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The French Revolution began with the astonishing events of 1789, but it has to be seen as an intense and profound process that changed and developed dramatically over the following decade and more. Its political and social experiments changed a great many aspects of French life, and these changes also had a major impact on all of France’s neighbours, including Great Britain. The Revolution led to a bitter dispute across Europe about the French principles of ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’, and, because the French revolutionaries sought to export these principles to the rest of Europe, it helped to provoke a war that posed an enormous challenge to France and all its neighbours. The French Revolution and the French Revolutionary war were the most discussed issues in British politics and the British press. The Revolutionary debate of the 1790s in Britain had a profound influence on the political, religious and cultural life of the country, while the French war produced almost unprecedented economic and social strains, and forced Britain to make a huge military, naval and financial effort to counter French ambitions. For a great many Britons the 1790s were a decade of crisis that polarized British society into the friends and enemies of the French Revolutionary cause. To understand the nature of this crisis, we need to appreciate the ideological disputes in Britain about French Revolutionary principles, to explore how these disputes encouraged Britons to support or oppose these principles, and to examine how these disputes strengthened the party of government, and seriously undermined the opposition in Parliament.

The ideological disputes about French principles and the French war

British radicals and reformers had been developing a political programme for constitutional reform, and intellectual justifications for such a programme, for at least two decades before the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. They wished, in particular, to promote a reform of the
electoral system that would see the House of Commons elected by a much higher proportion of adult males. Since 1780, the more advanced radicals had been advocating universal manhood suffrage, annual general elections, equal-sized constituencies, the secret ballot, the abolition of property qualifications for parliamentary candidates and the payment of MPs. These proposals were justified by historic appeals to the ancient rights of Englishmen, and to the universal rights of man. More moderate proposals were debated in Parliament in 1783 and 1785. Although the movement for parliamentary reform weakened in the later 1780s, these years still witnessed favourable discussions of the new American federal constitution, attempts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts for the benefit of Protestant dissenters and a widespread popular campaign to abolish the slave trade. The failure to achieve any success in the late 1780s disheartened the radicals and reformers, but they were galvanized into renewed action by the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. The events in France received a positive response from many Britons of liberal and advanced views. The veteran radical, Richard Price, a Protestant dissenting minister, offered the first sustained panegyric on the French Revolution when he addressed the Revolution Society in London on 4 November 1789. In this oration, subsequently published in early 1790 as *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, Price rejoiced that he saw the ardour for liberty catching and spreading, and a general reform of human affairs beginning in France. He undoubtedly hoped that the events in France would revive the reform movement in Britain.

More conservative British observers of the events in France were surprised and somewhat shaken, but they were not at first concerned about their possible consequences for Britain. Edmund Burke was initially undecided on how to respond to the amazing events in France, but, more than any other politician of the day, he made a serious attempt to understand what was happening. When he produced his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in November 1790, he was as much concerned with the way Richard Price and others were using the French Revolution to promote and justify radical reform in Britain as he was with the consequences of the Revolution for French politics and society. He devoted much of his famous tract to the threat posed by British radicals, who he feared were being seduced by dangerous French principles into giving fresh impetus to the cause of reform at home. Burke warned his readers that a new political society was being erected in France on the most abstract general principles and the wildest speculative theories. In their appeals to universal and inalienable natural rights, and to abstract concepts of liberty, equality and fraternity, the French were placing far too much reliance on human reason. They were ignoring divine
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providence, the flawed nature of man and the hard lessons of history. The French revolutionaries were acting under the dangerous delusion that social arrangements and political institutions were simply the artificial products of human reason. This unwarranted confidence in human reason needed to be rejected. Men had to recognize that the social and political order in any country was, in part, the creation of divine providence and, in part, the result of innumerable small changes, slight adjustments and even sheer accidents occurring over hundreds of years. The French revolutionaries were ignorant, self-seeking and mean-spirited men, who were determined to seize power from their social superiors. They had no understanding that firm government was needed to restrain human passions and to prevent the tyranny of the ignorant majority over the talented minority. The consequence of placing too much confidence in human reason, and of elevating human will above religion, justice and experience, would be an inevitable and rapid descent into social anarchy and unrestrained terror.

Burke’s *Reflections* was an immediate publishing success, though there were many who believed that his reactions to the French Revolution were exaggerated, unbalanced and unjustified. Many radical critics, including Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, Joseph Priestley and James Mackintosh, rushed to counter his arguments and his fears, while other writers came to Burke’s defence. Over the next few years several hundred published contributions were made to the profound and bitter discussion on the merits or dangers of the French Revolution. Some of the radical responses to Burke defended the character and principles of Richard Price, attacked Burke for reneging on his former liberal principles, condemned the abuses of the *ancien régime* in France and justified the French efforts to achieve reform. James Mackintosh’s *Vindiciae Gallicae* (1791) was probably the best attempt to defend the principles of, and to vindicate the actions taken by, the French Revolutionaries. Other radicals used the opportunity created by the excitement aroused by Burke’s *Reflections* to advance their own political agenda without replying directly to Burke’s arguments. In the first part of his *Rights of Man* (1791), Thomas Paine deliberately abandoned any appeal to the past or reliance on prescription, insisting instead that each age had the right to establish any political system that would best serve its own ends and purposes. The present age must be free to reject the tyranny of the past, and to inaugurate a new age of more extensive liberty. All men were created equal, and possessed the inalienable natural rights of liberty, property and the pursuit of happiness. To maintain these natural rights in civil society, the authority of those in power must be subjected to the sovereign power of the people. A written constitution must place limits on the executive and the legislature, and must clearly delineate the civil liberties of all subjects.
In the even more influential second part of the *Rights of Man* (1792), Paine demonstrated how a reformed political system could alleviate the distress of the poor by reducing taxes on the many, and imposing a property tax on the rich to finance social welfare reforms, including old age pensions, child allowances and maternity benefits.

In his *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793), William Godwin offered the most sophisticated critique of the existing political and social order, and advanced the most optimistic and utopian radical vision of the future if only men were governed by reason and not their passions. He attacked monarchy and aristocracy as unjustified by reason, and he argued that the unequal distribution of property was the greatest source of all social evils. He urged universal benevolence, advocated the promotion of the public good and believed in a future of unlimited human perfectibility. He wished to see the abolition of all government institutions and the radical extension of individual liberty. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft mounted a spirited case for the rights of women, but she argued primarily to free women from male oppression rather than to grant them an active role in politics. She wanted to free women from the authority of fathers and husbands, to grant them greater rights over their property and their children and to give them greater access to education and the learned professions. She believed that women were potentially the intellectual, moral and legal equals of men, but she did not explicitly demand that they should be granted the right to vote or to sit in Parliament or serve in government. A handful of radicals did broach the subject of women being granted political rights, but only tentatively. Thomas Spence conceded that women should be allowed to vote, but he did not expect them to take an active role in public life because of the delicacy of their sex. Spence’s radicalism rested primarily on his Land Plan, which he discussed in most of his publications. He urged the elimination of the private ownership of landed property or natural resources, and wished to see these placed under the control of parochial corporations that would lease them out to the highest bidder. The money so raised would be used to pay for the limited expenses of a reduced national government and for the building of various public works and amenities. The remainder of each parish’s income would be shared out equally every three months between every man, woman and child living in the parish. Under his system, Spence believed that excessive wealth and power would no longer be accumulated, and that dire poverty would be eliminated.

Although the needs of the poor, and the question of redistributing wealth, were discussed by only a few British radicals – the vast majority were content to advocate parliamentary reform – their arguments did much to alarm
conservative opinion in Britain. They led to repeated accusations that all British radicals were intent on confiscating private property, by force if necessary. Aware of the damage that such charges were doing to the cause of reform, many radical societies published handbills explicitly rejecting any suggestion that they wished to undermine the principle of private property or the right of inheritance. The Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information, for example, insisted that its members sought equal political representation, and were ‘not speaking of that visionary equality of property, the practical assertion of which would desolate the world, and re-plunge it into the darkest and wildest barbarism’.² Despite such disclaimers, it is clear that the more popular radical societies hoped that, if their demands for full political rights were met, they would see a freer press, a fairer judicial system, cheaper and more honest government, lower taxes, lower prices, more schools and a lower prison population.³

The political demands of the British radicals, expressed particularly strongly in 1792–3, alarmed conservative opinion in Britain because they coincided with growing violence and instability in France, and the outbreak of war in Europe. The ultra-radical ideas and practices of the French Jacobins, as they faced the possibility of internal counter-revolution and foreign invasion, seemed to confirm the fears that Burke had expressed in his Reflections, and this released a flood of conservative propaganda that deluged Britain with warnings about the danger posed to the political and social order in Britain by French Revolutionaries and their radical admirers in Britain. A host of British propagandists, including John Bowles, William Jones, Robert Nares, Arthur Young, Samuel Horsley and Hannah More, joined Burke in seeking to halt the spread of French principles across Britain. They produced propaganda written in simple language and an impassioned tone so that it might elicit a militant response from the middling and lower orders of British society. They argued that, in their pursuit of unrestrained liberty, the French Jacobins were lurching from crisis to crisis, and were letting loose the mob and rendering all property insecure. The Jacobins were blamed for unleashing the ‘Terror’ in France, and condemned as armed fanatics, who, having destroyed monarchy and aristocracy, were now conspiring to destroy all laws, all government and all religion. More alarming still, deluded British radicals were threatening to reform the British constitution. If they were not stopped, they would destroy all order and hierarchy in the British state, and encourage the poor to pillage the rich.

Once Britain was at war with Revolutionary France, from February 1793, arch-conservatives in Britain urged the nation to strain every sinew until ultimate victory was achieved. They saw the war as an ideological struggle of
supreme importance, as almost a new war of religion, which had to be won at all costs. The British people must support the war effort in order to preserve a constitution that guaranteed their liberties, their personal security and their property. The war was necessary to save the nation from anarchy, revolution and internal violence. Burke, in his *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1795–6), insisted that there could be no compromise with the French Jacobins. Others were even more forthright:

> It is for national existence, that we arm. It is for Religion against Atheism; for justice and security against universal depredation; for humanity against barbarous cruelty; for social order; for legal freedom; for all that distinguishes men in civil society, from a band of robbers, or an horde of savages. The British sword is drawn in the cause of God, and of our Country, and in defence of our lives, our families, and our all.⁴

**Radical societies and loyalist associations**

Several organizations supporting political reform, including the Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information, had been established in Britain well before the French Revolution, but they had declined in the late 1780s. They revived because of the political excitement engendered by the French Revolution, and they were soon joined by more radical and more popular societies dedicated to political reform. The most important of these new societies was the London Corresponding Society (LCS), founded on 25 January 1792 by a small group of artisans led by Thomas Hardy, a shoemaker. They agreed to meet at a tavern each week to discuss political issues, and they began to levy a weekly subscription of one penny. This society drafted a political programme dedicated to the radical reform of the electoral system. Several branches were established across the metropolis, with each one sending a delegate to the general committee, which met each Thursday evening. This general committee elected in turn a smaller executive committee that coordinated the objectives and policies of the society as a whole. The LCS drew up several addresses to the people, urging the cause of parliamentary reform, and began corresponding with reformers in France and across Britain. It is difficult to be precise about the size or social composition of the LCS. It claimed a total membership of 5,000, but attendance at meetings fluctuated considerably, and the active membership was probably around 3,000. When subjected to government repression, the membership declined to about a thousand by the end of 1796, and to a few hundred by 1798. Many members were small craftsmen and artisans, with little formal education, though others were attorneys, booksellers, printers
and shopkeepers. There is no evidence that the LCS ever had much appeal for unskilled day-labourers or the very poor.

Similar radical societies sprang up in many old and new towns across Britain, including Norwich, Newcastle, Leeds and Manchester. There were certainly many dozens of these popular radical societies, though we cannot be sure of their exact number. The most active and famous in the English provinces was the Sheffield Society for Constitutional Information, which was set up at the end of 1791. Total membership of this society may have reached 2,500 by June 1792, though the active membership was probably around 600. Many of these were connected to the steel industry. They were organized much like the LCS. The local newspaper, the Sheffield Register, supported them; and they distributed political literature in the vicinity of Sheffield, and communicated with other radical societies further afield. The Sheffield radicals secured 4,000 signatures for their petition for parliamentary reform in the spring of 1793, and they attracted more than 5,000 people to an open-air protest meeting on 28 February 1794. In Scotland, there were several branches of the Friends of the People that did much to organize in Edinburgh first a Scottish, and then a British, convention of radical delegates to promote parliamentary reform in 1792–3. The last of these conventions adopted French Revolutionary procedures, forms of address and songs. Despite such efforts, the radicals were never united into a single organization with clearly identified leaders.

The popular radical societies organized debates, public addresses and petitions, including a campaign against the government’s repressive legislation in 1795 that resulted in 95 petitions signed by over 130,000 protesters. John Thelwall and Henry Redhead Yorke went on lecture tours to speak to radical groups, and some large open-air public meetings were held, especially in 1795. The radicals were active in producing or supporting several radical newspapers and periodicals, and they also made determined efforts to educate the people about their political rights and the abuses of the government. When war broke out, most popular radicals were opposed to any interference in the internal affairs of France, regarding British involvement as unwise, unnecessary and unjust. There were many crowd disturbances provoked by industrial disputes, the high price of food and the impressment of men into the army, militia and navy, but little effort in Britain (though there was in Ireland) to start a violent revolution on the French model. When the government resorted to arrests and repressive legislation, most British radicals lost heart, or moderated their public activities. Some did emigrate rather than submit, and some began to arm themselves and to contemplate revolution should the French ever invade Britain, but only in Ireland was there a large-scale revolutionary movement committed to an armed rising.
The resulting Irish rebellion of 1798 was crushed with considerable ferocity before a small French army could land and provide effective military support.

The French Revolution did much to galvanize British radicals into political action in the earlier 1790s, but the French ‘Terror’ and the French war did much to undermine their efforts thereafter. Just as the French Revolution revitalized the British reform movement after 1789, so did it stimulate a powerful conservative reaction against reform. There was a conservative reaction to the efforts in 1787–90 to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts (restricting office under the crown and in borough corporations to members of the Church of England) that led to the formation of many Church and King clubs designed to defend the existing order in church and state. Members of such clubs attacked Protestant dissenters and political radicals celebrating Bastille Day in Birmingham in July 1791, and attacked the property and printing press of the radicals in Manchester in December 1792. Growing violence in France, and the outbreak of war in Europe, helped to produce some 386 loyal addresses to the King in support of the existing constitution in Britain by September 1792. In the winter of 1792–3 effigies of Thomas Paine were publicly and ceremonially burned in hundreds of towns and villages across the country. Although officially sponsored, large numbers of ordinary Britons were very willing of their own accord to join in these demonstrations of loyalty to the status quo and hostility to radical change.

On 23 November 1792 a public announcement appeared in the Star, a pro-government newspaper, urging the founding of an Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers (APLP). The advertisement was placed by John Reeves, who later claimed to be acting independently, although it has recently been proved that the government did know of his plans in advance, and did subsequently amend his proposal to serve its own political ends. After consulting with the government, the APLP declared that it would not only endeavour to halt the distribution of radical publications, but would disseminate its own cheap publications in order to persuade the poor not to be seduced by radical aims, and to recognize the benefits they enjoyed under the existing political and social order. The first APLP was set up at the Crown and Anchor tavern in London in November 1792, and within a few months many more similar loyalist associations had been established across the country, until they formed the largest popular political movement in the country. There were soon hundreds of these loyalist associations, perhaps even as many as 2,000. Active membership was largely confined to local men of property, and to Anglican clergymen and magistrates, though they did gain the support of
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more humble men. They were able to submit dozens of loyal addresses to the crown, many signed by hundreds of local people, and some by several thousand. It seems likely that the loyalists in Britain came to outnumber the radicals.

The loyalist associations produced and disseminated their own political tracts, and they also distributed hundreds of tracts written by such conservative propagandists as John Bowles, William Jones, William Paley and Hannah More. Some associations resorted to overt violence against the radicals, especially in Lancashire, and many warned innkeepers and publicans that they risked losing their licences if they allowed radical groups to hold meetings on their premises. This often had the desired effect. Men of property were also encouraged not to rent land or offer employment to, or make purchases from, those who could be regarded as seditious radicals. In many areas, the loyalists acted as the eyes and ears of the government, and reported any suspicious political behaviour to the Home Office or to local magistrates. Loyalist associations were encouraged to assist the war effort by offering bounties to men who would enlist in the army or navy, and by providing extra blankets, gloves and stockings for the British troops serving and suffering in Flanders in the winter of 1793–4. As the war expanded and the threat of invasion grew, the loyalist associations became a source of recruits for a voluntary and part-time armed force that could resist any armed invasion from France, and that might also be used to intimidate British radicals. In March 1794 the government decided to raise just such a force, the Volunteers, that soon attracted substantial sums of money, and many tens of thousands of recruits. Men of property, who had demonstrated their loyalty to the existing constitution, commanded the Volunteer corps, and they recruited into the ranks only those poor men that they believed they could trust. The parades, military exercises, celebrations, and patriotic speeches and addresses of the Volunteers demonstrated the loyalty of the propertied classes, intimidated their radical opponents and promoted a patriotic reaction among the people at large. The Volunteers ‘rendered disloyalty unfashionable, sedition dangerous and insurrection almost impossible’.6

The APLP and other loyalist associations did much to weaken the influence and disrupt the activities of the radicals by 1796, and many of the latter lost focus, commitment and direction. As the radicals weakened, so did the organization of the loyalists, but this did not prevent repeated demonstrations of political loyalty and popular patriotism in the later 1790s. In 1795–6, and in 1800, hundreds of loyal addresses were sent to the King after attacks on his person. There were similar massive demonstrations after every victory in the war against France, and after the ending of the alarming naval mutinies
of 1797. The clergy and ministers of all the various Christian churches in Britain delivered thousands of sermons, and printed hundreds of them, in opposition to French principles, in defence of the British constitution and in support of the war effort. Many leading conservative evangelicals, most notably Hannah More, contributed essays to the enormously successful *Cheap Repository Tracts* that began to pour from the press from 1798, and which were distributed as free or cheap publications to the poor. More militant loyalists produced such long-lasting periodicals as *The Anti-Jacobin* and *The Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine*. There seems little doubt that, by the late 1790s, the loyalist movement had done much to condemn French principles and to weaken the appeal of the radicals at home, as well as offering considerable support to the government’s war effort against the French Revolutionaries abroad.

**Government repression and opposition weakness**

William Pitt and his ministerial colleagues were originally prepared to be mere spectators of the astonishing events in France; and they saw no reason to interfere in the internal affairs of France, even when Austria and Prussia chose to do so in 1792. It was the French success in hurling back the forces that had attacked them, their issuing of the Edict of Fraternity in November 1792, offering military support to any people wishing to overthrow their rulers, and the French invasion of the Austrian Netherlands (modern Belgium) that brought Britain into the war. Once involved in the war, the members and committed supporters of the British government were divided on how best to conduct operations, with Henry Dundas and others preferring to wage a war at sea and in the colonies; with William Grenville and others believing that a land war in Europe was essential; and with yet others convinced that the ultimate aim must be to overthrow the French Revolution and restore the Bourbon monarchy. When British forces achieved very little on the continent and French forces became increasingly successful, and when several British efforts to make peace were rejected by the triumphant French, the British government became increasingly concerned that the French might launch a successful invasion, and that the invaders might find a welcome from British radicals. The British government was not content to rely on the virtues of the British constitution, or the arguments of their loyalist supporters, to counter the appeal of the radicals. It was determined to use its own resources to defeat the radical movement at home. While Prime Minister Pitt was genuinely concerned that the French might find many supporters in Britain who might support their cause, he was also ready to exploit the situation in order to increase his own support within