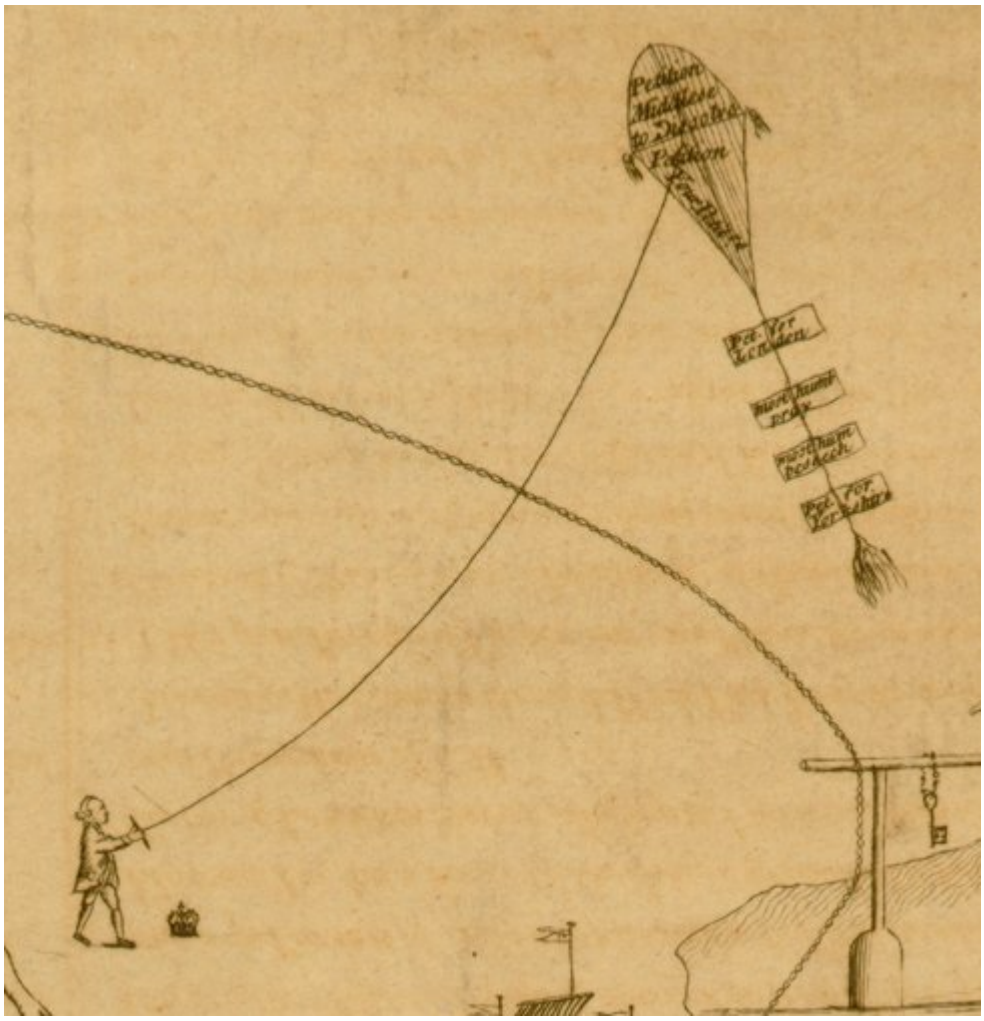
Political Electricity: The occult mechanism of revolution



Here is a tableau—an object in fact—that offers historical lessons about empire, and a warning:

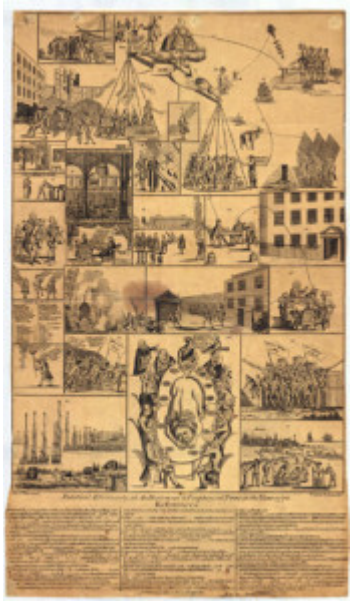
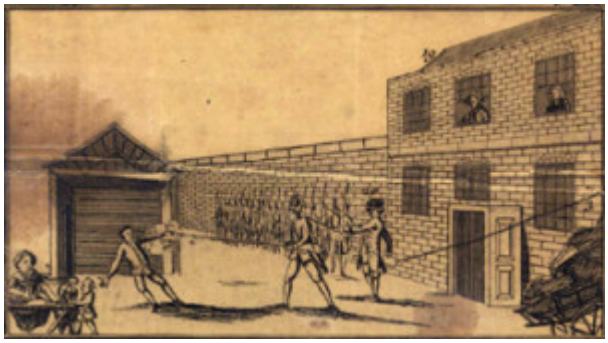


Fig. 1. Political Electricity; or, an Historical & Prophetical Print in the Year 1770. Anonymous, London, 1770. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society. Click picture for enlargement in new window.

This is *Political Electricity*, a copperplate engraving that circulated in London in 1770 as a large broadsheet measuring 27 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches signed "Veridicus," the *nom de plume* of Richard Whitworth, opposition M.P. for Stafford. Comprised of thirty-one distinct representations, the design is political satire as complex colloquial art, a densely allusive lattice-work of the misfortunes of the imperial British polity on the eve of the American Revolution. The image insists on a single narrative connecting many separate events. Where the story begins or ends is unclear, but the viewer is offered a partial thread, or rather a *chain* for guidance—an "electrical chain" that connects several of the print's panels, and whose movement is described by an accompanying key.

In this broadsheet, politics are electric and electricity political. The electric chain emerges in the top right-hand corner of the print from the person of "Lord Bute on the Coast of France . . . his Body the Electrical Machine shaking Hands with the Principal Nobles in France" (frame 1). It then proceeds in two directions. In one it is "conveyed from the Electrical Tube to the Princess of Wales" (frame 3) who, head in the clouds, is poised atop a set of scales in which different groups of M.P.s are balanced. The key tells us that "the Electrical Chain in her Left Hand which is conveyed across the Water from France, touches the Middle of her Waist and passes to the Hand of the [king] standing in the same Cloud." This end of the chain terminates at the person of George III, whose crown appears near his head. The other end, however, continues much further. From the right arm of the prime minister, the duke of Grafton, the chain passes to a group of prominstry M.P.s "in the Left Hand Scale" (frame 5) of the "Ballance of Power," and down through the heads of the secretary of state and the lord president of the Privy Council (frame 14), who are "Playing at Cards with the Public Money," while the paymaster-general

in England and master of the rolls in Ireland is “cajoling them with Wine.” The chain then moves down diagonally to the right through Arthur’s Club House, a “Gaming house in St. James’s Street where the Ministry are Playing at Cards regardless of the Nation’s Welfare” (frame 13). After continuing through a party of physicians examining the corpse of a man killed during riots after recent elections at Brentford, involving the controversial John Wilkes (frame 18), the chain finally terminates in a scene at King’s Bench Prison (frame 19).


Frame 19 from Political Electricity

Wilkes himself and a clergyman look on from the prison windows, as fire from the chain discharges a musket on a young man protesting Parliament’s unwillingness to admit Wilkes: he “touches the Barrel of his Musket to draw out the Electrical Fire, but the Force of the Shock is so great that it Kills him” (frame 20). The authority of George III terminates in the barrel of a gun turned on his own subjects.

Political Electricity sets in motion for the viewer a train of conceptions about the relationship between power and secrecy. The theme of conspiracy and hidden influence (equally prominent among Britons and Americans in this era) is signaled by the presence of figures like the earl of Bute, the king’s favorite, prime mover in the resurgence of the Tories after decades of Whig supremacy, and widely seen as the incarnation of ministerial corruption in the 1760s. Corruption, both financial and constitutional, is repeatedly emphasized in the print. Ministers gamble away the nation’s wealth, while the figure of Wilkes—Parliament’s most ardent critic and self-styled martyr for British civil liberties—is insistently invoked.

To anyone aware of British politics in the 1760s, these figures would have been unmistakable; by their inclusion, *Political Electricity* immediately establishes a shared frame of reference with the contemporary viewer into which a specific narrative and moral can then be inserted. Recent political *history* converges with *prophecy* through a narrative chain (the electrical chain) of violent self-destruction: the suppression of British liberties, the rise of corruption and militarism, the wrecking of trade and commerce, the disintegration of the British state, and the rise of America. In the opposition scale (frame 6), outweighed by the ministerial, Edmund Burke M.P., champion of American claims to the “rights of Englishmen,” speaks with a scroll before him entitled “The

Injured Ghost of Liberty.” In reference to the damage done to transatlantic trade by the Stamp Act and Townshend duties, the banks of the Thames are a wasteland where animals graze, while ships sit docked in disrepair, their masts turned into broomsticks (frame 25); the Royal Exchange is “turn’d into wilderness” (frame 11) and London itself erupts in flames (frame 21). At the bottom center, the great British Lion is about to be carved up, with Bute sitting at the head of the ministry’s table, the beast’s genitals already on his plate (frame 26).

Frame 24 from Political Electricity

Tellingly, the only scene of prosperity foretells the rise of the colonies at the mother country’s expense: the London skyline (including the dome of St. Paul’s) is labeled “Boston” (frame 24). These are “the Coasts of America where the Inhabitants are Industrious in every Art to provide themselves with the Manufactures that Great Britain used to furnish them with, being constrained and drove as it were to Industry, by the late Ministry.” The result: “The City of London [is] transferred to Boston.”

That all these events are related is confirmed by the visual metaphor of the electrical chain. But why this particular metaphor? Electricity was one of the leading branches of experimental science in the Enlightenment, certainly the branch with the highest public profile owing to the proliferation of commercial entertainments after the 1740s, both in Europe and British America, where customers willingly paid for the novel experience of having the “electric fire” course through their bodies. Such performances combined demonstrations of the rational principles of natural philosophy with playful sensory disorientations, electrifying bodies in order to demonstrate and explain the behavior of electricity, but also diverting the unwary with surprising shocks and sparks. Unlike in our own time, electricity in the eighteenth century was thought to possess spiritual and moral qualities. Conceived of as an “active power,” a material yet weightless entity, electricity was a force that penetrated and animated passive matter; as such, it was thought to mediate between the immaterial world, God, and His material creation, nature. According to Franklin’s electrical theory, one of the most influential of the Enlightenment,

electricity moved matter when a communication was established between physical bodies possessing different charges (positive/negative). Lacking such communication, electricity remained inert and imperceptible. As Franklin wrote in the late 1740s, "[T]he electrical fire is never visible but when in motion, and leaping from body to body." *Political Electricity* astutely follows this logic in using the electric fire as a metaphor for invisible political power. The electric chain is a medium of communication that reveals power in its transmission from George III through ministerial bodies, terminating in the tyrannical suppression of dissent outside King's Bench Prison. The electrical chain *is* the conspiracy narrative; it makes visible, if only for the instant of communication, the murderous force cloaked in honorable persons of state.

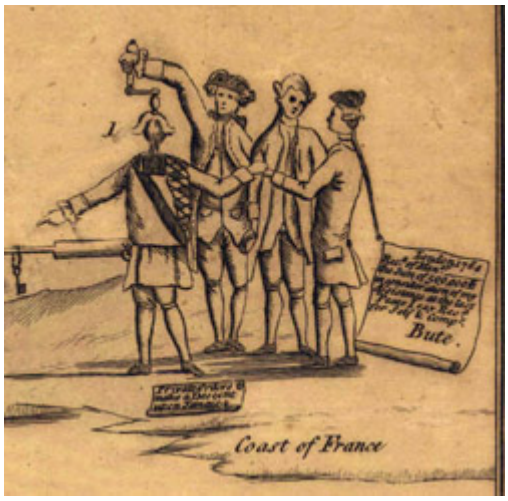
Beyond taking advantage of the logical conveniences of electricity as a metaphor for anxieties about occult political power, *Political Electricity* also participated in a broader politicization of science in the later eighteenth century. This was to culminate in a conservative critique of the radicalism (and Terror) of the French Revolution as the poisonous fruits of an atheistic rationalism, but in Britain, experimental science had already become politicized by the American Revolution. The key figure was, of course, Benjamin Franklin, invoked in the print through the seemingly innocuous figure flying a kite off the coast of France (frame 1).

Detail from frame 1 from Political Electricity

Having received the Royal Society's Copley Medal in 1753 for the invention of the lightning rod, Franklin came to Britain in the late 1750s as a colonial agent. Although he remained loyal to the cause of reconciliation between Britain and the colonies well into the 1770s, Franklin had associated since the previous decade with a group of liberal and radical Whigs in London, men of science, religious Dissenters, and critics of Parliament, who were sympathetic to American grievances after 1763. When resistance turned into revolution in the 1770s, Franklin came to embody this conjunction of experimental science and

liberal politics with unprecedented symbolic force. Heroic representations of Franklin as the experimenter-turned-republican-revolutionary abounded in America, Britain, and especially France, where Turgot famously wrote of him, *eripuit fulmen coelo sceptrumque tirannis* (he seized lightning from the heavens and the scepter from tyrants). Those who defended the Crown's authority in America, however, lamented Franklin's career as evidence of the dangerous results when men of lowly status got ideas above their station. In *Six Letters on Electricity* (1800), the Anglican minister William Jones of Nayland described Franklin's lightning experiments as "an ominous prelude to the business he was soon afterwards to do in the world, in drawing down the fire of civil war upon his country, and spreading the confusion of anarchy over the earth."

Like laboratory electricity, political electricity was power that became evident in communication and circulation. The source of this power remained hidden but it could be glimpsed through its effects, through the bodies it moved and the explosions it caused. *Political Electricity* does, however, present one generating point. Often depicted by satiric cartoons and effigy-bearing mobs as a boot, Bute here appears in the remarkable form of an electrical machine, his faceless head made to resemble a glass cylinder, cranked by French allies as though he were an electrostatic generator.



Detail from frame 1 from Political Electricity

More than a conceit for generating political power, this figure of the human machine suggests that artificial manipulation, rather than accident or natural causes, underlay the larger pattern of imperial implosion. If laboratory electricity required the artful manipulation of machines by individual social actors, so too did the political electricity of revolution.

Languages connecting electricity and politics were thus intimately linked with Enlightenment polemics about the competing moral authorities of art and nature. Tellingly, prominstry commentators often invoked machines to deny legitimacy to American resistance. According to Loyalists, an elite American cabal engineered a kind of popular delusion in America, deliberately inflaming the

colonial population with lies about British designs, rousing them to violence. The people of America "were like the Mobility of all Countries, perfect machines, wound up by any Hand who might first take the Winch," wrote Peter Oliver in 1781. Self-serving mobocrats like Franklin and Samuel Adams in Massachusetts deceived the clergy, and the clergy deceived the people, who were "weak, and unversed in the Arts of Deception." Thus, "the Wheel of Enthusiasm was set on going, and its constant Rotation set the People's Brains on Whirling; and by a certain centrifugal Force, all the Understanding which the People had was whirled away." American resistance was a machine of political madness set in motion by conspiracy and enthusiasm—the confusion of false causes for true. American republicanism was illegitimate because it had no basis in nature or reality—it was simply a work of conspiratorial art.

These rejections of resistance as the product of art and imagination contrasted sharply with Patriotic American celebrations of republicanism as a natural and divine electrical force. The janus face of political electricity (occult power as enthusiasm) was *electrical politics*: the sublime revelation of the electric fire of liberty through the movement of republican bodies. "The news [of an independent government in] . . . South Carolina has aroused and animated all the continent," John Adams wrote to James Warren in April 1776; "it has spread like a visible joy, and . . . will spread through the rest of the colonies like electric fire." Time and again, Patriots used electricity to conjure resistance not as a work of mechanical art, but as a spontaneous expression of divine will working through nature. Republican virtue, like the electric fire at an experimental demonstration, traveled effortlessly between feeling bodies. Looking back on the Revolution in his *Autobiography* (1821), Thomas Jefferson invoked the same metaphor. Resistance to the British in Virginia, he wrote, was like "a shock of electricity, arousing every man and placing him erect and solidly on his centre."

The print *Political Electricity* was thus part of a larger discourse that revealed the art behind such natural and divine appearances. Where Patriots celebrated the agency of divine will in the electrical-political sparks of revolution, vexed members of the metropolitan establishment saw conspirators artfully turning political-electrical machines. Polemics of art versus nature became polemics of conspiracy versus revelation. *Political Electricity* was an object that visually materialized lessons about the dangers of the immaterial and invisible forces threatening the empire in 1770. But by the time these forces had materialized, it was too late for such lessons to be learnt. Its prophecy was now history.

Further Reading:

For a full description of *Political Electricity*, see Frederic George Stephens, *Catalogue of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum, Division One: Political and Personal Satires, Vol. IV* (London, 1883), 649-60. For a fuller

discussion of electricity and politics in the American Revolution, see James Delbourgo, “Electricity, Experiment and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century North America” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2003), chap. 4. General treatments of electricity in the Enlightenment are John L. Heilbron, *Electricity in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Study of Early Modern Physics* (Mineola, Ny., 1999), and I. Bernard Cohen, *Benjamin Franklin’s Science* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); for electricity’s cultural history, see Simon Schaffer, “Natural Philosophy and Public Spectacle in the Eighteenth Century,” *History of Science* 21 (March 1983): 1-43, and “Self Evidence,” in James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootunian, eds., *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion Across the Disciplines* (Chicago, 1991), 56-91; on early American science, see Brooke Hindle, *The Pursuit of Science in Revolutionary America, 1735-1789* (Chapel Hill, 1956) and Raymond P. Stearns, *Science in the British Colonies of America* (Urbana, Ill., 1970). On satirical political cartoons of the era, see Peter D. G. Thomas, *The American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1986); on Franklin’s political affiliations in prerevolutionary London, see Verner Crane, “The Club of Honest Whigs: Friends of Science and Liberty,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 23 (April 1966): 210-33. Peter Oliver’s *Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion* (1781) is reprinted in Douglass Adair and John A. Schutz, eds., *Peter Oliver’s Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion: A Tory View* (Stanford, 1961). On British fears of American conspiracy, see Ira D. Gruber, “The American Revolution as a Conspiracy: The British View,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 26 (July 1969): 360-72; on American fears of British conspiracy, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 144-59, and Gordon S. Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (July 1982): 401-41. On sensibility, polemics of art and nature, and the intersection of science and politics in the French Enlightenment, see Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2002). For recent approaches to the relationship of things and ideas, see Bill Brown, ed., “Things,” special issue of *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Autumn 2001), and Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons From Art and Science* (New York, 2004).

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British Atlantic world.