**The Age of Revolutions: Paine and Burke**

**The American Revolution 1776**

**Thomas Paine (1737-1809)**

Common Sense (1776)

‘For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his family in perpetual preference to all others for ever.’

‘Wherefore since nothing but blows will do, for God’s sake, let us come to a final separation, and not leave the next generation to be cutting throats…’

‘To elect and to reject is the prerogative of a Free people.’

‘Let the names Whig and Tory be extinct; and let none other be heard among us, than those of a good citizen, an open and resolute friend, and a virtuous supporter of the Rights of Mankind and of the Free and Independent States of America.’

‘that the example which ye have unwisely set, of mingling religion with politics, may be disavowed and reprobated by every inhabitant of America.’

**Edmund Burke (1729-1797)**

Burke argued for conciliation with the American Colonists (and lost his Bristol seat as a result). But note that Burke defended the Americans on the grounds that their claims were based on their historical rights as British subjects. British policy was not only self-defeating, but went against the tenor of the established constitution. British policy was oppressive and war an overreaction.

**The French Revolution 1789**

**The British Reaction**

"Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive  
But to be young was very heaven!"

Wordsworth

**Richard Price (1723-1791)**

A leading rationalist philosopher and minister, Price supported the American Revolution in his *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty* (1778). His defence of liberty viewed the Glorious Revolution as a victory for reason and progress. He preached a sermon in support of the French people. In his *Discourse on the Love of our Country* (1789) Price used the language of British political thought: rights, liberty and popular sovereignty. But he extended these principles into universal claims that applied to all men.

More conservatively minded Britons worried that the revolution would spread to Britain. Edmund Burke writes in response to Price.

**Edmund Burke: Reflections on the Revolution in France (1789-90)**

**1) The Criticism of Abstract Reason**

‘Circumstances, which for some count for nothing, give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing colour and its differing effect.’

**a) The importance of circumstance. Cannot use abstracts in practical matters. Use experience.**

**b) Abstract reason deals with extremes it is not realistic and rejects the idea of compromise.**

**c) Abstract Reason assumes that it is the only way to access reason.**

**d) Abstract reason de-humanizes us.**

**e) Abstract reason elevates the universal above the particular.**

**f) Abstract reason fails to get things done.**

**g) It discounts precedent.**

**h) It simplifies where man is intricate.**

‘They have attempted to confound all sorts of citizens, as well as they could, into one homogeneous mass; and then they divided this their amalgama into a number of incoherent republics. They reduce men to loose counters, merely for the sake of simple telling, and not to figures whose power is to arise from their place in the table.’

**2) The Rejection of Universal Rights**

‘the clumsy subtilty of their political metaphysics’

Government is a ‘contrivance of human wisdom’ to deal with human wants and needs. It is not an embodiment of natural rights. Government reacts to circumstances to serve the public interest – natural rights cannot react because they are universal principles.

‘In this partnership all men have equal rights, but not to equal things’

Civil society is conventional > law is common law

Nat rights exist (like property) but are not what govt is for

Right > Want > Govt deals with wants

The problem is not abstract rights (to food or medicine)

But how to procure these things > realism > circumstances.

Politics is not a priori – a practical science based on experience

Pragmatism, problem solving, compromise.

Things persist because they work (approved by God)

Not universals, but adapt to circumstances

No natural ‘human rights’, only the rights that you inherit.

The rights that we have are the rights of British Subjects. We have inherited them from our forefathers.

**3) The Defence of Tradition**

Prejudice is good. Take prejudice literally – pre-judgment.

**a) It humanizes**

**b) Makes life and society easier to understand**

**c) Possesses inherent truths**

**d) Allows rapid judgment without prolonged reasoning**

‘Jurisprudence is the collective reason of the ages.’

‘avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations and ages’ Not rely on own small stock of reason – custom. Prejudices embody latent knowledge.

Law is the collected wisdom/reason of the ages

Caution in reform of existing – draw on experience – no revolutions.

**4) The Defence of Property**

Society an ‘entailed legacy’ – from father to son, conditional on custodianship. Not changeless but gradually and carefully evolved.

Burke argues that property is the basis of society. It provides a direct connection between people and the land that connects them to the nation. They have a direct, tangible interest in the national interest. We are ‘temporary possessors and life-renters’ of our polity. To innovate abstractly is to squander the inheritance, to demean our ancestors and rob our children for our own pleasure.

‘By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often, and as much, and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken. No one generation could link with the other. Men would become little better than flies of a summer.’

**5) The Defence of Religion**

Religion is the basis of the civil order. We are religious animals, and an established national church will inculcate feelings of respect for the wisdom of our institutions.

No original contract but the state is a contract between ‘those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.’

**6) Rejection of Revolutions**

a) They destroy what is good as well as what is bad

b) They break continuity without which we are but ‘flies of a summer’

c) Revolutions are obsessed with the surface ills of the existing order and overlook the faults on their own side

d) They are conducted in a hasty manner by ‘paper theoreticians’

e) The theories themselves come to be worshipped and lead revolutionaries to bend circumstances to fit their theories

f) They lead to violent rather than peaceful reform

**Thomas Paine: The Rights of Man (1791-2)**

The Rights of Man was published in two parts in 1791-2.

‘If systems of government can be introduced, less expensive, and more productive of general happiness, than those which have existed, all attempts to oppose their progress will be fruitless.’

‘There is a morning of Reason rising upon Man on the subject of government, that has not appeared before’

**Paine’s argument**

**1) Posterity**

Paine argues that one generation cannot assume to ‘command forever, until the end of time, how the world shall be governed and who shall govern it.’ He adds ‘Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies.’

‘Every generation is equal in rights to the generations which preceded it, by the same rule that every individual is born equal in rights with his contemporary.’

‘a law not repealed continues in force, not because it cannot be repealed, but because it is not repealed; and the non-repealing passes for consent.’

If we go back far enough we can find a precedent for almost anything.

**2) The Hereditary Principle**

a) It casts out younger children.

b) It presumes that talent is hereditary? But why should judges be hereditary?

c) It is unaccountable and therefore cannot be trusted

d) It leads to interbreeding as people attempt to keep property and power in the family.

‘The rights of men in society, are neither devisable, nor transferable, nor annihilable, but are descendable only; and it is not in the power of any generation to intercept finally, and cut off the descent.’

**3) Tax**

Taxes are not raised to make war, but rather wars are made to raise taxes. Every time there is a war tax rises and remains at the new level after the war is over. Paine believes the French, like the Americans, have now avoided this by placing the right to declare war with the people who have to pay for it.

Paine notes: ‘It is time that nations should be rational, and not be governed like animals, for the pleasure of their riders.’

**4) Law and Reform**

The separation of Church and State, like that in America, is the sign of true religious freedom.

‘Men are born and always continue free, and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded only on public utility. The end of all political associations is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; and these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression. The Nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty; nor can any individual, or any body of men, be entitled to any authority which is not expressly derived from it.’

**5) Rights and Constitutions**

Natural rights are: ‘all the intellectual rights, or rights of the mind, and also all those rights of acting as an individual for his own comfort and happiness.’ Civil Rights are ‘those that appertain to man as a member of society’.

The institution of government has three possible origins, but only one of these is legitimate given what we know about its relation to rights.

1) Superstition: the government of Priests by deception

2) Power: Government by conquest like William the Conqueror

3) Reason: a social contract to promote individual and common good.

**‘The representative system takes society and civilization for its basis; nature, reason, and experience, for its guide.’**

‘A constitution is not the act of a government, but of a people creating a government, a government without a constitution is power without right.’

**6) Civil Society**

‘Government is no farther necessary than to supply the few cases to which society and civilization are not conveniently competent; and instances are not wanting to show, that everything which government can usefully add thereto, has been performed by the common consent of society, without government.’

**Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)**

Mary Wollstonecraft spent her life as an embodiment of her radical political views. Following the death of her mother she began a long campaign to establish her financial independence as a teacher, educational theorist and journalist. Wollstonecraft was at the heart of radical politics in Britain. A friend of the leading reformers, she married William Godwin and supported radical causes in print. Her daughter with Godwin would later become Mary Shelley, author of Frankenstein.

***A Vindication of the Rights of men, in a letter to the right honourable Edmund Burke; occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)**

Wollstonecraft accuses Burke of being weirdly obsessed with tradition (his ‘Gothic affability’) to the extent that his judgment is led astray. Burke’s attack on Price was unjustified and out of all proportion to the sentiments in the Sermon.

The ‘light of reason’ must be our guide in understanding government and reason is just as necessary for understanding history as it is for apprehending right. She uses Hume’s History to show that the history of the British constitution was a series of contingent compromises rather than the wisdom of ages. It was the work of ambition and arrogance in conflict through time. How then can this provide us with a better guide to truth than the calm application of reason?

‘It is necessary emphatically to repeat, that there are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights.’

The British form of government must be judged against this universal standard.

‘The only security of property that nature authorizes and reason sanctions is, the right a man has to enjoy the acquisitions which his talents and industry have acquired; and bequeath them to whom he chooses.’

‘Why was it a duty to repair an ancient castle, built in barbarous ages, of Gothic materials? Why were the legislators obliged to rake amongst heterogeneous ruins; to rebuild old walls, whose foundations could scarcely be explored, when a simple structure might be raised on the foundation of experience, the only valuable inheritance our forefathers could bequeath?’

Individual rights are sacred and inviolable because God-given. Inequality of ranks prevents moral progress by retarding individual development.

**William Godwin (1756-1836)**

Philosopher and radical campaigner. Husband of Mary Wollstonecraft. He published *The Inquiry concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*. (1793). Godwin believed that justice demanded ‘the adoption of a principle of morality and truth into the practice of a community’. Godwin began by demanding political reform and the end of monarchy, but his position eventually hardened, and he came to view all government as corrupt and corrupting. Government ‘by its very nature counteracts the improvement of original mind’. Godwin was a rationalist who believed that humans are the sum of their individual experiences. Thus good experiences breed good men and this process is disturbed by government. Progress occurs through rational discussion between free individuals. Godwin was essentially a liberal anarchist who demanded freedom for all rational beings.