Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

22 | 2021

**Unheard Possibilities: Reappraising Classical Film
Music Scoring and Analysis**

Tom Scriven, *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical moral politics, 1820-1870*

Alexandra Sippel

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/37754>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.37754

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Alexandra Sippel, "Tom Scriven, *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical moral politics, 1820-1870*", *Miranda* [Online], 22 | 2021, Online since 17 March 2021, connection on 27 April 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/37754> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.37754>

This text was automatically generated on 27 April 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Tom Scriven, *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical moral politics, 1820-1870*

Alexandra Sippel

REFERENCES

Tom Scriven, *Popular Virtue: Continuity and Change in Radical moral politics, 1820-1870*.
Manchester: University Press, 2017, 240p., £80. ISBN: 978-1-5261-1475-4

- 1 Tom Scriven's "study looks at the extensive counter culture that resulted from the interchange between the mass agitation for universal suffrage and the campaign for individual improvement" (4). The book opens on the death of Henry Hetherington in 1849 and the various ways in which he embodied the Chartist culture of free thought, teetotalism, vegetarianism and faith in alternative medicines. These are the main avenues that are explored in *Popular Virtue*'s six chapters. Rather than focusing on the Chartists' political campaigns as such, it sheds light on "the moral mindset of Chartism" and on "the practices [this] *mentalité* require[d] of the movement's supporters" (5). Scriven analyses how they built on the radical optimism of Volney, Godwin or Owen who posited human perfectibility, in order to promote the popular education to self-care they deemed indispensable. The volume follows a chronological organisation, spanning the five decades from the 1820s to the 1860s, even though the many "bifurcations and contradictions" (5) of the movement sometimes render some overlaps inevitable in the book itself.
- 2 Chapter One examines how free thought permeated radical circles in the 1820s and impacted all aspects of their militancy and education. Owen's deism in particular chimed in well with the belief that improving people's circumstances was conducive to ameliorations in individual behaviours. It also paved the way for their later interest in and recourse to alternative medical doctrines. Scriven also shows how older traditions like that of denouncing the "Old Corruption" of the landed and monied classes inspired the radical press. He goes on to explain how this "moral populism" transpired in heavily satirical (sometimes even scatological or pornographic) representations of the upper classes and the Church. Hetherington's *The Destructive, Or Poor Man's Conservative* and John Cleave's *A Slap at the Church* are particularly revealing in this regard. Another central aspect of this first chapter is Chartism's attitude to women: under the influence of William Thompson and Anna Wheeler's *Appeal to One Half of the Human Race, Women* (1825), early nineteenth-century radicals proved supportive of extending women's

social and political rights, and encouraged female militancy. Besides, they took stock of working-class officious traditions like common law weddings, and supported contraception, both out of adherence to Malthusian theories and in support of free (or freer) love.

- 3 The 1830s marked a shift away from the lightness of the 1820s. The cholera epidemic of 1832, and the institutional and social reforms of 1832 (The Great Reform Act extending the vote to the upper monied classes) and 1833 (the Poor Law Amendment Act with its bastardy clause) ushered in a period when Radical and Chartist activism was geared rather to intellectual and physical improvement than to satirical news reports. Chapter Two accordingly follows in the footsteps of Henry Vincent as a case study of this evolution. Vincent toured the West country and South Wales, exhorting workers to convert to teetotalism. Commitment to free love waned and women were gradually encouraged to retreat to the private sphere to contribute to the polishing and improvement of their husbands and children. Popular virtue was increasingly modelled after more bourgeois standards.
- 4 The 1839 Newport Rising caused the emergence of yet another brand of Chartism: with some 500 Chartist leaders and activists in prison – which represented more political prisoners than at any time since the Jacobite uprising of 1745, the movement temporarily lost momentum. Chapter 3 thus demonstrates that the early 1840s were years of aborted projects and short-lived newspapers. Henry Hetherington, like many others, took to reading extensively about health and alternative medicine. Scriven already hinted at their interest in phrenology in Chapter Two. Like the Owenites, many Chartists were materialists and they easily accepted that improving the conditions in which the brain developed as an organ would provide the favourable circumstances in which individuals and society could thrive. Scriven shows how eagerly they also read about homeopathy, hydropathy, vegetarianism or teetotalism, which they then diffused in their correspondence and in the newspapers that were still published then or in those launched in the next few years. Comments on phrenology outside Chartist circles could have proven useful here, to contrast their optimism with the much more judgemental and deterministic approach of this (pseudo-)science. Also in this chapter, Scriven brings up the historiography of the working classes: histories of the medieval labourers were contrasted with depictions of factory workers, to suggest that they could have been as sturdy as the Anglo Saxon peasants of yore, had the manufacture not debased them.
- 5 Chapter 4 delves deeper into the Chartists' "Medicine, popular science and improvement culture" (103), this time as individual measures rather than collective ones. Scriven goes further in his study of how Jacksonian America influenced British radicalism, especially after John Cleave popularised William Ellery Channing's pamphlet *Self-Culture* that irrigated Chartist literature throughout the 1840s. In those years, their newspapers "had moved from satire and muckraking to poetry and fiction and considerably upped their philosophical and directly instructive content" (107). Respectability became paramount and Chartists encouraged teetotalism (even though they quite often insisted that drunkenness was the result of inhumane working conditions rather than their cause) and promoted traditional gendered roles that failed to fit the reality of female labour – and put an end to women's political militancy. They also promoted self-care, diffused medical advice and sold herbal medicines, which at times earned them accusations of quackery. What was novel, Scriven insists, is the

“politicisation of medicine and self-care” (114) that became one of the popular virtues his study centres on. “A re-reading of the progressive texts of the 1790s presented a political strategy in which individual improvement would remove the conditions that allowed tyranny to function, thereby making Liberty inevitable” (124).

- 6 Chapter 5 is dedicated to Feargus O’Connor’s short-lived Land Plan “as both a centre piece of constitutional strategy and an attempt to address the social grievances made evident in the demands of the grassroots in 1842” (130). Parliament had refused to consider the Charter for the second time in 1841, despite its two miles and over three million signatures, and strikes erupted in the course of 1842. The Land Plan offered fresh perspectives : in the words of O’Connor himself, he preferred spade husbandry and “the small farm system to the present factory system as means of insuring a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work, which, after all, is the aim and end of the People’s Charter” (139). His plan offered the working class the perspective of land ownership and independence and revived Owen’s hopes of “home colonisation” (140).
- 7 Self-care, individual reform and access to private property all caused the Chartist movement to be called into question. Chapter 6 examines “the fragmented legacies of Chartist moral politics” (164) and opens on the Marxist historiographical critique of the movement: it “initially subscribed to the ‘labour aristocracy’ thesis that the elite of the working class were ‘embourgeoised’ by middle-class Liberals who provided them with increased wages and the vote [in 1867] in order to create a compliant bulwark against other sections of the working class” (164). With the rise of a new generation of socialists influenced by French Republicanism as well as by Marx’s and Engels’s writings, Chartists faced criticism over their alleged elitism. Scriven argues that in reaction, they went back to what he calls “moral populism” (although “populism” is loosely defined and its connotation seems much more negative than the adjective “popular” in the book’s title).
- 8 All in all, Scriven’s book sheds light on the ways in which Chartists educated themselves and shared their knowledge with their working class audiences and readerships in order to help them reform their habits and gain the respectability that would earn them the Charter. The book is slightly repetitive at times, as the influence of illustrious Radical figures resurfaced periodically between the 1820s and the 1860s. Still, *Popular Virtue* wonderfully shows how the Chartists strived to promote individual improvement as a collective, rather than individualistic, way of making Victorian industrial society more liveable for the labouring poor as a whole.

INDEX

Keywords: Radicalism, Owenism, Chartism; perfectibility, popular education, teetotalism, phrenology, homeopathy, feminism, socialism

Mots-clés: Radicalisme, Owénisme, Chartisme, perfectibilité, éducation populaire, abstinence, phrénologie, homéopathie, féminisme, socialisme

AUTHORS

ALEXANDRA SIPPEL

Maîtresse de conférences

Université Toulouse-Jean Jaurès

alexandra.sippel@univ-tlse2.fr