

## Reflections on a Revolution in Britain:

### Edmund Burke's Defense of the British Constitution

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The French Revolution spurred people around the world to question their established governments in the late eighteenth-century. Thomas Paine defended the French Revolution in *The Rights of Man* (1791). But Paine's work was an attempted rebuttal of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which questioned the application of revolution to Britain. Burke felt that history showed the true strength of Britain since she had been a power to contend with for many years and was, in fact, becoming more powerful. Compared with Britain's long period of success, Burke believed that the new French government was too young to propose changes in other countries, especially since France had ignored its own history. Paine, on the other hand, claimed that the British government was holding onto outdated ideas of the past, therefore refusing to let its people live for the future. While Paine's argument might appear the more progressive and democratic today, Burke's argument deserves to be taken seriously, especially as it was popularized by writers like Hannah More.

At age 61, Burke published his response to the French revolution not for "France in the first instance, but this country," Britain.<sup>[1]</sup> He wrote *Reflections* more to prove the British were right in their aversion to revolution than that the French were wrong. In fact, he felt that the French should have modeled themselves after the British in staging their change in government. The French failed, he believed, because the National Assembly had "a power to make a constitution which shall conform to their design . . . instead of finding themselves obliged to conform to a fixed constitution."<sup>[2]</sup> This lack of strict reorganization led to a wrong start in the new government and to abuses of the system. Without a strict constitution to conform to, the National Assembly had no such restriction.

Also, Burke argued that to have ensured a successful revolution, France should have looked at its past to fix the problems that had previously occurred. Instead, the French set a precedent to start fresh each revolution, but "people will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors."<sup>[3]</sup> Burke felt that England's Glorious Revolution of 1688-89 showed how one could improve a government without a complete or violent renovation. At that time, "England found itself without a king . . . [but] did not, however, dissolve the whole fabric" of government when compensating for this loss.<sup>[4]</sup> Instead, the country proceeded with the Revolution "to preserve our *antient*

indisputable laws and liberties.”<sup>[5]</sup> The British wanted to fix what was broken, but saw the importance in keeping what had been working all along.

The French, however, did not wish to look back at the past and allow history to guide their new, fragile government, according to Burke. Paine conversely, did not see the importance in conforming to the past. He stated that, “it is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated.”<sup>[6]</sup> Paine also claimed that England was born from “a race of conquerors, whose government, like that of William the Conqueror, was founded in power.”<sup>[7]</sup> He insisted that one should “review the governments which arise out of society, in contradistinction to those which arose out of superstition and conquest.”<sup>[8]</sup> While Paine was correct as far as his example of 1066, he refused to see how far Britain has come in the time since William’s reign. Concerning the value of history, Paine also needed to realize that the science of government [is] a matter which requires experience, and even more experience than any person can gain in his whole life. . . . It is with infinite caution that any man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purpose of society.<sup>[9]</sup>

Moreover, Burke argued that inheritance had been shown to work in Britain’s past. Each family had a title and rank based on how far back its ancestors could be traced in the country, again showing the importance of history in British government. The British were eligible for the House of Lords, in the British Parliament, based on their family’s status throughout history. He stated that pivotal documents, such as the Magna Carta (1215) and the 1689 Declaration of Rights, “assert our liberties, as an entailed inheritance derived to us from our forefathers.” Burke’s argument hinged on property and inheritance: “We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage . . . and a people inheriting privileges, franchises and liberties from a long line of ancestors.”<sup>[10]</sup> This had worked for centuries for Britain, and France was mistaken to lecture Britain on how the country should be ruled.

Paine rightly questioned inheritance, believing that “titles are but nicknames.”<sup>[11]</sup> According to Burke however, the British felt they kept history alive and “that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission; without at all excluding a principle of improvement.”<sup>[12]</sup> Titles and the aristocracy form the House of Lords, offset by the House of Commons for those without titles. Despite Paine’s hatred for nobility, it was an important principle around which the British system was set.

Hannah More aimed ideas similar to those of Burke at the lower classes of Britain. More placed a Burke-Paine debate in the dialog of two villagers. When Tom the mason heard of France’s ideas of liberty and reform, he immediately called for “a new constitution. . . . I want liberty and equality and the rights of man.”<sup>[13]</sup> Tom suggested that Britain should follow France’s example, but blacksmith Jack would “sooner go to the Negroes to get learning or to

the Turks for freedom and happiness.”<sup>[14]</sup> Here, More echoed Burke’s idea that the French should have tried to emulate the British, but came upon a new idea for government and felt the need to force it on others.

Tom also supported France in its aim “for a perfect government,” but Jack explained, “you might as well cry for the moon. There’s nothing perfect in this world [but] . . . we come nearer to it than any country in the world ever did.”<sup>[15]</sup> By examining past governments and how the world was changing, Jack made the case that the British were wiser for sticking to what worked and amending what did not. The lower class read this argument about history, and was thereby exposed to Burke’s views on proper governmental change.

Burke’s fear of the new French government stemmed from his constitutional beliefs. He stated that, while King George III’s actions regarding the colonies “were not against the letter of the constitution, they were all the more against it in spirit.”<sup>[16]</sup> Burke felt that Britain held loosely onto their legal rights, but needed to examine how to properly deal with the colonies. Similarly, Burke felt the new French system was not specific enough to determine the letter of the law. Burke saw this as a weakness in the new government, and felt that the lack of strictness would further harm the new system by not requiring adherence to a constitution.

The French Revolution might also be seen as a compliment to the American Revolution that had ended officially in 1783. But, in fact, the Americans handled their revolution similarly to the British, as they attempted “to perfect the work of history [while] the French opted for the far more radical experiment of a philosophical break with the past that would create the world anew.”<sup>[17]</sup> Coming from Britain, the Americans knew history’s importance in determining the future. The colonists used what they felt worked in the British system, then changed what they felt needed improvement. Again, the French became so caught up with their “new” ideas of government, they did not think to examine how such systems had fared in the past.

Burke and Paine differ over the lessons that the French Revolution held for Britain. Paine insisted that it brought up the fundamentals that should exist in a government, which Britain lacked. He saw corruption and a conquering monarchy that had existed for too long. Burke claimed that the revolution simply showcased idealism that had gone too far. He felt the French should have followed Britain’s thoughtful handling of the Glorious Revolution, in which they sought a diplomatic answer to the succession of the crown.

Burke’s strength lay in his acceptance and study of history. He saw the importance of reflection and analysis of the past workings of the government in question. Slight change or reform was more beneficial to a state than a dramatic revolution. Britain realized this concept ages before, which is why she had remained so strong. If the French had asked for Burke’s opinion on them before their uprising, he would have had his “countrymen rather to recommend

to our neighbors the example of the British Constitution, than to take models from them on the improvement of our own.”<sup>[18]</sup>

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- <sup>[1]</sup> Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons, 1754-1790* (New York: for the History of Parliament Trust by Oxford University Press, 1964).
- <sup>[2]</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The Past Speaks*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Walter L. Arnstein (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1993), 121.
- <sup>[3]</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.
- <sup>[4]</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>[5]</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.
- <sup>[6]</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, in *The Past Speaks*, 128.
- <sup>[7]</sup> Paine, 130.
- <sup>[8]</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>[9]</sup> Burke, 123.
- <sup>[10]</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>[11]</sup> Paine, 131.
- <sup>[12]</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.
- <sup>[13]</sup> Hannah More, *Village Politics*, in *The Past Speaks*, 137.
- <sup>[14]</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>[15]</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.
- <sup>[16]</sup> From Revolution to Reconstruction, <<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/B/eburke/burke.htm>>, edited by the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.
- <sup>[17]</sup> Keith Michael Baker, “A World Transformed,” in *World History, Volume II: 1500 to the Present*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., ed. David McComb (Guilford, CT: Dushkin/ McGraw-Hill, 1998), 78.
- <sup>[18]</sup> Burke, 126.