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978-0-521-28656-5 - Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy

Edited by Marilyn Butler

Excerpt

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Introductory essay

This book selects from the pamphlet war of the 1790s. As a public issue, the 'Revolution debate' lasted for about six years, from the first English rejoicings at France's new dawn in 1789, to December 1795, when Pitt's government introduced measures to stop the spread of radicalism by the printed and spoken word. But the questions in contention cannot be understood except in a longer perspective. When the dispute opens, the combatants are speaking of a revolution that is Britain's, not France's – the Glorious Revolution of the seventeenth century. At the close they are no longer writing of political revolution as imminent or practicable. Yet the themes and techniques of the 1790s do not disappear but go underground, to re-emerge in at least two distinct areas of nineteenth-century controversy: the working-class radical movement, and its press, of the post-Napoleonic era; and the more specialised, refined, but sometimes notionally radical body of literature known as the Romantic movement. For many of those who afterwards played a part in nineteenth-century controversy, the course taken by the Revolution debate was significant, even formative.

In 1790, Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* set out to rally English sentiment and patriotism in support of the existing aristocratic system of government. During the next three years, scores of radical writers, among whom Paine and Godwin are the most powerful, replied with critiques of monarchy and aristocracy, and with alternative proposals which include republicanism, agrarian socialism and anarchy. Alfred Cobban calls the debate 'perhaps the last real discussion of the fundamentals of politics in this country. . . . Issues as great have been raised in our day, but it cannot be pretended that they have evoked a political discussion on the intellectual level of that inspired by the French Revolution.'¹ The effect is not that of a protracted university seminar, dedicated to studying events overseas; discussion centres instead on British society, what it is like and what it ought to be like. Rather than limiting themselves, as modern academics often have them do, to theories such as 'natural rights', the participants are putting pressure on those in power, on behalf of those

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who would like more of it, and in 1792, at least, the word 'revolution' comes to have a meaning that is close to home and practical: should Britain continue to be governed by owners of land? Why do so few own land? Even, why need individuals own land at all?

Nowadays we lack commonly accepted rules for reading books like Burke's *Reflections*, Paine's *Rights of Man*, Wollstonecraft's *Rights of Woman*, or Godwin's *Political Justice*. A philosopher sees Godwin in *Political Justice* grappling with 'perennial problems . . . : government and human progress, the power of truth and the nature of man, friendship and obligation, marriage, sex and population'.² A historian is concerned with its influence, which he notes 'was confined to a small and highly literate circle'.³ Literary critics usually regard *Political Justice* as peripheral to their subject, perhaps of most interest because some greater writer, Wordsworth or Shelley, had to reject it before arriving at the more subjective, irrationalist theories appropriate to poets. If the philosopher and the literary critic collaborated, their account of the book's meaning would be enriched by the need to relate its 'perennial' matter to its method and manner, the text's subliminal ploys to win the reader's agreement. If either would consider the circumstances of the book's production, too often the concern of only the historian, they would see an unstable but more fascinating work, its matter and manner responding to the events of 1790–5, changing even in its relationship to Burke's *Reflections* (see pp. 151–2).

Study of the Revolution controversy as a whole reveals the artificiality of the practice, common among philosophers and critics, of examining an isolated book out of its context. The Revolution debate represents in its totality not discrete texts and not the *oeuvres* of autonomous authors, but a single series of works which depend for their meaning upon one another, upon the historical situation which gave them birth, and upon the different kinds of reader for whom they were designed. Perhaps two-thirds of the words in this book emerged from a community of writers, personally known to one another, stimulating and sustaining one another, at first, especially, the writer-readers of a shared project. This collective literary enterprise, and its break-up, presents the critic with a phenomenon of great methodological interest, as well as historical importance. It is so clearly focussed upon a single complex issue, and so consciously a genuinely interactive debate, that a special approach has been adopted here, and the principles of selection look rather different from those of other volumes in the present series. As usual, the main texts (which here are those by Burke, Paine, and Godwin) are given at length. But on this

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occasion they are accompanied by a large number of shorter extracts from other writers, including a group who carry the story from Paine and the theorists of popular language to Wordsworth. The reader can follow the successive phases of the debate, and observe how each writer responds to his predecessors, to his public, and to a European crisis of unique fascination and significance.

English radicalism encountered a severe set-back in the mid 1790s, the end of all hopes of any substantial reform legislation for well over a generation. In 1790, however, the mood on the radical side was unusually cheerful. Between 1760 and 1790, there had been a series of extra-parliamentary campaigns aimed at extending the franchise further (or much further) down the social scale, and at re-drawing parliamentary boundaries so that the new conurbations of the Midlands and the North, notably Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester, and Birmingham, were represented. The lobbying was done either by associations, hitherto run by liberal-minded gentlemen,⁴ or in books, newspapers, and pamphlets. The era sees a spate of liberal writing on the Constitution, important for our purposes because it is the 'story so far' behind the radical pamphlets of the early 1790s.

We think of English eighteenth-century government as stable and broadly successful in achieving its ends; but the critique of the system was also strong, deeply rooted, and articulate, so that by the last half of the century its disparate strands had merged into what was in effect an alternative ideology. A Whig oligarchy governed with the support of City interests, controlling Parliament through its network of personal contacts and its monopoly of patronage, and maintaining an expansive, competitive, and often aggressive foreign policy in the interests of British trade. The system's natural opponents among the politicised classes included (especially early in the century) elements of the old Tory country gentry, and of the urban Old Whigs, or radicals, all of whom looked back, within their respective intellectual traditions, to the fierce doctrinaire disputes of the seventeenth century. By the second half of the eighteenth century, this opposition was generating a powerful rhetoric, heady enough to sustain the American Revolution, vague enough to manifest itself ubiquitously in the arts; for, in the poetry and painting of 1770–1800, salient themes include a sense of personal liberty and autonomy, a belief in civic virtue, and a hatred of corruption – all of which can be seen as symptomatic of a 'republican' tradition in Western European thought at least as old as Machiavelli.⁵ When he applies himself more specifically to the Constitution, the late-eighteenth-century radical seeks to extend the democratic element in the system, which is notionally held

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to be a balance between monarch, aristocracy, and commons. Typically, then, the radical criticises the monarch, or the aristocracy, or both, and represents these institutions as encroaching upon the populace or upon its preserve, the House of Commons. He sees existing government as not truly tripartite, but aristocratic. He therefore argues for economical reform, because he believes that an oligarchic government maintains its influence through its control of patronage, or that it manipulates the economy in favour of its own small class, the 'landed interest'. The radical opposes war because, again, he thinks wars tend to profit certain wealthy interests (like the aristocratic owners of West Indian plantations), while they entail loss to ordinary commerce, and hardship to the population at large.

This is the common currency of radical writing at almost any point in the closing decades of the century, as familiar to the literary reader from the poetry of Cowper or Blake as to the historian from newspapers and parliamentary speeches. But, though the principles are much repeated, the ideas evolve during the 1770s and 1780s, becoming larger and more insistently radical; arguably the ideas, and the language in which they are couched, begin to run ahead of real reformist sentiment. It was in 1780, during the American war, that English radicals adopted a platform of demands which would remain unsatisfied until the middle of the next century, like universal adult male suffrage and the redistribution of parliamentary seats according to population; perhaps, indeed, liberal sentiments were more widely found among the educated classes in 1780 than a decade later.

The most public, overt agency of reform in the period – the lobbying, petitioning political association – was not much in evidence in the 1780s: the important groups had to be founded or re-founded early in the next decade. Instead the most coherent group among the reformers, the rational Dissenters, relied on the support of friendly liberal Whigs to bring up in Parliament their special cause, the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, the seventeenth-century legislation which prevented non-Anglicans from holding public office: bills which would have given them these civic rights were introduced and defeated in 1787, 1789, 1790, and 1791. But in the era of the American Revolution, the general case for reform had already been eloquently made by the two leading spokesmen for the Dissenters, Richard Price, author of *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (1776), and Joseph Priestley, whose prolific works include *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (1768). In intention, these two leading radicals have limited objectives, and are hardly (by

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modern standards) democrats: Priestley, for example, does not advocate any redistribution of property and certainly does not envisage handing over power to the masses, for he expects the enfranchised common man to choose an educated representative.⁶ Yet Priestley and other Dissenting intellectuals are all along in a false position, cut off both from the governmental process and from meaningful political discussion with members of other social groups. The result is that during the 1780s and early 1790s they and those like them evolve a rhetoric of liberty which is international rather than patriotic, 'levelling' rather than hierarchical, and above all misleadingly unconstrained, since it puts its claims in respect of the individual conscience, which has no class accent. The message that comes across, unspecific yet unmistakable, is *insubordination*. A phrase like 'the sovereignty of the people' acquires almost indefinite implications, including, for Richard Price, the concept that the people can dismiss their monarch (see p. 29). The extremist tone of the Dissenters' rhetoric may have helped to lose gentry and middle-class support for reform in 1792–5 – if, indeed, widespread reformist sentiment was still there to lose. Extremism, out of step with real sentiment in the country, is the main characteristic of this body of writing, perhaps insufficiently noticed because modern historians of these events are prone to discuss the class affiliations of the writers, their conscious intentions and their careful caveats, rather than their subliminal impact.

Fired by enthusiasm at events in France, and by the too-ready sympathy of a likeminded, pre-selected circle of readers, the leading London radicals produce between 1791 and early 1793 a series of innovative and utopian proposals. Paine, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft envisage, for example, the establishment of a humane welfare state; or the ultimate withering away of the centralised state; or a new egalitarianism in inter-personal relations which would do away with the employee's subservience to the employer or the woman's to a man.

But these are the celebrated performances, preserved for us perhaps by their extremism; the debate, as it evolved after 1790, was often more humdrum or more practical. Most of the excerpts I have chosen originate as pamphlets, published at prices varying from one penny (Thomas Spence's *Meridian Sun of Liberty*) to three shillings (Burke's *Reflections*): the price is an indicator of the public aimed at. A few came out in books, in one volume or more, and costing at least a pound (Wollstonecraft, Young, Godwin). Rather more were not independently published, but contributions to journals or newspapers. The writers involved in the debate chose different ways to

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reach the public or rather, in each case, a section of the public, defined by the price it would be willing to pay.

A publishing industry with discriminating techniques of marketing already existed in London (and almost everything in the present selection emanated from London). It was largely run by Dissenters, of whom two of the most influential were the Unitarian Joseph Johnson, publisher, bookseller, and owner-editor of the *Analytical Review*, and Ralph Griffiths, proprietor of the *Monthly Review*. Though these were the two best reviews in 1791–3, their only competitors, the *Critical* and the *English*, were also sympathetic to the Dissenters and to the cause of reform.⁷ It became a matter of conservative comment, indeed scandal, that early in the decade ‘informed opinion’ was in the hands of a closely knit circle for which Johnson’s dinner table in particular served as a focus, since Johnson was the publisher, friend, at times the host of Joseph Priestley, John Aikin, Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Joel Barlow, William Blake, Erasmus Darwin, R. L. and Maria Edgeworth, Henry Fuseli, William Wordsworth, Thomas Christie, William Godwin, Tom Paine, John Horne Tooke, Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Beddoes, and Humphry Davy.

The emergence of this group of interconnected radical intellectuals looked dangerous in a period when the political importance of ‘public opinion’ was becoming recognised. Even oligarchies cannot govern without a basis of support, or acquiescence; the proliferation of comment in books and newspapers, much of it hostile, brought the extent of that support into question, and made Pitt’s Administration nervous. By the early nineteenth century, it could be claimed that British governments might fall if the press turned against them. Though this state of affairs shocked many members of the Administration and its supporters, who tended to think of radical journalists as irresponsible, ignorant, and scurrilous, the liberty of the press was also widely treasured in England, even by spokesmen for the upper orders, and perceived as a valuable element in the constitution. It was ‘the great palladium of British freedom’ and ‘essential to the nature of a free state’, according to the constitutional lawyer Blackstone, while parliamentary liberal Whigs went further. ‘Against despotism of any kind or in any shape’, cried Sheridan in a celebrated speech, ‘let me but array a free Press, and the liberties of England will stand unshaken’.⁸ To its friends and its enemies, the press could be seen as a new fourth estate of the realm. A more cynical view of the real influence of opinion-mongering intellectuals in pre-Reform England would be that they operated as a safety valve for the Establishment; they might not often change government policy, but they gave an illusion of

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effectiveness to writers and readers, so that as a whole this class failed to take up the option of organised political action.⁹ The view at the time, however, was that the more vociferous reformist writing *was* part of the political action, and it was upon this premise that the radicals and their antagonists in the government acted.

The twelve-month period beginning in February 1792 was the *annus mirabilis* of eighteenth-century radicalism, for it saw not only the appearance of its classic texts, but the peak activity of radical associations, in London and in the provinces, which were now for the first time not merely joined but run by working men. The London Society for Constitutional Information was, it is true, led by intellectuals: The S.C.I. was John Horne Tooke's revival, in 1790, of a society founded ten years earlier by Major John Cartwright, R. B. Sheridan, Thomas Day, and others 'to revive in the minds of their fellow-citizens, THE COMMONALTY AT LARGE, a knowledge of their lost rights'.¹⁰ Occasionally in the provinces educated men took the initiative while working men stood aloof: in Derby and Belper in 1792, the manufacturer William Strutt and the doctor Erasmus Darwin met opposition from workpeople when they attempted to distribute the Paineite propaganda sent them by the S.C.I. Much more commonly, gentlemen continued to meet in their Literary and Philosophical societies, in order to debate revolution in its various aspects at a safely general level.

For many modern historians, the most significant feature of the reform agitation of the 1790s is the spontaneous growth, in London and in cities like Sheffield and Manchester, of associations dominated by working men. Their point of contact in London, indeed the society specially founded to provide the organisational link between radicals, was the London Corresponding Society, founded in January 1792 by the shoemaker Thomas Hardy, with unlimited membership and a subscription of a penny a week. As a political phenomenon, the L.C.S., with its discussions, its support for radicals in the Midlands, the North, and Scotland, its links with the French National Convention, its mass meetings, was undoubtedly the single most important organisation in the radical campaign. But the written word remained the other crucial weapon, one on which the popular societies were, in the long run, dependent. Here it was the S.C.I. which took the decisive step, a step which temporarily bonded the middle-class intellectuals to the mass movement, when in May 1792 it determined to print as a pamphlet and distribute nationwide Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*.

No other production of the pamphlet war achieved the impact or

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the notoriety of Paine's. While the London intellectuals were self-evidently addressing one another, or similar members of the propertied classes in the provinces, they represented no threat to established order. But the combination of rapidly spreading political organisations with a supply of eloquent radical writings to politicise the masses was another thing entirely. Late 1792 sees the build-up of the antijacobin backlash, a largely spontaneous campaign to silence agitation and to ensure the loyalty of the common people. The gentry organised tenants into groups of yeomanry, a kind of Home Guard which could not have stood up to the French army, but imbibed sound patriotic principles along with its drill. A recently returned Chief Justice of Newfoundland, John Reeves, founded an Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, which commissioned and then circulated a spate of popularly written pamphlets – religious, loyalist, and soon far more numerous than radical reading-matter aimed at the same audience.

In the second half of 1792, Pitt's Administration began its series of moves to stop the spread of radicalism through the written word. Paine left in September for France, but in December 1792 he was tried and sentenced in his absence for his authorship of a seditious libel, *The Rights of Man*. In court the Attorney-General made it clear that Paine's crime could not be estimated by considering his book as so many mere words on the page, or as abstract ideas. Its being placed in the hands of the masses made it a political tool; the cheapness was an essential part of the offence. From this point, the government kept up a steady pressure against the popular side of radical publishing, and regularly pulled in not so much the writers, but the publishers and distributors of Paineite literature, such as the booksellers Symonds, Eaton, and Spence in London (see pp. 244 n.12, 185, 190) and Richard Phillips in Leicester, and the editor James Montgomery in Sheffield.

By contrast, the intellectual leaders and writers remained for a while relatively safe, because their role was perceived as in some sense gentlemanly, and thus privileged, unlike that of the commercial bookseller or political organiser. Although the parliamentary Whigs, headed by Charles James Fox, and their association the Friends of the People, were considered faint allies by the radicals of the L.C.S. and S.C.I., they were of one mind, and practically helpful, on the principle of the free expression of opinion. In 1792 Fox got a Libel Act through Parliament which ensured that the jury, not the judge, would be charged with determining whether or not a particular article amounted to libel. English juries over the next few years were to prove

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notably reluctant to find for the government, as they demonstrated when they threw out the charges of treason against the London radical leaders Hardy, Tooke, and Thelwall in November 1794 (see p. 169). Scottish law left more to the judge, a difference which in 1793–4 sent five prominent middle-class radicals to Botany Bay for either seven or fourteen years. The parliamentary Whigs became a fully motivated Opposition again in late 1795, when Pitt forced new repressive laws through Parliament (see p. 198). At this point pamphleteers of the extra-parliamentary movement, like Godwin and Coleridge, seem indistinguishable from aristocratic parliamentary Whigs like Fox and Sheridan.

But by 1795 the freedom they were claiming was to express their minds as individuals, not as a group. The growing importance, the respectable, consensual popularity, of the issue of free expression, must have worked to detach the leading writers from the reform movement in which they began. The dignity they perceive in writing increases in proportion to its intricacy and individuality, and is compromised (says Godwin in 1796) if the writing aims to express the views of a group (see p. 162). In fact, the uproar over Paine now looks like the crucial moment of the controversy, as decisive a turning-point in the psychology of the radical intellectual as in general political opinion. Paine forced his friends and colleagues to see themselves for the first time as activists – in, moreover, what was now a mass movement rather than a coterie or a middle-class ‘interest’. The re-thinking which had to follow this development drove some prominent reformers, like Mackintosh (p. 90) and Bishop Watson (p. 145), out of the radical camp, and forced painful, protracted revisions on the more heavily committed, very well exemplified in the defensive strategies of Godwin. The shock and anxiety felt by intellectuals was all the greater because their prestige in the late eighteenth century had risen so extraordinarily high. Godwin’s novel about a man subjected to witch-hunting when he tries to tell the truth, *Caleb Williams* (1794), expresses the fears of every critic of the system, once he finds Paine being described by politicians, judges, churchmen, and fellow-journalists as a fugitive and a criminal.

Even without Paineite incendiarism and the backlash provoked by it, nothing could stop the ebbing of the radical tide once England began to move towards total war with France. These two most powerful European nations had been rivals, and intermittently at war, for over a century; once the French government was not merely revolutionary, but aggressively bent on exporting revolution, external pressure forced English opinion towards conservatism. Before war

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broke out, during 1792, the French Revolution became much more radical. In November the Convention issued a decree of 'fraternity and assistance' to all peoples, threatening every conservative European government with a fifth column within the state.

For the time being many English radicals nevertheless tried to maintain their links with the Convention in Paris; Paine in his exile became a deputy. After war was declared between France and England in February 1793, fairly moderate members of the opposition, in and out of Parliament, believed it to be the ploy of an aggressive, aristocratic English government against the peace-loving, humane, and united people of France. It was not altogether easy for English critics of Pitt's government to maintain a rosy view of the new French republic. They had to contend with disconcerting news: the September Massacres of 1792, the execution of first the King and then the Queen in 1793, the Terror of 1794 and the royalist rebellion in the Vendée of 1793–5. Yet some radicals and liberal Whigs saw the war, to the end, as England's 'fault'; Godwin claimed that no one who had once favoured the French deserted them, at least until in 1797 the government across the Channel became unmistakably a military dictatorship, and French armies had marched into the Low Countries, Switzerland, and Italy.¹¹

Insidiously, however, even the most stalwart radical was caught up in the powerful change of feeling which begins with the mass distribution of *The Rights of Man*. With the publication of *Political Justice* in February 1793, the month the war began, the heroic age of the *expansion* of radical thinking comes to an end. After this, the pamphlets drop away sharply in number, and the new ones are less innovatory. Rather than attempting new theories, or new applications of old theories, they repeat familiar principles and make the kind of broad humanitarian points that are calculated to hold, and reassure, the right-minded reader.¹² The years 1793–6 see the emergence of John Thelwall, sentimental poet and novelist, journalist, lecturer, and orator rather than original thinker, as the leading figure among the radicals.

Many brave and risky efforts to both organise radicals and write for them occur in these post-Paine years. The political objective now is to attract and hold the widest possible support for an anti-government platform; activists no longer use the self-sustaining discourse of a closed clique of convinced reformers. We are judging from the viewpoint of professional intellectuals when we object that the journals and pamphlets that follow Paine, a more working-class phase of the movement, seem (if Thomas Spence is excepted) less innovatory