Uniquely British: Britain's Intellectual Response to Revolution

Jon Otto

Under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Davis

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Any study of the Atlantic world during the latter half of the eighteenth and the beginning

of the nineteenth centuries must include an examination of the American and French

Revolutions. These two conflicts led to great changes in the political, social, and cultural

structures within their respective places of occurrence. The American and French Revolutions

also had consequences in places well beyond the areas where conflict happened. These

revolutions' proximity in time and place, along with any other shared qualities, shows the

importance and necessity of considering the revolutions in relation. David Armitage and Sanjay

Subrahmanyam have noted that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries have long been

termed as an "Age of Revolutions."[1] This depiction implies that the two revolutions cannot be

viewed solely in terms of their geographic location, but must take into account their relationship

to other revolutions and even their impact in those places where revolutions did not occur.

The American and French Revolutions left great impacts upon Britain. Britain was

intimately connected to the American Revolution because the rebelling colonists were British.

Britain's link to the French Revolution, meanwhile, resulted from the geographic proximity and

lengthy historical interaction between the two nations. The two revolutions impacted Britain

socially and politically, with a heavy emphasis on intellectual discourse. Recently, Emma

Vincent Macleod has argued that there is a need for more research to consider the "impact of the

American Revolution on British attitudes to the French Revolution."[2] She has noted that a few

scholars, such as Mark Philp and Amanda Goodrich, have attempted to connect the British

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[1] David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Introduction: The Age of Revolutions, c.1760-1840 – Global Causation, Connection, and Comparison," in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c.1760-1840*, ed. David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), xii.

[2] Emma Vincent Macleod, "British Attitudes to the French Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 50-3 (Sept. 2007), 708.

response between the two revolutions.[3] The involvement of many leading British figures in the debates surrounding both revolutions and the proximity in time has illustrated the need to analyze the connection between the two events. The American Revolution's grand effect was to produce a more conservative, yet intellectually pluralistic, British society that faced the French Revolution. It is not enough to simply examine the conservative leanings of the political response and the debate over radicalism and conservatism in the intellectual responses to the American and French Revolutions. The American Revolution offered for the French Revolution opportunities for ideological adaptability, the presence of a state-based conservatism, and a chance for intellectual debate.

There were two principal ideologies that characterized the intellectual differences in Britain during the late eighteenth century: conservatism and radicalism. British conservatism focused on a "utilitarian theory of government" that sought a "commitment to maintaining a pan-European culture of moderation and civility … [which] safeguard[ed] the benevolent social, political, and cultural hegemony of the empire's Anglicized élite."[4] Conservatism desired a society that believed in the benevolence and stability of its institutions. On the other hand, the radicalism that persisted in Britain during the late 18th century emphasized the importance of liberty for all men and sought to change the way in which government institutions operated to "tip the balance in favour of the 'democratic' or 'popular' element in the Constitution.[5] British intellectuals and politicians ascribed themselves to these ideological views, which would ultimately play key roles in their responses to the American and French Revolutions.

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[3] Macleod, "British Attitudes to the French Revolution," 708-709.
[4] Eliga H. Gould, "American Independence and Britain's Counter-Revolution," *Past & Present* 154 (Feb. 1997), 129.
[5] G. Rude, "John Wilkes and the Re-birth of British Radicalism," *Political Science,* vol. 14, no. 2 (Sep, 1962), 24.

In order to gain a sense of the intellectual tone surrounding the American Revolution it is important to examine the leading figures of the time period. The most dominant voices typically emanated from Members of Parliament. However, there were also some leaders that did not hold seats in Parliament, but utilized intellectual and political persuasion nonetheless

One of the most central figures in any examination of British opinions surrounding the events in America is Sir Edmund Burke, an intellectual and Member of Parliament. Burke offered his views both before and during the war with the American revolutionaries. His 1775 Parliamentary speech, "A Speech for Conciliation," was given in response to the revolutionary stirrings of American colonists. In his speech, Burke offered a passionate plea to engage with the colonists' rebellious attitude by utilizing "peace. Not peace through the medium of war; not peace to be hunted through the labyrinth of intricate and endless negotiations."[6] Burke was uninterested in Britain's involvement in a drawn out war against an independent-minded enemy. He emphasized that Parliament had even "admitted that the complaints of our former mode of exerting the right of taxation were not wholly unfounded."[7] Therefore for Burke the problem was not the colonists' actions, as even Parliament had agreed with their sentiments in parts. Instead Burke was concerned with the "question" as to "what, in the name of God, shall we do with it?"[8] "It" referred to the situation in America and "what" referred to Britain's course of action. Burke's initial reaction was tentatively supportive of the colonists, yet he was not fully in favor of one side or the other, as he openly decried the prospect of war. He extended understanding and sympathy towards the colonists' grumblings, while also explaining his desire that Britain attempt to enact a policy of acquiescence. Moreover, Burke adopted a pragmatic approach to the

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[6] Edmund Burke, *Speech on Conciliation with America,* ed. Albert S. Cook, (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1901), 7.
[7] Burke, *Speech on Conciliation,* 9.
[8] Burke, *Conciliation,* 27.

American situations because he did not want Britain to enter into a conflict that might prove long lasting.

It was apparent that many Britons shared Burke's distaste for war before the outbreak of violence in the American colonies. Linda Colley has argued that the public's attitude at the war's onset was quite varied, especially owing to the fact that it would be a war between two groups of fellow Britons.[9] It would have been difficult for many Britons to fight against their own countrymen and this meant, at least initially, that Britain was far from any unified opinion on the matter of war.

A prominent politician that echoed Burke's sentiments was Sir John Wilkes, a Member of Parliament, who argued, "Americans are neither to be cozened, nor by violence deprived of either liberty or property … We cannot succeed by force, nor in this commercial country is the object worth our while, were it possible."[10] Wilkes directly attacked the actions of Britain in response to the American Revolution and insisted that the war was futile. Wilkes' stance was pragmatic, similar in nature to Burke's, because he believed that even if Britain were to emerge as victors, the colonists would still be unwilling to accept further imposition of British rule.

There were a few British figures that went even further than Edmund Burke's limited support for the American colonists' discontent by offering full-fledged support for the American cause. Thomas Paine, who was a chief figure in the radical intellectual circle, wrote a 1776 pamphlet titled *Common Sense,* which became a rallying point for many in the radical movement. In *Common Sense,* Paine contended that "Britain, being now an open enemy, extinguishes every other name and title: And to say that reconciliation is our duty, is truly

[9] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 139.
[10] John Wilkes, "The Speeches of Mr. Wilkes in the House of Commons," in *The Making of the Modern World,* (London: 1786), 183.

farcical."[11] Paine wholeheartedly supported the cause of the American colonists, and he argued against the British government's continued involvement in their affairs. In this strain, Paine shared many similarities with Edmund Burke, who also sought to prevent Britain's involvement in war. However, Paine went further than Burke by declaring that Britain should not have had any interest in attempts at regaining the American colonies.

Opposition to the war in the American colonies was not only couched in intellectual leanings, but it also symbolized a political opportunity. According to Gerald Newman, the political opposition was due in part to distaste for King George III, because "Rockinghams [Whigs], even though conservatively opposed to popular movements, embraced the American cause as part of their opposition to the king."[12] Thus opposition to the war could transcend ideological boundaries, and it was possible for some Britons to support the rebels while simultaneously pledging one's loyalties to Britain.

Conservatives' reactions to the American Revolution desired reintegration into the British system. Some men, like Samuel Johnson, argued that American sympathizers "mean in spite to destroy that country which they are not permitted to govern."[13] Johnson believed that revolutionaries would have been detrimental to the country that they desired to establish. Newman has termed these people as proponents of the "mindless conservative old-style patriotism," precisely because of their intense distaste for supporters of the American cause.[14] As the war progressed there was a public swelling of support, or at least a more vocal support, for the British cause in the American Revolution. This shift was most evident through the

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[11] Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in *Rights of Man, Common Sense, and Other Political Writings,* ed. Mark Philp, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 23.
[12] Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism,* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 194.
[13] Newman, *English Nationalism,* 194.
[14] Newman, *English Nationalism,* 199.

chastisement and violent treatment of some American sympathizers at the hands of their fellow countrymen.[15] J.H. Plumb has argued that Thomas Paine's position in the public consciousness became that of an "anathema, the symbol of a violent, radical traitor."[16] Edmund Burke's letter to local sheriffs of Bristol during the war's course solidified his opposition to a war with the American colonists, as he wrote, "we have made war on our Colonies, not by arms only, but by laws."[17] It is apparent that Burke was very much in resistance to the actions of the British government, because it utilized its power of governance to deny the rights of the colonists, which would be unhelpful in any attempts to establish goodwill between the two nations. Yet, it was still evident that Burke wanted to settle the question of the American colonists by bringing them back into the fold of the British structure.

But the war also highlighted the differences between those who supported American independence and those who wanted the colonists back in the British state. Burke's position as a moderate was drowned out by calls to choose a side, as Britons were pressed to support the conservatives' "successive war efforts" or the radicals' continual clamoring for "political and social change at home."[18] As the American Revolution became defined as a movement to leave the empire, those who had initial reservations about the war had to reaffirm their loyalties to Britain or join forces with a political movement that was increasingly chastised.

Following the war's conclusion, Britain was left to grapple with the nature of its defeat. The scholarship on the consequences of the war certainly has had areas of divergence. Most notably, the events of the war had a definite effect on the strength of radicalism in Britain, but

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[15] Colley, *Britons,* 143.
[16] J.H. Plumb, *In the Light of History,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1973), 81.
[17] "A Letter from Edmund Burke," in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online,* (London: Pall-Mall, 1777), 20.
[18] Colley, *Britons,* 145.

the extent of the impact has been debated. John Brewer has argued that the American Revolution was a turning point for radicalism, especially for the strain that became emboldened in the last decade of the eighteenth century.[19] This view gave credit to the strength of radicalism's leadership and ideology in overcoming an antagonistic public. But Ian Christie has asserted that radicalism was instead hobbled by the war, as he states, "even moderate schemes of reform of the representation made so little appeal at that time to members of the political class or to the interested public (either in Britain or in Ireland) at large that the issue was dead by the summer of 1785."[20] Christie took issue with Brewer's insistence on a strengthened British radicalism and instead argued that Britain's tendency towards support for the war kept radicalism from being a major force in British politics.

Much of the British government's response in the aftermath of the American Revolution took on a conservative approach. The fact that Britain fought against its own colonists to bring them back into the fold of governance illustrated that many Britons, or at the very least, their leaders, were concerned with the stability of empire. Eliga Gould has termed the British actions following the conclusion of the war as "counter-revolutionary."[21] In doing so, he has alluded to the strong force to preserve the stability and status quo of the British system. Many Britons likely asked themselves if a revolution was necessary, but conservative leaders sought to deny this possibility from happening. Even though radicalism had enjoyed moments of exposure during the American Revolution, and it still held political and intellectual relevance through the prominence of men like John Wilkes and Thomas Paine, the lack of tangible reform or revolution

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[19] John Brewer, "English Radicalism in the Age of George III," in *Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776,* ed. J.G.A. Pocock, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 362.
[20] Ian R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 48.
[21] Gould, "American Independence and Britain's Counter-Revolution," 107.

was a heavy blow to its strength. Furthermore, Britain showed a reemphasis on solving its imperial problems through actions such as the India Act and the "fortif[ication] [of] its holdings in Canada."[22] This was surely disheartening to radicals who desired the recognition of sovereignty in the British colonies, because it showed that Britain was willing to deny independence to its colonists.

Six years following the end of the American Revolution, a new revolution began in France. The most important period of the French Revolution occurred from 1789-1794, and it was a time of enormous change for France and the rest of the world.[23] The French Revolution's effects on Britain, two nations separated by a small body of water, were immense not only because of geographic closeness, but also in relation to the historical relationship of the two nations. The French Revolution's impact in Britain, according to Stephen Prickett, must be examined in terms of the "original debate … in the early 1790s" and the "later radical agitation over reform in England."[24] And Seamus Deane has argued that the "reception of the French Enlightenment and Revolution in France is essentially a literary and cultural story."[25] It is thus important to recognize the role of intellectualism and ideology in terms of France.

Scholarly disagreements have developed surrounding the strength of radicalism and conservatism during the 1790s. Jennifer Mori has asserted that "Foxite Whigs sought to act as

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[22] Maya Jasanoff, "Revolutionary Exiles: The American Loyalist and French Émigré Diasporas," in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c.1760-1840,* ed. David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, (Houndmills: Palgrave and Macmillan, 2010), 53.
[23] Stephen Prickett, *England and the French Revolution,* (Houndsmills: Macmillan Education, 1989), 1.
[24] Prickett, *England and the French Revolution,* 30.
[25] Seamus Deane, *The French Revolution and Enlightenment in England: 1789-1832,* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 3.

mediators between an overmighty state and a potentially rebellious people."[26] Her claim suggests

that the presence of radicals in Britain was large enough to be politically influential. Mori's

argument that Britain was marked by a restless population that was only kept stabilized through

the actions of some of the more radical politicians reflected her notion of the power of radicalism

within Britain. However, Thomas Schofield has argued in opposition and claimed "the

intellectual case in favour of stability, made good by legitimating the ethical basis of British

society, was instrumental in preserving that stability," and subsequently defined stability as the

"conservative analysis of the nature of civil society."[27] This assertion meant that Schofield

believed in intellectual conservatism as the most important factor in the upkeep of stability in

Britain, not political Whigs. His insistence on a stability obtained through conservatism belied a

belief in a powerful conservative movement.

Edmund Burke played a prominent role in the French Revolution's debate, just as he had

in the time of the American Revolution, because he was very much a cause for discussion and

disagreement. His most influential work in this period was the *Reflections on the Revolution in

France,* which he published in 1790. It is perhaps surprising that John Whale claimed that there

were "relatively few positive public responses" in light of "its rich, contentious after-life."[28] In

light of the French Revolution, Burke withheld his support of the rebels' actions when he stated

> I should therefore suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France, until I was
> informed how it had been combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and
> obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with
> morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order; with civil and social

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[26] Jennifer Mori, *Britain in the Age of the French Revolution, 1785-1820,* (Harlow: Pearson
Education Limited, 2000), 9.

[27] Thomas Phillip Schofield, "Conservative Political Thought in Britain in Response to the
French Revolution," *The Historical Journal* 29-3 (Sept. 1986): 622.

[28] John C. Whale, *Edmund Burke's Reflections on the revolution in France: new
interdisciplinary essays,* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2000), 1.

manners. All these (in their way) are good things too; and, without them, liberty is not a benefit whilst it last, and is not likely to continue long.[29]

Burke's disagreement with the Revolution was tentative because he believed that the French could adopt multiple tenets in their pursuit of liberty to bring about his support. His major point of dissent with the events in France did not stem from the aims of its people. His insistence that liberty was a benefit for all was consistent with his earlier condemnation of the British government's imposition on the colonists during the American Revolution. Yet, in this situation it was a lack of institutional development that troubled Burke, not an overbearing government involving itself with the affairs of citizens.

Burke then launched into a defense of the British government's long history and used it to offer Britain as a model for the French revolting against their government. He insisted that the French have wrongly latched onto a few of the rights offered by Dr. Price, a radical supporter of the French Revolution, namely the "right 1. 'To choose our own governors.' 2. 'To cashier them for misconduct.' [and] 3. 'To frame a government for ourselves.'"[30] Burke believed that these rights were never present in Britain and they were not something to be sought. Instead, he argued, "if the *principles* of the Revolution of 1688 are any where to be found, it is in the statue called the *Declaration of Right*," which is "'an act for declaring the rights and liberties of the subject, and for *settling* the *succession* of the crown.'"[31] Burke emphasized that the "Declaration of Right" was "drawn up by great lawyers and great statesmen, and not by warm and inexperienced enthusiasts."[32] Burke's admonishment of the sovereignty of ordinary men in the development of government outlined his beliefs about the tenets that constitute a legitimate

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[29] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J,C.D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 152.
[30] Burke, *Reflections,* 162.
[31] Burke, *Reflections,* 163.
[32] Burke, *Reflections,* 163.

government. He desired historical legitimacy, or at the very least, institutional legitimacy. It reinforced his argument that liberty needed to be safeguarded by a protective political structure if it had any hope of a lasting impact.

According to F.P. Lock, it was apparent that the new primary thrust for Burke's views on the French Revolution was a "tempera[nce] and conviction" for being a "conservative."[33] This conservatism was plainly evident in his insistence on both the historical validity of the British system and his opinion that the revolution in France was not moving towards an establishment of political or social structures. However, Burke's ideology was not set upon a defense of the monarchy. It might be appropriate to attribute to Burke a sort of moderate conservatism, which would allow his belief in the importance and validity of the historical nature of the British government, while also settling his recognition of the importance of liberty. Undoubtedly, one of Burke's great propositions was that he did "most heartily wish that France may be animated by a spirit of rational liberty."[34] It is apparent that Burke had problems with France's course of action, but not necessarily their desire, if it was their overwhelming one, for liberty.

In contrast with Edmund Burke's moderate conservatism was Thomas Paine's continued radicalism. The most important work that he published during the French Revolution was his response to Burke's *Reflections*. The *Rights of* Man was published in two parts in 1791 and 1792. First, the *Rights of Man* established that the French Revolution was "not against Louis XVI, but against the despotic principles of the government."[35] Paine lamented the troubles afflicted upon Louis, but he believed in the necessity of the revolution. Because Paine directly attacked the old

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[33] F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France,* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1985), 31.
[34] Burke, *Reflections,* 145.
[35] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution, Pt.* 1, ed. Daniel Edwin Wheeler, (New York: Vincent Parke and Company, 1908). 17-18.

government of France as the source of problems, he sought to deny historical validity as a legitimate force of government. Moreover, Paine alleged that the failures of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, especially through its omission of a discussion of the English Constitution might lead some to "consider, whether there is not some radical defect in what is called the England Constitution."[36] Through this allegation, Paine asserted that those who did not ascribe fully to either conservatism or radicalism could have been swayed by a full examination of the English Constitution. Radicalism was predicated on the necessity of reform and change to the status quo, and if Paine could have proved that there were problems associated with the English government's constitution, then it would have been in the best interest of the radical movement.

Although the second part of Paine's *Rights of Man,* according to Stephen Prickett, was "less concerned with the French Revolution than what an egalitarian society in general might look like," it is still an essential source to gauge British reaction.[37] This is most accurately reflected by the fact that Part II sold more copies than Part I and completely outsold Burke's *Reflections*, while the reaction in Britain became so dangerous for Paine that he was forced to "flee to France."[38] These two situations indicate a divided Britain because radicals were supportive of his work, while the government was worried about his French sympathies. Paine continued his arguments of Part I in Part II when he argued for the benevolence of the revolution in France preface, "it is not worth making changes or revolutions, unless it be for some great national benefit."[39] Thus, one of the radical responses to the events of France, at least for Paine, was to caution against revolutions that did not happen for the correct reasons. Because he offered

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[36] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man Pt. 1,* 104.
[37] Prickett, *England and the French Revolution,* 66.
[38] Prickett, *England and the French Revolution,* 66-67.
[39] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man Pt. 2 Preface,* XV.

this admission, Paine allowed British radicalism an escape from having to lend blanket support to all other revolutions. Instead, Paine's political support could now be utilized to criticize uprisings and rebellions that were detrimental to the imposition of liberty. Later in Part II, Paine argued that revolutionary changes did not lead to a crumbled society. Instead, Paine reasoned "there is a natural aptness in man, and more so in society … to accommodate itself to whatever situation it is in … A general association takes place, and common interest produces common security."[40] Paine harkened back to his belief in the preface of Part II that men will naturally gravitate towards the formation of a unifying structure. He further backed his argument, although in a unique way, by positing,

> Though it might be proved that the system of the government now called the NEW, is the most ancient in principle of all that have existed, being founded on the original inherent Rights of Man: yet, as tyranny and the sword have suspended the exercise of those rights for many centuries past, it serves better the purpose of distinction to call it a *new*, than to claim the right of calling it the old. The first general distinction between those two systems is, that the one now called the old is *hereditary,* either in whole or in part; and the new is entirely *representative.* It rejects all hereditary government.[41]

This claim, steeped in historical attributes, served to show that it was well within the rights of all men, not just for those living in societies that allowed for basic sets of rights, to agitate for new government. This new government could be one that did not expressly dictate to people that their social class defined their right. But Paine's insistence on referring to the past was quite brilliant because it would have garnered the support of the Englishman who looked to the past to gain a sense of stability. Through his criticism of tyranny and government rooted in wrong ideals, Paine drew a distinction between the value of history for government and the presence of a corrupting influence on government. As a popular intellectual, Thomas Paine could ensure the spread of his influence through Britain.

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[40] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man Pt. 2,* 228.
[41] Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man Pt. 1,* 24.

The Revolution in France also saw responses by numerous women throughout Britain. They offered new attitudes and perspectives to the events in France. Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the more influential figures and she utilized a unique approach to the conflict in France, because of her willingness to modify her opinions as it progressed.

Mary Wollstonecraft's first major work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, was one of the first works written in response to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.[42] In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft critiqued Burke's work and noted her shock at his refusal to adopt the tenets of radicalism, for she wrote, "had you been a Frenchman, you would have been, in spite of your respect for rank and antiquity, a violent revolutionary … it is not impossible that you might have entertained the same opinion of the English Parliament, that you professed to have during the American war," a war in which he had validated the concerns of the colonists.[43] Wollstonecraft believed that Burke offered views and reactions that were in contention with his true opinions on revolution. It is thus unsurprising that she criticized Burke by placing him in the position of a Frenchman. In doing so, Wollstonecraft showed that Burke's arguments were not so conservative that he should have been precluded from an understanding of the revolutionaries' desires. This action was likely done in response to Burke's insistence on the attainment of liberty as a worthy ideal.

Furthermore, Wollstonecraft argued that the French cause was justified, not only because it overthrew an undesirable king, but also because it directly attacked the inequality that separated men. She wrote,

> Inequality of rank must ever impede the growth of virtue, by vitiating the mind that submits or domineers … And if this grand example be set by an assembly of unlettered

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[42] Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing, and Revolution,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 17.
[43] Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Men," ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf, (Petersborough Canada: Broadview Press, 1997), 78-79.

clowns, if they can produce a crisis that may involve the fate of Europe, and "more than Europe," you must allow us to respect unsophisticated reason.[44]

Wollstonecraft threw her support behind the French uprising, as she was willing to gloss over the supposed "unsophisticated reason" of the French revolutionaries if she knew that they had made a "grand example."[45] Wollstonecraft surely understood the powerful rhetoric of language about the position of men because she wrote extensively throughout the *Vindication* on the prospect of men facing poverty and suffering. Her insistence on featuring "inequality of rank" in her discussion on the French Revolution signaled that she respected and knew the power that class-based language would have upon readers.[46] She may have been asserting her own unhappiness with Britain's stratified society because Tom Furniss argued that her views "can only flourish in a society based on equality in gender and class."[47] Wollstonecraft believed that if the revolutionaries were able to rectify the problems of inequality, then the whole continent of Europe would benefit.

Wollstonecraft's later work on the French Revolution, *A Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, was published in 1795, a full five years after *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*. Furniss asserted that Wollstonecraft's work was "greeted in literary magazines with warmth and enthusiasm," which showed that women had gained at least some level of respect.[48] In the preface of *A Historical and Moral View*, Wollstonecraft asserted her continued support of the French Revolution and its aims. She declared,

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[44] Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Men," 82.
[45] Ibid., 82.
[46] Ibid., 82.
[47] Tom Furniss, "Gender in revolution: Edmund Burke and Mary Wollstonecraft," in *Revolution in writing: British literary Responses to the French Revolution,* ed. Kelvin Everest, (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1991), 92.
[48] Furniss, "Gender in Revolution,"101.

> We shall be able to discern clearly that the revolution was neither produced by the abilities or intrigues of a few individuals; nor was the effect of sudden and short-lived enthusiasm; but the natural consequence of intellectual improvement … from a state of barbarism to that of polished society.[49]

This view held that the French Revolution, contrary to conservatives' complaints, was not based in agitation, but rather in reasoned men. In this strain of thought, Wollstonecraft sustained her previous writings on the benevolence of the events in France. Moreover, Wollstonecraft's argument is also a response to the arguments that were evident even in the period of the American Revolution, one of which presumed that "by repudiating the legal authority of Parliament, [the American] Congress had erected an irregular power … [that] depended on enthusiasm rather than law."[50] The same concerns were brought forth in the French Revolution when Sir Horace Walpole, a prominent writer, wrote a letter to his friend in 1790 stating, "how franticly have the French acted, and how rationally the Americans!"[51] Thus there had been a concern that the societies and governments established by revolutions were not grounded in law. However, Wollstonecraft immediately repudiated that notion by characterizing the French Revolution as a result of the "natural consequences of intellectual improvement."[52]

But as her essay moved forward, Wollstonecraft acknowledged the existence of flaws in the French Revolution. As the situation in France deteriorated, Wollstonecraft showed signs of disenchantment because she wrote, "from the commencement of the revolution, the misery of France has originated from the folly or art of men, who have spurred the people on too fast;

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[49] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Historical and Moral View of the Origins and Progress of the French Revolution and the Effect It Has Produced in Europe,* (Delmar, New York: Scholars' Facsimiles, & Reprints, 1975), vii-viii.

[50] Gould, "American Independence and Britain's Counter-Revolution," 119.

[51] Horace Walpole, *Letters of Horace Walpole,* ed. Charles Duke Yonge, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 2004), 308.

[52] Wollstonecraft, *A Historical and Moral View, 82.*

tearing up prejudices by the root, which they should have permitted to die gradually away."[53] Similar to Burke, she believed that the French needed to allow the establishment of social structures to defend liberty. Wollstonecraft likely understood that offering support to the men who were responsible for atrocities in France was detrimental. Some intellectual writers, especially the Romantics, also illustrated changes in response to the French Revolution because they offered "some kind of recantation" of the "enthusiasm" that was present in France, while others raised a "violent detestation of its French versions."[54] Thus admonishment was not entirely unheard of, even amongst radicals.

In terms of the French Revolution's impact on Britain, authors have pointed to the consequences that were felt following the Revolution's end. David Eastwood has argued that the "effect of the 1790s might have been to retard the progress of political and institutional reform in Britain."[55] Eastwood may have been looking at the horrors of events in France as the event did push some radicals, such as Wollstonecraft, to reexamine their support of the French situation. The lack of a revolution in metropolitan Britain or any grand measure of reform until much later likely influenced this view. Linda Colley was less willing to adopt this view because she wrote that the Revolution and subsequent war, two events closely linked, brought more "agitation for the franchise."[56] Colley thought that the existence of radical intellectuals emboldened by a revolutionary debate in which they took part helped lead to more calls for the expansion of rights. Neither Colley nor Eastwood would deny the historical reality that reform in the 1800s

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[53] Mary Wollstonecraft, A *Historical and Moral View,* 337.
[54] Prickett, *Britain and the French Revolution,* 111.
[55] David Eastwood, "Patriotism and the English state in the 1790s," in *The French Revolution and British popular politics,* edited by Mark Philp, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 168.
[56] Colley, *Britons, 329.*

did occur, but both disagreed as to how much the radicals that were present in Britain during the French Revolution were responsible.

For some, the French Revolution was marked by a fear for the stability of the British system, but for others it offered a chance to point to a European power undergoing much needed change. Yet the popular sentiments that had garnered the most support during the American Revolution were popularized during the French Revolution as well. Government actions that were meant to suppress radicalism such as the Seditious Meetings Act of 1795, which proclaimed that "no meeting, of any description of persons, exceeding the number of fifty persons … shall be holden, for the parpose or on the pretext of considering of or preparing any petition" showed the state was willing to threaten the speech and assembly of Britons.[57] This act was clearly conservative and a continuation of the state's attempt to maintain stability throughout Britain.

Though radicalism had found a position in the intellectual, political, and social spaces of late eighteenth century Britain, it is apparent that the government aimed to strengthen its conservative approach to foreign and domestic affairs. Colley argued that there was a formation of an "officially constructed patriotism" in Britain, which was evidence that both the state and the population worked in tandem to assert the power and strength of its cause.[58] This did not preclude Britain from an examination of its position in relation to the outside world, but it meant the division between the radicals and conservatives would continue to be a point of division in a society. A radical intellectual ideology that advocated for changes to the contemporary British system was in constant contention with a conservative thought that argued for the historical

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[57] "Pitts act, to prevent seditious meetings," in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online,* (London: 1796), 1.
[58] Colley, *Britons,* 147.

legitimacy of the British system and its monarch. This divergence, coupled with the antagonism of the British population towards American sympathizers as the war in America dragged on, lent itself to a society that held radical views, conservative views, or aspects of both.

Most notably, the rhetoric of intellectuals, from all points on the ideological spectrum, highlighted an intellectual fluidity present throughout all of British society. Burke's calculated offer of support for the American Revolution was set in his affinity for liberty and rights, which he never lost in his future writings. And his belief in the validity of the British government and his admonishment of the French Revolution flowed from the differences he saw between the French and American situations. Burke's recognition of liberty as a rallying point in both revolutions certainly showed that he believed the two revolts' aims were similar, although the courses of action differed. Mary Wollstonecraft's shift in opinion regarding the revolution in France shadowed Burke's ideological journey between the American and French Revolutions. She initially noted the benign nature of the French Revolution, but later acknowledged the lack of improvement brought by the revolutionaries. These changes in response reflected the continual turns in the two revolutions and the adaptability of British intellectual response to the outside world. The emphasis of these two writers was not on an ideological purity but on a willingness to adopt a cautioned approach to ever-changing situations.

It must be noted that even with the occurrence of adaptable ideologies the immediate impact of the American Revolution also turned the British state's response to the French Revolution into a vastly conservative one. Eliga Gould has termed the post-revolution period in Britain as a sort of "counter-revolution," and Linda Colley has described the impact of the loss in America as a "sharp move to the Right" and a "patriotism which stressed … the desirability of

strong, stable government by a virtuous, able and authentically British élite."[59] These two

descriptions point toward a conservative Britain, which was strongly reflected in the

government's actions during the French Revolution. The crackdown on the meetings of radical

groups mirrored the patriotic outbursts against sympathetic Britons during the American

Revolution. If anything, the government's attempt to focus devotion upon itself was reinforced

during the American Revolution and continued into the French Revolution.

The influence of the American Revolution in Britain also allowed a space for intellectual

discourse and debate that would spill over into the French Revolution. The numerous

conservative and radical writers, and the prominence of dissenting voices such as John Wilkes in

Parliament, indicated that discussion of the two revolutions was never far from the minds of

British citizens. The American Revolution, in spite of actions against partisans in Britain, had

shown that divergence of opinions was a common occurrence in Britain. Radicals had pointed to

the outcome in America as a worthy goal, especially later amidst the French Revolution, while

some writers such as Samuel Johnson had found the American Revolution to be a destructive

undertaking.[60] It is possible that the desire for an area of debate was occasioned by the

"strikingly cosmopolitan dimension" of the "conservative response to the American Revolution,

which Gould argued had been a focus of Britain after the American Revolution.[61] As Britain was

forced to confront all aspects of its empire, it desperately sought the ability to listen to all of the

differing viewpoints. The debates over ideology translated into the French Revolution as well,

because Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* sold more copies than Edmund Burke's *Reflections on*

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[59] Gould, "American Independence," 107; Colley, *Britons,* 146-147.
[60] Mark Philp, "The Role of America in the 'Debate on France' 1791-5: Thomas Paine's Insertion," *Utilitas,* Vol. 5, No. 2, (November 1993), 223; Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism,* 194.
[61] Gould, "American Independence," 110.

the Revolution in France.[62] Yet, this did not mean that radicalism was the standard-bearer. Instead, the conservative backlash came from the government that passed laws to prohibit radical meetings.[63] Still, one of the consequences of the American Revolution was to uphold the framework that allowed the diffusion of opinions, both radical and conservative.

The American and French Revolutions left a remarkable impact upon British society. Some of the consequences were unique to only one revolution, such as the loss of the American colonies. However, many of the effects were linked to both revolutions, as the American Revolution shaped the reactions to the French Revolution in many ways. Although there will continue to be debates on the strength and presence of radicalism, especially when it comes to the level of influence that the two revolutions exerted, there is no doubt that radicalism played a role in the responses of British elites, writers, and citizens. The same can be said of conservatism though, because it dictated the aims of the state, as well as intellectuals and citizens. Although the two ideologies stood in contrast to each other, the level to which people adhered to these strains of thought did not always preclude them from supporting aspect of both. Furthermore, the Britain that confronted the French Revolution brought with it an impetus for fluid intellectual response, conservative government, and a space for intellectual dialogue. The effects of the American Revolution did lead to a more inwardly focused Britain but it did not prevent the voices of dissenters, radicals, and moderates from being heard.

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[62] Prickett, *England and the French Revolution,* 67.
[63] "Pitts act, to prevent seditious meetings,"1.

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