

# Three Contrasting Perceptions of the French Revolution: Burke, Paine and Wollstonecraft

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Epoch making events like the French Revolution led to diverse political theorising as evident in the writings of Edmund Burke (1729-97), Thomas Paine (1739-1809) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97). Burke vehemently criticised the Revolution by attacking its ideological basis while Paine defended it. Wollstonecraft pointed out the incompleteness of Enlightenment liberalism because of its failure to address the question of women's rights and of the French Revolution which despite a promise of equality left out women. These three contrasting perspectives illuminate three different theoretical postures: conservative (Burke), libertarian liberal (Paine) and liberal feminist (Wollstonecraft). Conservatism and feminism as distinct schools of philosophy began with Burke and Wollstonecraft while Paine continued with the Lockean-Jeffersonian libertarian mood of early liberalism. All these diverse streams continue to remain important and relevant components of contemporary debates about politics and society in political theory.

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Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,  
But to be young was very heaven! Oh! times,  
In which the meagre, stale, forbidding ways  
Of custom, law, and statute, took at once  
The attraction of a country in romance!

These lines by William Wordsworth (1770-1850) summed up the rapture and enthusiasm that the French Revolution evoked. Many in Britain saw it as the first expression of humankind towards general emancipation and liberation and the beginning of a new dawn. The storming of the Bastille translated abstract rights into reality. Its fall was described as the best news since the British defeat at Saratoga<sup>1</sup>. The French Revolutionaries felt they were emulating the Puritan Revolution (1641) and compared the execution of Louis XVI with that of Charles I as both met similar fates because they disregarded the wishes of the people and parliament. The French Revolution led to diverse political theorising, as evident in the writings of Edmund Burke (1729-97), Thomas Paine (1739-1809) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97). Burke's critique of the Revolution led him to lay down the foundations of conservatism as a creed in political philosophy, while Paine's defence led him to

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<sup>1</sup>The Battles of Saratoga which took place in 1777 from 19th September to 7th October represented final moments that gave decisive victory to the Americans over the British in the American Revolutionary War.

restate the libertarian impulses within liberalism in the late eighteenth century. Unlike Burke, who supported the American cause but bitterly opposed the French Revolution, Paine supported both the Revolutions, the American and the French. In contrast to Burke and Paine, Wollstonecraft pointed out the incompleteness of Enlightenment liberalism because of its failure to address the question of women's rights and the French Revolution, which left out women despite a promise of equality. Her critique of Burke's philosophy, along with that of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) enabled her to lay the foundations of liberal feminism.

In Britain, a section of the intelligentsia welcomed the French Revolution, comparing it with the Glorious Revolution. They hoped that it would give impetus to their long-standing demands since the 1760s for greater democratisation of the parliament and abolition of second-class status to dissenters and women. The crux of the debate was that if men were equal and entitled to full citizenship rights and if people were sovereign, then none could be denied suffrage. Richard Price (1723-91), a dissenting Unitarian minister, remarked in 1789, "I see the ardour of liberty catching and spreading, a general amendment beginning in human affairs; the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws and dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience" (as cited in Wardle, 1987, pp. 112). Price's *The Revolutionary Society* met every year to commemorate the 1688 settlement and desired a restatement of its principles by highlighting the right to liberty of conscience and to resist abusive authority. In a letter to Burke, he wrote, "in order that liberty should have a firm foundation, it must be led either by poor men or philosophers" (as cited in Nixon, 1971, pp. 51). The dissenters considered themselves to be true inheritors of the Lockean legacy and were enthusiastic in their support for the Americans and the early phases of the French Revolution, as these were positive advancements towards realising liberty.

Among the rational dissenters included Paine, Price, Wollstonecraft, John Wilkes (1725-97), Reverend Joseph Priestley (1733-91), William Godwin (1756-1836), William Blake (1757-1827), Henry Fuseli (1741-1825) and Thomas Holcroft (1745-1809). They believed that only a free individual could be virtuous and considered the independence of mind a basic right. They equated independence with reason which was elevated to the status of religion as it could mitigate most of society's shortcomings. They were keen on reforming the political system to promote the happiness of humanity. They, unlike Burke, considered the middle class as a repository of morality and civic virtue. They extolled the virtues of commercial civilisation and opposed the lazy indolence of both rich and poor. They defended religious freedom (Kramnick, 1977). They represented the "radical elements in English religious dissent, moving towards rationalism... concerned with parliamentary reform, the extension of education and the removal of obstacles to free intellectual enquiry" (Williams, 1981, pp. 75).

### **Burke's critique of the French Revolution**

Burke denounced Price's sermons lauding the French Revolution, attacked the ideological basis of the French Revolution and defended the British constitution and prescriptive right. He viewed 1688 revolution as 'manly, moral and regulated liberty', denying any parallel between events of 1688 and 1789. The 1688 Revolution preserved ancient laws and liberties of the British people, which they had inherited

from their forefathers<sup>2</sup>. His *Reflections on Revolution in France* and on the proceedings of certain societies in England relating that event written during the revolutionary years was published in 1790. According to Macpherson (1980), the second part of the title was significant as Burke was deeply concerned with its possible impact on England (p. 38). His virulent criticisms surprised many as it seemed to be at variance with his earlier criticisms of the king's control of the parliament, his decade-long efforts to expose the oppression, exploitation and misrule by the East India Company in India, and the support he lent to the American colonies.

Burke's criticisms preceded the Reign of Terror (1793-94) in France. He articulated a framework that emphasised change with continuity, thus differing from both Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) and Louis Gabriel de Bonald (1754-1840), who outrightly defended orthodoxy and absolutism. Citing the English example, he pointed out that the two principles of conservation and correction operated in England during the critical periods of Restoration and Revolution when there was no king. Without replacing the old order, the shortcomings were addressed within the existing constitutional framework balancing the old with the new. The period from the Magna Carta of 1215 to the Bill of Rights of 1688 was one of slow but steady consolidation in England, reflecting change with continuity. Inheritance was valuable, making it possible for both conservation and transmission.

Unlike the gradual change in Britain, the French attempted to make a complete break with the past. Jacobinism attacked established religion, traditional constitutional arrangements, and the institution of private property, which for Burke were primary sources of political wisdom. Burke often used the term 'prejudice' by which he meant attachment to established institutions and practices. He saw these as providing a bulwark against sweeping changes. Burke did not venerate all that was ancient but only those that held society together by providing order and stability. He debunked the idea of a society of equals as he inherently believed in natural aristocracy. Burke's idea was ruled by ability and property; hence he was appropriately described as a liberal-conservative.

Burke was critical of atomistic individualism<sup>3</sup> as he perceived social relationships to be "partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection.... a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are dead and those who are yet to be born" (Burke as cited in Curtis 1961, Vol. II, pp. 59). The individual existed within and found fulfilment within the family which was the basic social unit. He categorically dismissed the idea that society could be reduced to a mere contract between two or more parties. He saw no conflict between the church, monarchy and aristocracy. Like John Locke (1632-1704), he emphasised that all authority was based on trust but rejected the other Lockean ideas of contract, natural law, natural rights and the separation of the church and the state. The Glorious Revolution saw changes within a constitutional framework, while the French Revolution was based on a rationalist and untested

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<sup>2</sup>Poock (1960) argued that the doctrine of the ancient constitution might have helped Burke.

<sup>3</sup> Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) and Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-83) too were critical of this notion. Bentham dismissed natural rights as nonsense upon stilts and argued that rights in the proper sense were codified by law. Hegel offered the idealistic notion of rights while Marx dismissed rights in a bourgeois society as formal (Waldron, 1987).

theory of The Rights of Man as it attempted to create a new order by making a total break with past practices.

Burke rejected the notion of natural rights as these were 'metaphysical abstraction' that failed to consider the differences between societies. Like Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu (1689-1755), he too believed in the existence of different legal and political systems in different countries that reflected the country's climate, geography and history. Burke argued that a new government could be created only if constitutional liberties were defined not as abstract principles but historically. He also wondered whether the new class of people with no previous experience in politics, namely the lawyers, writers, financiers, philosophers whom he called the 'swinish multitude' could be entrusted with affairs of the state. Burke preferred aristocracy with its inherited wealth given to the common good as the natural elite. He was of the opinion that good and rational reform could be brought out only by people with experience and expertise. He repeatedly stressed the society's need for awe, superstition, ritual and honour for its stability and securing loyalty and support of those on whom it depended. A state that disregarded these essential safeguards in the name of reason would ultimately degenerate into one based on lust for power. He pointed out that veneration of authority developed over a period of time. An abstract revolutionary ideology that assigned supremacy to reason would lead to subversion and anarchy because of its emphasis on rights at the cost of duties, order, discipline and obedience to authority. A person rendered obedience to society not because of the benefits that one accrued but because one was an integral part of it. He accused the natural rights theorists of not merely "imprudence and intellectual arrogance but of blasphemy and impiety as well" (as cited in Waldron, 1987, pp. 95). He argued that the king owed his crown not to popular choice but due to a fixed rule of succession. Burke did not endorse the divine right of kings. He considered reason to be inherently limiting, incapable of unravelling the mysteries of the universe as it discounted the roles played by passion, prejudice and habit.

Burke was sceptical of the political ability of the ordinary people regarding rule by the aristocracy as the best. Like Aristotle (384-22 BC), he restricted citizenship to a segment of adults who had the leisure for discussion and information and were not mentally dependent. Since baser instincts guided the average individuals, the government had to keep them apathetic to prevent their selfishness from undermining communal life. The masses were incapable of governing by themselves and needed guidance and direction. A government, according to Burke, was based on wisdom, prescription and prejudice and not merely on the general will. This was because the government had to do with duty and morality, and that "...neither the few nor the many have a right to act merely by their will, in any matter connected with duty, trust, engagement or obligation... duty and will are ever contradictory terms, will cannot be the standard of right and wrong" (Burke as cited in Canavan, 1960, pp. 94).

For Burke, political representation "is the representation of interests and interest has an objective, impersonal and unattached reality" (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 10). Representatives were genuinely superior to the electorate, as they possessed the capacity for rational decision-making. In sharp contrast to Rousseau, he regarded representatives as men of practical wisdom who need not consult or be bound by the views of the voters. They enjoyed absolute freedom, for they had no interest

other than the national interest. Parliament is not a Congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole— were not local prejudice ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. When a member is chosen, the person becomes a Member of the Parliament, not a member of Bristol (Burke cited in Canavan, 1960, pp. 116).

His contempt for the average voter led him to advocate restricted suffrage to ensure a full-proof selection of the natural aristocratic group of parliaments. He defended parliamentary government and sovereignty, but his parliament was one that would be dominated by large landowners. Burke was perturbed by the idea of equality and dignity of all professions propagated by the French Revolution, denouncing it as antithetical to the natural order of human society. He defended inequality among human beings and supported the natural ordering of things. He stressed the importance of preserving and protecting private property, favoured the accumulation of wealth, defended inheritance rights, and advocated enfranchisement of property owners.

Burke also distinguished between actual representation and virtual representation. Since an area would have one dominant interest, he saw the merit of virtual representation against actual representation. Virtual representation was based on common interest. By this logic, even people who did not vote would be represented. The localities which did not have actual representation, by this criterion, would have virtual representation. His view of representation endorsed the seventeenth-century notion and had very little relevance in contemporary times (Pitkin, 1967, pp. 169-70). Burke enthusiastically supported the progressive Whig principles of the 18th century, which opposed arbitrary monarchical power, advocacy of internal reform in administration, scepticism of England's adventures abroad, a considerable degree of religious toleration, and freedom under the law. All of them were the intellectual legacies of 1688 (Kirk, 1960, pp. 14-15). But his virulent onslaught on the French Revolution was because "he was always a liberal, never a democrat and that he dreaded a modern democratic state" (p. 20). He emphasised the importance of prudence in political affairs, which led him to support the Americans but not the French Revolution.

### **Paine's Reply to Burke**

In *Rights of Man* (1791), Paine, the most radical among the dissenters, carried forward Locke's egalitarian and rationalistic assumptions to defend the French Revolution against Burke's critique of the revolutionary principles. He "not only employs uncompromising logic but introduces humor and even enlivens his arguments ... Burke's *Reflections* Paine regards as a tissue of romantic nonsense.... In his reply, Paine matched rhetoric with rhetoric." (Adkins, 1953, pp. 23). Paine pointed out that democratic theory no longer represented people's collective rights against the king but individual rights that guaranteed and safeguarded one's independence against the state or government. All individuals were created equal and rational beings with natural and imprescriptible rights by virtue of being human beings. These included the Lockean rights to liberty, property and security, and a derivative right of resistance to oppression. Governments for Paine, like Locke,

came into existence as a result of contract between individuals with constitutions preceding governments. This shift is best exemplified in the Bill of Rights of the United States Constitution<sup>4</sup>. In total contrast to Burke, he championed political equality, universal suffrage without property qualification and representative government with the rule of law. He completed his survey of the working class in England, the defects and deficiencies of a hereditary system of government, the unequal tax structure and the consequences of the impressment of sailors, namely poverty and deprivation, without any hope of relief.

Paine was sanguine that a representative government was superior to monarchy, aristocracy and hereditary rule. He looked down on the aristocracy as a class of unproductive idlers and parasites, who exploited and lived off the surplus of the industrious classes. "The aristocracy are not farmers who work the land, and raise the produce, but are mere consumers of the rent and when compared with the active world are the drones... who neither collect the honey or form the hive, but exist only for lazy enjoyment" (Paine, 1953, pp. 89). As such, in a rational, reconstructed society they would not be missed at all. He pointed out the presence of illiterates in large numbers in the 'old' world as a consequence of unreformed governments. Paine considered hereditary government to be a government by fraud as it relied on people's ignorance and superstition: "the idea of hereditary legislators... is as absurd as a hereditary mathematician, or a hereditary wise man; and as absurd as a hereditary poet laureate (Paine, 1953, pp. 91). Hereditary rule was given to corruption, war and expense. "A body of men holding themselves accountable to nobody, ought not to be trusted by anybody. ... Hereditary powers operate to preclude the consent of succeeding generations and the preclusion of consent is despotism (p. 102, 103).

Paine regarded a representative democracy founded on a constitution drawn up by a convention of whole people and approved by them as free from above aforesaid evils. Using the experience that he gained in America, he appealed to the people of France and England to abolish their corrupt hereditary systems and replace them with a republican government as it would secure individual rights and autonomy. A republican government would have to explain its actions to its people to ensure that the best and the wisest were elected to it. He was critical of the British constitution for being unwritten, making it unhelpful as a reference point. Its precedents were all arbitrary, contrary to reason and common sense. Tom Burke's description of a state as a partnership, Paine pointed out that "it is the living and not the dead that are to be accommodated" (p. 77). Furthermore, "That which may be thought right and found convenient in one age, may be thought wrong and found inconvenient in another. In such cases, who is to decide, the living or the dead? (p.

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<sup>4</sup>These were the first ten amendments which were introduced by James Madison (1751-1828) in 1789 as a member of the newly created US House of Representatives. Madison originally proposed 19 amendments. On 15th December 1791, 10 were ratified. The inspiration for some of the Bill of Rights came from one of essays that he wrote in 1785 regarding separation of religion and government. He campaigned for the ratification of the Constitution by co-authoring a series of essays written between 1787 and 1788 with John Jay (1745-1829) and Alexander Hamilton (1757-1804) that were published in various newspapers of New York and then circulated around the states. In all, 85 essays were written, of which 29 were written by Madison, 54 by Hamilton and 5 by Jay and these came to be known as *The Federalist Papers* (1788). These were written under the pseudonym 'Publius'.

80). He concluded with his famous sentence that Burke "pities the plumage but forgets the dying bird (p. 132). He defended the French Declaration of the Rights of Man in the following words:

It has been thought a considerable advance towards establishing the principles of freedom to say that Government is a compact between those who govern and those who are governed but this cannot be true, because it is putting the effect before the cause for as a man must have existed before Governments existed. There necessarily was a time when governments did not exist, and consequently there could originally exist no governors to form such a compact with. The fact therefore must be that the individuals themselves each in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a compact with each other to produce a government; and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist (pp.86).

In an earlier tract *Common Sense* (1776), Paine pointed out that human wants produced society while a government arose because of human wickedness. He argued that "government even in its best state, is a necessary evil; in its worst state, an intolerable one" (Paine, 1953, pp. 4). Like Locke, he too viewed government as a trust. He believed that society was natural to men and hence there was no need for a government in future, thus outlining anarchistic ideas in their embryonic form. He referred to the useless and unproductive monarchy which he developed in the *Rights of Man*.

Burke and Paine were representative symbols of the conservative and liberal responses to the French Revolution. It is noteworthy that both of them championed the American cause but were on opposite sides with regard to the French Revolution. Their fundamental disagreements had to be understood in light of their support for the American cause. "Burke was liberal because he was conservative. And this cast of mind Tom Paine was wholly unable to appreciate" (Kirk, 1960, pp. 21). For Burke, "Taxation without representation" violated traditional English rights and liberties and placed the English on the wrong side of history for violating their own well-established practices. For demanding redress, the Americans did not base their arguments, like the French did, on a notion of natural rights. On the other hand, Paine found that the British action in America violated universal reason and natural rights. Knowing Burke's influence, in the summer of 1789, Paine wrote to Burke from Paris to elicit his support for introducing in England "a more enlarged system of liberty" (p. 30). Burke specifically approved five separate rebellions against authority. These were the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the American War of Independence, the struggle of the Corsicans for freedom, the attempt of the Poles to preserve their national independence, and various revolts against the minions of Warren Hastings in India (Cobban, 1960). He pointed out that Paine destroyed in "six or seven days... all the boasted wisdom of our ancestors has laboured to bring to perfection for six or seven centuries" (as cited in Kramnick, 1976, pp. 46).

Paine's original contribution was in the second part of the *Rights of Man* and in *Agrarian Justice* (1797). In both, he went beyond a libertarian idea of a minimal state and offered a rationale and blueprint of a welfare state (Philp, 1987, pp. 365). He proposed for Britain a national system of poor relief, state finance for the education of the poor, old-age pensions, death and maternity grants and sheltered

workshops for the indigent, all of which would be financed from the savings in expense incurred from replacing monarchical government with a republican constitution. He recommended progressive income tax to alleviate the burden of the poor and compel the rich from spending more equally among their children, thus ending the unnatural system of primogeniture. In *Agrarian Justice*, he provided a more principled case for redistributive taxation and a welfare state. He argued that each person was born with a natural right to use the earth and its produce. His fierce egalitarianism endeared him to the working man. However, he was no "working-class ideologue. Paine's merciless indictment and repudiation of an aristocratic polity and society did serve the interests of the workers and touched their souls. But at this juncture of history their cause lay with the bourgeois destruction of aristocratic England and it was that cause that consumed Paine in his *Rights of Man*" (Kramnick, 1976, pp. 47).

### **Wollstonecraft's defence of the French Revolution**

As a member of the rational dissenters, Wollstonecraft was enthused about the French Revolution; it vindicated some of her liberal beliefs in the brotherhood of man and equality of sexes. In 1792, while staying in France, she wrote *A Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution and its Effects it has produced in Europe*. The book was published in 1794. It was the first in a multi-volume history of the Revolution. The rest did not follow because, as Wardle pointed out, it was her least original work (1979, p. 41). In the preface, stressing on the importance of progress of human mind and knowledge, she wrote that the Revolution

...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, gradually proceeding to perfection in the advancement of communities, from a state of barbarism to that of political society, till now arrived at the point when sincerity of principles seems to be hastening the overthrow of the tremendous empire of superstition and hypocrisy erected upon the ruins of gothic brutality and ignorance (1795, pp. vii-viii).

Wollstonecraft appealed to her readers to rationally judge the Revolution. She considered the Revolution as bringing about "improvement for civilisation" (1989, p. 6-7). For her, Revolution was an expression of revolt of reason against prejudices, a revolt of equality and freedom against privileges. She insisted on the need to build a new social order, one that would differ from the old one (p. 90). She highlighted the miseries of the poor and the politically underprivileged and opposed tyranny of all hue and colour. Interestingly, like Burke, she emphasised the need for slow and gradual change to prevent despotism. She held that the French people had acquired enough knowledge to begin the Revolution but having been corrupted by their experiences of the *Ancien Régime* and being over-zealous to bring about a new society, they led their own country into a crisis. She was critical of the Catholic clergy and aristocracy.

Wollstonecraft was of the view that the political and social structure prevalent in England and France was based on ignorance and inequality. She rejected Burke's claim of the British constitution being exceptional and agreed with Paine's critique of the monarchy and aristocracy as unproductive. She felt that the French



revolutionaries needed a new model based on justice and reason, one different from what existed in the past. She was convinced that the aristocracy and clergy, which were the dominant elites of the Ancien Régime, would not be able to bring about the necessary and desired changes. She was confident that the advancement of science and reason would inevitably lead to the abolition of privileges and advance citizens' freedom (Wollstonecraft, 1989, pp. 41, 45). This change could be brought about only by those who did not have any privileges. She supported the actions of the revolutionaries who, with the help of reason, demolished traditional beliefs, values and social relationships and wanted the same for England too. For her, "the Revolution is the beginning of a regime where women and the poor are active citizens, and all of the privileges and injustice are terminated at the social, political, economic and gender spheres" (Duman, 2012, pp. 87). Despite the subsequent 'reign of terror', she continued to retain her belief that the French Revolution represented the culmination of the intellectual movement towards general social advancement. She was convinced of it being intrinsically right but blamed the French people for not having sufficient strength of character to carry forward the task of liberating humanity. "Mary can be called a child of the French Revolution. Its philosophy inspired her and was the foundation of her hopes for the future" (Nixon, 1971, pp. 250).

#### *Critique of Burke's Reflections*

Wollstonecraft refuted Burke's *Reflections* in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790)<sup>5</sup>. She pointed out the apparent contradiction between the liberal Burke who supported the American cause and the conservative Burke who opposed Jacobinism in France and England. Burke's defence of tradition, hereditary rights, and emphatic stress on the conservation of existing political relations indicated a lack of reason and predominance of sentiment and would impede civilisation's progress, resulting in social stagnation. She was critical of Burke for upholding unequal property as it would restrict liberty and undermined sociability as friendship and mutual respect were possible only among equals. She described property as 'demonic' as it made parents treat their children as slaves and sacrifice the interests of the younger ones to that of the eldest son. It encouraged early marriages and injured young minds and bodies by producing lax morals and depraved affections. Furthermore, property led to discontent among the middle class, as they tried to emulate the lifestyles of the rich.

Wollstonecraft saw the Church praised by Burke for upholding tradition as fundamentally a corrupt institution, acquiring vast properties from the poor and the ignorant. With the help of David Hume's *History of England* (1754-62), she showed that English laws were a product of contingencies rather than the wisdom of the ages. She insisted that only those institutions which withstood the scrutiny of reason and in accordance with natural rights and God's justice deserved respect and obedience. She assailed Burke for defending a 'gothic affability' more appropriate for a feudal age than a burgeoning commercial age marked for its liberal civility. As against Burke's prescriptive rights, Wollstonecraft contended that human beings

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<sup>5</sup>Besides Wollstonecraft Catherine Macaulay Graham (1731-91) also furnished a rejoinder to Burke and regarded the French Revolution as new and unique. Like Price, she saw benevolent providence in it.

were by birth rational creatures with certain inherited rights, especially equal rights to liberty compatible with that of others. She considered him as a brilliant but misguided voice of the past.

*Critique of Burke's views on Women<sup>6</sup> and Founding of Liberal Feminism*

Wollstonecraft criticised Burke's earlier and influential books on aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), in which he associated beauty with women and the sublime with men. She considered his views on women as strongly prejudiced minds and accused him of being indifferent to their plight. It is generally agreed that modern feminism begins with Wollstonecraft. She established a close link between individualism and feminism by accepting the liberal challenge to aristocratic and patriarchal rule. Her *A Vindication of the Rights of the Woman* (1792) extended the prevailing arguments on the rights of man to include women and affirmed the principles of 'true Whiggery and political radicalism' (Barker-Benfield, 1989, pp.106). It questioned the male bias inherent in notions of rationality and citizenship and demanded equal opportunity for women. It regarded sexual distinctions as arbitrary, a product of a patriarchal society. It glorified reason as the primary tool for women's emancipation and attacked the notion of women as sexual beings. Wollstonecraft desired the extension of the liberal value of economic independence, individual achievement and personal autonomy to women in general and middle-class women in particular. Reaffirming the radical opinion of the dissenters, she brilliantly exposed the myth of equality and freedom, which ignored half of humanity. Hers was the first tract to trigger the debate centred on the theme of 'sameness versus difference' (Ramaswamy, 2018).

The French Revolution, which was libertarian in most aspects, was conservative on the gender question. The Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789) referred only to universal manhood suffrage. On 28th October 1789, the French National Assembly refused to entertain a petition from Parisian women who demanded universal suffrage in the election of national representatives. The Revolution withdrew some of the rights that a woman enjoyed under the Ancien Régime. For example, as a landowner, a noblewoman had rights like those enjoyed by feudal lords. She could levy taxes and administer justice. Women could become peers, diplomats and own large tracts of land. In the guilds, women exercised their professional rights as voters. The abbesses enjoyed the same powers as the abbots. Wollstonecraft dedicated her *A Vindication* to Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, the Bishop of Autun and the French minister, urging him to include women in the new French constitution, failing which France would continue to be a tyranny. She could easily grasp the incompleteness of the Revolution as it failed to extend equal rights to women.

Wollstonecraft was equally critical of women for accepting their artificial and subordinate status confining themselves to household work, and not realising their infinite capacities. She found the idea of chaste wives and sensible mothers absurd. These distorted views, she was convinced, would be eliminated through the right kind of education as it would lead to creativity, critical thinking, individual excellence and a proper understanding backed by experience. She pointed out that women's

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<sup>6</sup>Other than Burke she also targeted Rousseau, Dr Gregory, Dr Fordyce and Lord Chesterfield as their texts and views presented a 'sexual character to the mind'.

education of her time was grossly deficient, resulting in women not having the capacity to generalise their thoughts and develop their understanding. This led to excessive emotionalism, which was further reinforced by a lifestyle they were made to lead. Wollstonecraft recommended co-educational schools as segregation between boys and girls led to the acquisition of bad habits. She wanted working-class girls to acquire skills that would enable them to be financially independent. She opposed blind obedience to rituals and prejudices of any kind and believed that obedience should be based on reason and conscious awareness of one's rights.

Wollstonecraft was convinced that equality was the key to the reform of society in general and of women in particular as it would lead to the creation of better individuals and vibrant citizens. Like Locke, Montesquieu and Adam Smith (1723-90), she advocated free trade and had immense faith in the progressive outlook of the middle class, whom she considered virtuous, independent and rational. She insisted on equitable distribution of property among all the children in a family to ensure happiness and promote virtue. She defended women's civil rights within the confines of marriage and family and stressed the need to achieve equality and independence in marital relationships. Her ideal was women who were well educated, independent in character with a capacity for self-reliance within the family, fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers. She desired that a woman be given the freedom to choose and not accept marriage as the only desirable option, reaffirmed by John Stuart Mill (1806-73) subsequently. She considered motherhood to be more critical than wifehood. She pleaded for women to take up careers compatible with their natural duties, such as nurses, midwives, physicians and the like. She believed inherently in women's suffrage and women's representation but did not pursue it, realising that even radicals would not support her. She opposed royalty and aristocracy in the public domain and patriarchy in the private as these symbolised artificial power and authority. The *Vindication* focused on middle-class women only. However, her novel *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), published posthumously, took up the cause of poor and working women. According to her, significant inequalities in the distribution of wealth and non acceptance of the fact that women, like men, were rational creatures were the two maladies of contemporary society. "Mary Wollstonecraft's constructive proposal was to see deprivations of every kind within a broad framework, so that it would always be an incomplete exercise to protest about women's inferior position, without raising questions about gross inequalities of other kinds. And also vice versa... that broad view is needed even now. And not just for the rights of women, but for the rights of all, in particular of the disadvantaged of every kind" (Sen 2005, pp. 7-8).

### **Conclusion**

The mixed responses of human optimism and despair that the French Revolution evoked in Great Britain was aptly captured in these memorable opening lines the *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way- in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only (Dickens, 1867, pp.1).

Burke was opposed to the French Revolution seeing revolutionary change as undesirable for the uncontrollable violence it entailed. He impressed upon the importance of acting prudently, reform by changing, improve by preserving and not resorting to break with the past and traditions completely. He subscribed to the idea of change with conservation. He favoured continuity of institutions and practices that worked well but did not favour the status quo. Both Paine and Wollstonecraft were critical of Burke's views. They were enthralled with the Revolution seeing as a new dawn. Paine's criticisms of Burke were more effective and well known with catchy phrases. Wollstonecraft's critique led her to lay the foundations of feminism. She also had a more radical plank than Paine for ameliorating the plight of the poor. While Paine suggested taxing the rich and the need to improve the appalling conditions of the poor, "he failed to offer any economic solution to the problem" (Dickinson, 1977, pp. 267). Wollstonecraft suggested economic means to improve the condition of the poor by dividing estates into small farms. Like Burke, she believed in orderly change, but she was convinced of the efficacy of reason and improvements in science. Paine and Wollstonecraft were critical of the monarchy and aristocracy. Paine asserted that "each individual has the right to judge how best to secure his natural rights...they had the right to discuss political principles and agitate for political reforms" (Philp, 1987, pp. 366). Wollstonecraft underlined the need for women's rights.

Burke, Paine and Wollstonecraft writing in the backdrop of the French Revolution and responding to the issues that the Revolution threw up responded in three different ways: conservatism, libertarian liberalism and feminism. These three contrasting perspectives illuminate three different theoretical postures. Conservatism and feminism as distinct schools of philosophy began with Burke and Wollstonecraft, respectively, while Paine continued with the Lockean-Jeffersonian libertarian mood of early liberalism. All these three streams continue to remain important and relevant components of contemporary debates about politics and society in political theory.

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