

Reactions to the French Revolution:
EDMUND BURKE, THOMAS PAINE,
AND THE RIGHTS OF MAN

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Paper

“Only the living can exercise the rights of man”—that is, no previous generation can create unchangeable laws for a people yet unborn.¹ So argues Thomas Paine, hero of the American Revolution and author of *Rights of Man*. Paine’s work, published in February 1791, was in part a reaction to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Both Burke and Paine were acutely aware of the enormous shift in the zeitgeist of France and potential for change in England. However, these very well-respected British men developed “two entirely different and totally irreconcilable points of view.”² At its most basic level, this debate, which has been called “probably the greatest joust in the lists of political philosophy that Great Britain ever witnessed,” is a clash between conservatism and liberalism.³ Burke reacted to the French radicals and their revolution against the Old Regime with suspicion; he feared their capacity for violence and destruction and the possibility that the English commoner would be infected with revolutionary zeal from across the Channel. In *Reflections*, Burke analyzed the current situation in France and made harrowing predictions about its outcomes, as well as reasserted the authority of the English monarchy and demarcated the boundaries for the common man. Paine passionately reacted to Burke’s vitriolic criticism of the French and debunked his ideas about the duties of the English subject with *Rights of Man*. By challenging the stark conservatism of Burke’s volume, he set out both to redefine the boundaries of government itself and to assert the voice of the common man. Paine emphasized “natural

¹ Thomas Paine in Craig Nelson, *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 200.

² R.R. Fennessy, *Burke, Paine, and the Rights of Man: A Difference of Political Opinion* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963), vii.

³ R.B. McDowell in David Duff, “Burke and Paine: contrasts,” in *British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s*, ed. Pamela Clemit, *The Cambridge Companion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011), 47.

rights” over hereditary ones, and stressed government’s need for flexibility and the ability to change.

Born in Dublin in 1729, Edmund Burke served a distinguished career in British Parliament as a Whig. The Whigs sought to maintain the traditional limits of the British monarchy and increasingly became defenders of the free market. Burke was well known for his support of the American Revolution and criticism of King George III and Chancellor of the Exchequer Lord North.⁴ Despite Burke’s progressive Whig principles, he was greatly disturbed by the changes brought about by the Night of August 4th, 1789, during which the French National Assembly abolished feudal privileges, serfdom, and tax exemptions.⁵ In Burke’s view, the changes in France were dangerous because they had moved too quickly against tradition; Burke’s liberalism was in principle gradual, not radical. He was perhaps even more infuriated by a report that two groups in London, the Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information, both had passed friendly resolutions supporting the fall of the Bastille in July 1789.⁶ For Burke, this was an indication that French radicalism might become contagious and spread uncontrollably throughout his own country. He feared that radicalism was brewing within England, and he became “consumed with the idea that [English] state reform would include a dose of Parisian-style mob rule.”⁷ The very thought of such violence, which could destroy everything Burke had worked for in his career, left him beside himself; he would do anything in his power to prevent this from happening in England. In the fall of 1789,

⁴ Audrey Williamson, *Thomas Paine: His Life, Work and Times* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 107.

⁵ Williamson, 114.

⁶ Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man, Books That Changed the World* (New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2006), 72.

⁷ Nelson, 194.

Burke received a letter from Charles Dupont, a member of the French National Assembly, who asked Burke to share his reaction to the Revolution.⁸ Burke responded with *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which he published in November 1790.⁹

Reflections argued that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had created a stable relationship between the monarchy and the people of England. The English people understood their role in society and any interference with this relationship was absurd.¹⁰ Burke wrote about the events of 1688 as if English history had reached a conclusion during those years and had produced a perfect, and unwritten, Constitution. Throughout his work, Burke reinforced the concept of hereditary rule and denied that hereditary rights of the people had ever existed.¹¹ For Burke, this truth was evident in all practices and traditions of England: “We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors.”¹² Burke made a clear distinction between these inherited liberties and hereditary rights; simply put, liberties were given by the state to the individual, and not naturally assumed as universal rights of all men.

Burke’s belief in the ancient power of the monarch was deeply entwined with his belief in the natural social hierarchy: “We fear God; we look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility.”¹³ To Burke, this theorem was as fundamental to France as it was to England. Each group had an “appointed place” in an “eternal society” that should not be

⁸ Hitchens, 71.

⁹ See Appendix I.

¹⁰ Hitchens, 16.

¹¹ Edmund Burke. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Edited by Jon Roland. London, 1790, eBook. http://www.constitution.org/eb/rev_fran.htm.

¹² Burke.

¹³ Burke.

modified.¹⁴ France's Third Estate was no exception; to challenge their appointed place, Burke believed, was an abomination. Burke did not deny that a lower class individual, such as a common tradesman, had a place in society, but simply maintained that these individuals had no place whatsoever in government. If these roles continued to be challenged, Burke was certain that France would be doomed. Moreover, he predicted with remarkable clairvoyance that the revolutionaries would be destroyed and the government would become a military dictatorship.¹⁵ Burke's work was received warmly; it has been estimated that thirty-five thousand copies of *Reflections* were sold, and in fewer than two months after its publication, seventeen essays were published in support of Burke's work.¹⁶

Although Burke's Whig colleagues were shocked by his conservative positions, no one was more disappointed than his one-time friend Thomas Paine. Born in Thetford, England, in 1737, Thomas Paine had championed the cause of American independence with his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense*. Paine returned to Europe with great hope and excitement for the stirrings in France.¹⁷ Unlike Burke, Paine's intended audience throughout his career was the common man: "It is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand."¹⁸ In November 1789, Paine wrote to Burke in an attempt to win his sympathy for the Revolution. However, he had been out of touch with Burke for a time and did not know that Burke had already formed strong opinions on the situation in France.¹⁹ Paine tried to prove to Burke that the Revolution had been carefully planned

¹⁴ Burke.

¹⁵ Burke.

¹⁶ Nelson, 197.

¹⁷ Thomas Paine in V.E. Gibbens, "Tom Paine and the Idea of Progress," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 66, no. 2 (April 1942): 197, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20087477>.

¹⁸ Thomas Paine in Nelson, 203.

¹⁹ Fennessy, 103.

and thus far successfully carried out, but Paine's letter only reinforced Burke's worst suspicions. Burke replied to Paine, writing, "Do you mean to propose that I, who have all my life fought for the constitution, should devote the wretched remains of my days to conspire its destruction? Do you not know that I have always opposed the things called reform; to be sure, because I did not think them reform?"²⁰ Paine, dissatisfied with Burke's response, began drafting an essay. In November 1790, Burke published *Reflections*, which Craig Nelson argues "gave Paine a focus for the thrust of his argument, as well as new insights into the received notions of modern-day Britons."²¹ On March 13, 1791, *Rights of Man* was available for purchase.²² Paine left for Paris soon after to start working on a French edition of the text.²³

In this pamphlet, Paine reacted to *Reflections* by challenging Burke's fundamental arguments and proposing political changes that would benefit the common man. The first major point upon which Paine repeatedly attacks Burke is the concept of hereditary rule in England, and to a larger extent, all nations. Paine disagreed with the practice of hereditary rule for two reasons. First, hereditary rule was inflexible and rigid; it assumed that the world was in a state of constant equilibrium, which clearly did not reflect the reality of European politics. Paine believed that the best government would be one that was capable of changing itself to meet the needs of the day. Second, Paine strongly believed there was no basis for hereditary rule; in fact, he did not believe any pre-existing contract had ever existed between ruler and ruled in the age of man.²⁴ He explained this by asserting that man must have existed before governments existed, and thus, there was a

²⁰ Edmund Burke in Fennessy, 104.

²¹ Nelson, 198.

²² See Appendix II.

²³ Nelson, 202.

²⁴ Hitchens, 94.

time when government did not exist, and as such, there originally could not have been any governors to form such a compact with. In short, man in his natural state had rights, and man in his natural state had not relinquished his rights to a despot.

Paine found one passage of Burke's pamphlet to be particularly outrageous, in which Burke argued that not only were the English people well aware of the fact that they possessed no rights, but that they would be willing to resist that assertion with their "lives and fortunes." Paine noted sardonically, "That men should take up arms and spend their lives and fortunes, not to maintain their rights, but to maintain they have not rights, is an entirely new species of discovery, and suited to the paradoxical genius of Mr. Burke."²⁵ Paine was perhaps even more irked by Burke's "worship of an imperiled [French] queen, while ignoring her regime's starving peasants and jailed political and religious dissenters."²⁶ Burke's complete lack of regard for the common man, who Paine believes is the true victim, is egregious to Paine: "[Burke] pities the plumage" of the queen, "but forgets the dying bird...His hero or his heroine must be a tragedy-victim expiring in show, and not the real prisoner of misery, sliding into death in the silence of a dungeon."²⁷ Although Burke ignored the starving peasants in France, Paine undoubtedly viewed the common man in England as a victim of similar injustices.

In *Rights of Man*, Paine condemned the shortcomings of the English system. He argued that not only had the English government failed to establish stability, but the monarchs themselves had created turmoil by engaging in both foreign and domestic wars fought to decide who would rule.²⁸ Paine's pamphlet called for a written constitution, an

²⁵ Thomas Paine in Nelson, 199.

²⁶ Nelson, 200.

²⁷ Nelson, 200.

²⁸ Hitchens, 94.

elected chief of state, an elected legislature, voting for all adult males, the end of feudal benefits for aristocrats and clergy, and commerce free from mercantilist interference. Paine stepped beyond even the most liberal British political activists of the day by “advocating an entirely different form of government altogether.”²⁹ Paine wanted some form of representative government, which he also described as a republic, based on the laws and consent of the people. He maintained that a republic must have a “visible” constitution to be meaningful; in other words, he did not believe England had a real constitution.³⁰ A representative government, Paine believed, was a government that gave the common man a voice. A representative government, Paine argued, was a government based on reason.

The immediate success of *Rights of Man* was enormous. At a time when the literacy rate in Britain was forty percent and the average work of non-fiction sold only seven hundred and fifty copies, *Rights* sold fifty thousand copies three months after its release.³¹ Edmund Burke was less enamored with Paine’s work but well aware of the impact it had. “Painism,” Burke wrote to a colleague, “will infuse into the people a disposition to all sorts of mischief...I ought to do all I can against that Man.”³² Burke and other conservatives published numerous attacks on *Rights of Man*. Paine quickly responded with *Rights of Man, Part the Second* published in March 1792, in which he supported his arguments from the first part with economic reasoning.³³

²⁹ Nelson, 202.

³⁰ Ellis Sandoz and H. Malcolm MacDonald, “The Rights of Man/Burke and Paine: On Revolution and the Rights of Man,” *Social Science Quarterly* (University of Texas Press) 57, no. 1 (June 1976): 212. Professional Development Collection, EBSCOhost (17479524).

³¹ Nelson, 202.

³² Edmund Burke in Duff, 47.

³³ Nelson, 216.

Rights of Man found massive audiences in America, France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Hungary. European sales exceeded 1.5 million copies by 1809, a true testament to the lasting popularity of Paine's work.³⁴ Dozens of clubs in England formed to fight for constitutional reform and distributed copies of *Rights of Man* as cheaply as possible.³⁵ The English government became so concerned with Paine's popularity and large readership that it actively tried to suppress the spread of his ideas. Booksellers were arrested for selling *Part the Second*, and reform society meetings were forcibly shut down.³⁶ Moreover, government agents followed Paine and incited effigy burnings of him. Paine was brought to court on June 8, 1792, on charges of seditious libel. The trial was set to continue in December 1793, but fearing for his life he had escaped to France in September 1792. Paine was tried *in absentia* and convicted of seditious libel; he would never again return to England.³⁷

Neither Edmund Burke nor Thomas Paine failed to realize the magnitude of the recent revolutionary events that had taken place in France by 1790 as a sign of even greater changes to come. Burke reacted caustically to the small displays of support in England for the French radical cause. He was eager to raze English reform movements and to expose the French radicals as the violent beasts he believed them to be. In *Reflections*, Edmund Burke both reaffirmed the authority of the English monarchy and the rigid structure of the social hierarchy, as well as anticipated the chaos that would shortly ensue in France. Thomas Paine vehemently opposed Burke's scathing criticism of the French and also sought to dispel the myth about the limitations of a common man. *Rights of Man*

³⁴ Nelson, 220.

³⁵ Nelson, 221.

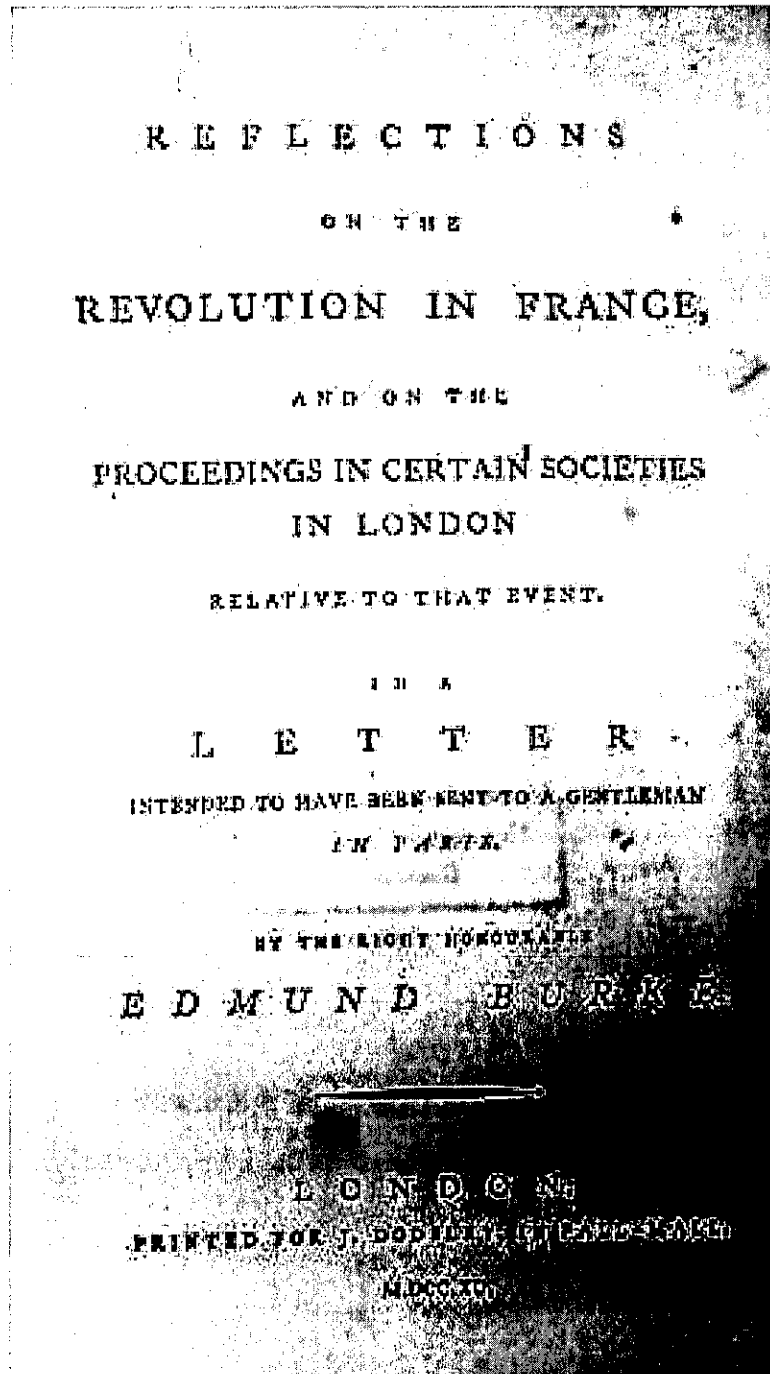
³⁶ Nelson, 228.

³⁷ Nelson, 228.

defied the conservatism of Burke's volume. In these pamphlets, Paine intended to redefine the boundaries of the institution of government and to prove that the common man had a voice. He stressed "natural rights" over hereditary ones, and argued for the importance of a flexible government. For the common man, Paine advocated a more active role in politics by means of a representative government to correct England's rigid hierarchy. In the following decades England would "glacially reform itself, just as Burke proposed, but into a structure not all that different from the one envisioned by *Rights of Man*."³⁸ Throughout Europe and much of the world in the next two centuries, the voice of the common man, as heard by Thomas Paine, would be heeded in the world's many democracies.

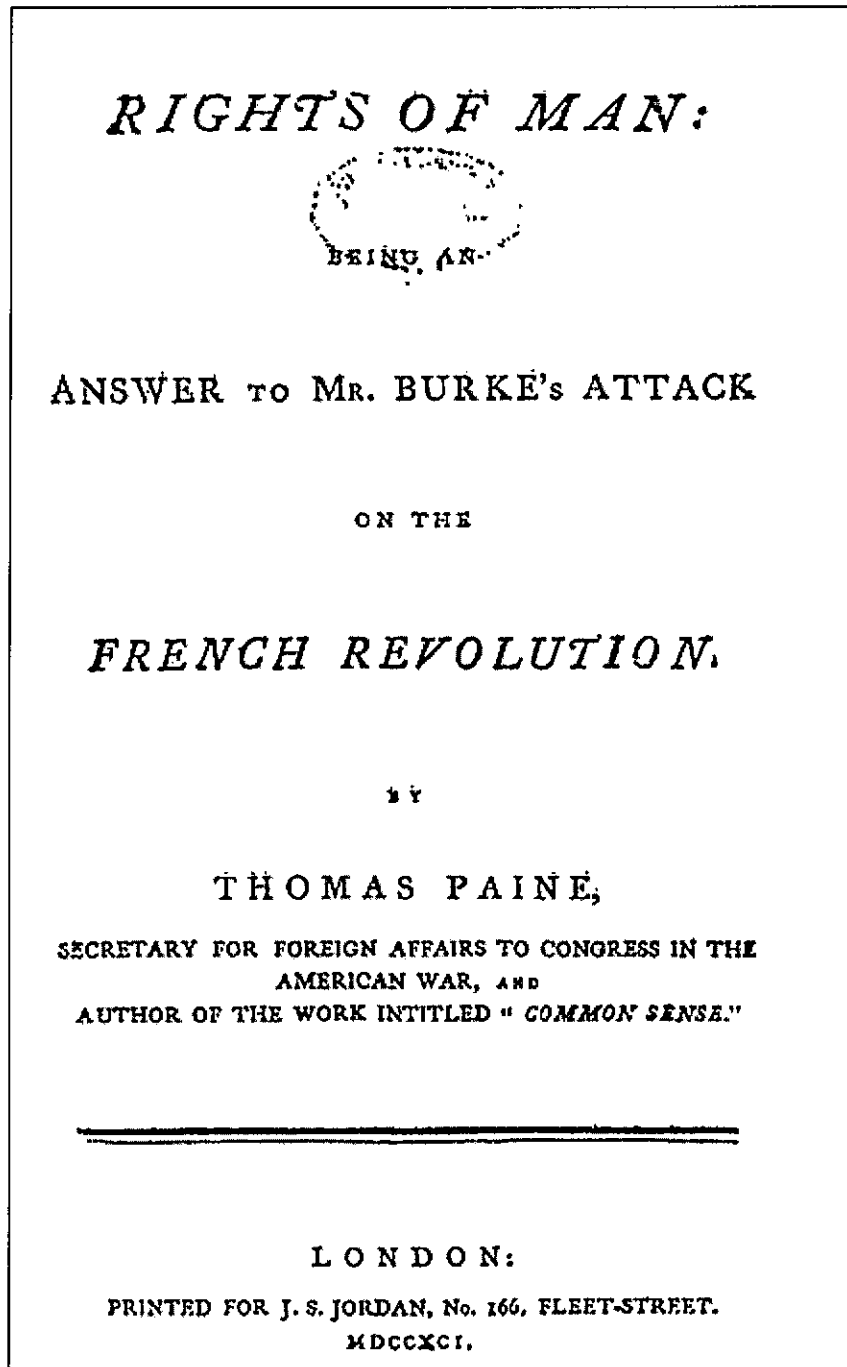
³⁸ Nelson, 203.

APPENDIX I



Cover of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by Edmund Burke. The full title of Burke's work makes a clear note of the stirrings of the Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information in London. Furthermore, the full title reveals that *Reflections* began as a letter; the "Gentleman in Paris" was Charles Dupont.

APPENDIX II



Cover of *Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine. The full title of Paine's work highlights his intention to refute Burke's *Reflections*. The cover page also makes reference to Paine's earlier best-selling pamphlet, *Common Sense*.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Edited by Jon Roland. London, 1790, eBook. http://www.constitution.org/eb/rev_fran.htm.

Burke presents his reactions to the changes in France and expresses his concerns for the political stirrings in England. This work played a major role in Paine's publication of *Rights* a year later. I quote Burke's work numerous times in my paper.

Paine, Thomas. "Rights of Man, Part One." In *Liberty and Terror in England: Reactions to the French Revolution*, edited by Roland Bartel, 53-57. Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1965.

This work provides the core of Paine's argument. Paine dismisses many of Burke's arguments made in *Reflections* and advocates for political change in England. I quote this work numerous times in my paper.

———. "Rights of Man, Part Two." In *Paine and Jefferson on Liberty*, edited by Lloyd S. Kramer, 105-134. New York: Continuum, 1994.

This work supports Paine's arguments made in the first part with economic reasoning. It was published in 1792 separately from the first part of *Rights*. It enjoyed widespread readership which resulted in government suppression. I discuss it in my paper.

Secondary Sources

Duff, David. "Burke and Paine: contrasts." In *British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s*, edited by Pamela Clemit, 47-70. The Cambridge Companion. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011.

This paper explores the debate between Burke and Paine. It provides a detailed account of the personal connection and correspondence between the two men. I reference it in my paper.

Fennessy, R. R. *Burke, Paine, and the Rights of Man: A Difference of Political Opinion*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1963.

This work was originally a dissertation. It provided a rich background for the changes in France and the writing process of each man. I quote it in my paper.

Gibbens, V.E. "Tom Paine and the Idea of Progress." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 66, no. 2 (April 1942): 191-204. <http://www.jstor.org/>.

This paper discussed Paine's influence in America as well as in Europe. It explains his return from the newly independent American colonies back to Europe. I reference it in my paper.

Hitchens, Christopher. *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man*. Books That Changed the World. New York: Atlantic Monthly, 2006.

Hitchens's work gives a detailed account of Paine's publication and its impact. He discusses the significance of the debate between Paine and Burke. I quote it numerous times throughout my paper.

Nelson, Craig. *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations*. New York: Penguin Group, 2006.

This biography of Paine provides an in-depth examination and analysis of Paine's career. Several chapters are devoted to the development of *Rights* and Paine's connection to the French Revolution. I cite it heavily in my paper.

Sandoz, Ellis, and H. Malcolm MacDonald. "The Rights of Man/Burke and Paine: On Revolution and the Rights of Man." *Social Science Quarterly (University of Texas Press)* 57, no. 1 (June 1976): 210-214. Professional Development Collection, EBSCOhost (17479524).

This article explores the debate between Paine and Burke. It provided valuable analysis on Paine's arguments. I quote it in my paper.

Williamson, Audrey. *Thomas Paine: His Life, Work and Times*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973.

This biography of Paine focuses on the European aspect of Paine's life. Furthermore, it provided useful background for Burke's political career in Parliament. I reference it in my paper.