result, prophetic discourse and female authority is presented as a tidy narrative of increased feminine consciousness and radicalism, culminating with Mary Astell, who used the politics of sexual difference to write a “recognizably secular female tradition” and a “vision of female equality (214).” Feroli claims much for her book, and when she compares texts, relates them to broader contexts, and details the role of sectarian prophesying, her arguments work. But unfortunately those moments are too few and she resorts to reasserting, with greater insistence, her broad claims.


In this collection of eleven essays, adding an introduction and two “afterwords,” thirteen scholars offer their definitions and applications of radicalism and its proponents. Given the slippery nature of English radicalism, each author’s approach is somewhat idiosyncratic and the best this reviewer can offer is guidance concerning a few interpretative and analytical points. Along this line, reading the introduction and the “afterwords” would be a good preparation for digesting the main corpus.

The approaches of these scholars to their subject reflect the historian’s dilemma of seeking a proper perspective. Akin to choosing a camera lens, the closer one views the subject the more disparate and particular the evidence becomes and the more the writer relies on descriptive language. Essays one through five, eight and eleven fit this approach. Pulling back the lens leads to more interpretative approaches, often focusing on the use of language as radical strategies. Essays six, seven, nine, and ten fit this general approach. Thus the reader emerges from this volume with a sense of the variety of radicalisms. Although most radicals wished to delegitimate established authority, governments and loyalists could resort to radical, or emergency, measures to support political stability. The Bond of Association (1584) to secure Queen Elizabeth’s crown and the Church and King associations of the French Revolutionary period would be examples found here. Otherwise the ranks of the disaffected stretched across Levellers, Millenarians, Restoration republicans, feminists, and institutional reformers of various stripes and causes.
Although none of the principal authors directly investigates the causes of radical behavior, the volume’s timeline points to the two seismic events: the Protestant Reformation and the French Revolution. The Protestant Reformation undermined established authority with a combination of threats from abroad and a variety of local discontents and protests, leading to government policies of clerical controls, and the suppression of dissent. The resulting contest between the central government and the local communities persisted throughout the seventeenth century, spawning the efforts of radicals studied here. In the same way, the French Revolution reopened possibilities to assert popular rights and advance proposals for institutional reform, in this case often focused upon Parliament. Each of these seismic events had its own chronological dynamic, and radicals appeared in different guises and with programs often driven by the necessities of the moment. Hence an emphasis on both variety and fluidity mark the contents of this volume.

While radicals were critical of established institutions, their own efforts either made use of or appealed to certain institutional forms. All groups and individuals made use of print media. Other major components included associations directed toward a particular end, clubs to debate and formulate programs and strategies, and “engagements” that pledged members to the pursuit of particular goals. Religious societies of a more millennial disposition could harbor radicals. During the French Revolutionary period, appeals to a “convention” as a means of redressing a variety of social and institutional ills sprouted up. These groupings shared the English scene with more benign venues, such as coffee houses, Spectator Clubs, taverns, village fetes, and Benjamin Franklin’s JUNTO.

These institutions implied the preexistence of local networks where formal and informal forms of authority established traditions of self-governance. Offices comprising “constables, churchwardens, jurymen and overseers of many kinds” (350) worked to create what Professor J. C. Davis calls the “unacknowledged republic.” These networks, in turn, lent credibility to the variety of sources upon which exponents of radical ideas drew. These sources included: the ancient constitution, the Revolution of 1688, millennial hopes, appeals to natural rights, and to its more ethno-centric version of an English birthright of liberty, a civic culture dedicated to the public good and arrayed against corruption, and the experience of American democracy. Seventeenth-century radicals such as the Levellers and Diggers appealed to the
restoration of this “unacknowledged republic” to legitimate their movements. In the eighteenth century the distinction between social manners and personal virtue—a hallmark of the literature of the period—became the departure point for Mary Wollstonecraft’s arguments. Particular writers could exert powerful influences. John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments of English Martyrs* supplied grist of many radical mills. Jeremy Bentham followed cues from Hume and Helvetius. And Bentham turned his own conversion to atheism into a wellspring for his utilitarian and reformist program.

This final observation provides the basis for Professor J. C. D. Clark’s argument that English Radicalism came into being with Bentham’s utilitarian program, reinforced by Ricardian economics. Bentham’s thoroughgoing rejection of religion, Clark claims, was the defining characteristic of his, and future, radical appeals, distinguishing radicalism from both socialism and liberalism. While Clark’s point illuminates the modern aspects of English radicalism, it tends to privilege the particular over the general. His claim that English Radicalism must be shorn of its religious concerns leaves the reader wondering what interpretative constructs he would develop for the impact of the Protestant Reformation. As this volume argues, radicalism remains a sufficiently plastic term to distinguish the various levels of protest and rebellion associated with the crises the Reformation spawned. This plasticity turns out to be both the blessing and the curse of the word.

This volume also offers a view of a newer historiography of radicalism. On the one hand this newer historiography is non-Marxist. Class interpretations are out. Christopher Hill and E. P. Thompson receive respectful, but definite, critical appraisals. The newer historiography builds on the assessments of social and linguistic historians, some of them reaching back into the 1980s. Each essay is thoroughly endnoted, giving the reader access to the avenues leading to this newer historiography. Thus, while potential readers should be warned that these essays are not meant for the generalist, the rewards of this volume are as many and varied as the subject it addresses.