

**To what extent was late 18<sup>th</sup> century English society  
affected by 'Revolutionary' ideas from America and France?**

The late eighteenth century was a period of political change in both America and Europe; the change was embodied by the moving away from the *ancien regime*. In Europe the societal unrest reached its apogee in 1789 with the French Revolution. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries England was by no means protected from these changes and the threat of Revolution was constantly present as the populace grew increasingly aware of Revolution elsewhere in the world.

The American Revolution (1775 – 1783) is the first critical uprising to consider and is intrinsically linked to France and the French Revolution through military involvement and ideology. The Englishman Thomas Paine arrived in America in 1774 and within two years had published his pamphlet *Common Sense* which “advocated complete independence for the American colonies, argu[ing] for republicanism as the sole rational means of government” (Belchem, 2002, §1). When he returned to England in 1787 his beliefs in democratic republicanism were promoted in his two part *The Rights of Men*.

The American *Declaration of Independence*, establishing the freedom of American colonies from England's control, is an important document in that it establishes the “self-evident truths” on which Revolution was based: “that all Men are created equal”, and that they have the unalienable rights of “Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness”. (LOC, 1776, p1). There is a certain irony in that Jefferson's greatest influence for the *DoI* was John Locke's justifications for England's ‘Glorious’ Revolution of 1688.

As well as providing kindling for political debate, the War of Independence was responsible for a decrease in British exports. Evans (1983, p18) indicates that “exports to the North American mainland [...] fell by almost half” around 1780. However Morgan (1999, p91) suggests that this was compensated for by the increase in aggregate demand throughout the English economy.

Contemporary writing regarding the French Revolution in England was prolific and it brought the issues to a wider audience. One of the first pro-Revolution sources is the Dissenting preacher Richard Price's *Discourse on the Love of our Country* (November 1789) which discusses the role of monarchy and government, and finishes with the belief that the Revolution has heralded a new chapter in history:

“Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting American free, reflected to France, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes and warms and illuminates Europe” (Butler, 1994, p32)

In direct response to this sermon, the pamphleteer Edmund Burke attacked Price's viewpoint in one of the most influential contemporary documents, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

Burke describes the “fresh ruins of France” being the result of “rash and ignorant counsel” (Butler, p41), and criticises Price and his cronies by name for their philosophy. Burke's anti-Revolutionary approach led to the formation of the London Corresponding Society in 1792 which had the objective of raising “artisan political consciousness in the provinces”. In the early days of the Society, members debated whether “we, who are Tradesmen, Shopkeepers and Mechanics, have any right to obtain a Parliamentary Reform?” (Rule, 1992, p224ff). A positive answer to this question was an indication that politics had become part of English society at every level.

Joseph Priestly was a supporter of reform and in 1791 held a “public feast” at his house to celebrate the anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. In his *Observations of the Emigration of Dr Priestly*, William Corbett suggests that the public were repulsed by the idea that such an event could be “celebrated”, and Priestly's house in Birmingham and all it contained were destroyed by rioters in a disturbance which lasted for five days (Butler, p136ff). This again shows the involvement of the ‘common man’ in political matters, and illustrates the fact that people were aware of the issues throughout the country and not just in the capital.

As Burke had responded to Price, Paine's *The Right of Man* was a direct reaction to Burke. Paine's American experiences meant that he saw the French Revolution as the start of an age of equal opportunity

for all men. He had a talent for writing for his audience and the most pessimistic calculations suggest over 100,000 copies of parts one and two of *The Rights* were sold within two years of publication (Butler, p108; Belchem, §2). His writing is also very forward looking; he suggests the need for the government to use taxation to redistribute wealth to the poor, and to provide for the aged (Butler, p119ff).

Paine's radical approach won much support within England, and as a result a Royal Proclamation against seditious writing was invoked by the government in May 1792, which led to Paine's attempted prosecution. (Belchem, 2002, §4). Paine's ideas were later disregarded as events in France followed Burke's predictions, which served to reinforce anti-Revolutionary ideas in England.

Although English reform was ultimately to fail, there were attempts to hold a convention to express the popular support of reform in 1794. To have considered such an event suggests a significant level of support in England for reform, however the government employed heavy handed techniques to arrest leading proponents of reform on suspicion of treason by a reinterpretation of 'treason' (Philp, 2002, §3). The accused were acquitted but Pitt introduced the Treasonable Practices and Seditious Meetings Acts (Rule, p3) a year later to control the likelihood of future organised gatherings.

The number of pamphlets published regarding reform, the number of prosecutions made, and the new Acts passed by parliament to stifle reform groups indicate the effect of Revolutionary ideas from abroad. Rule (p27) summarises the influence of affairs in France: "Events across the Channel inevitably stimulated intense political debate in Britain and brought a deep polarisation of opinion", and French events had, in turn, been markedly influenced by American revolutionary ideology. The intensity of political debate and the involvement of so many people in politics were novel occurrences and, for the ruling powers, worrying ones. The great divide between people was dramatic and exaggerated what was already a delicately placed debate. Considering the ferocity of the global debate, Evans (2002, §2) suggests that Britain escaped Revolution "not by the hand of God but by the skin of its teeth".

(1027 words)

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