupine in America*, 130.
29. Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 101.