

REVOLUTION AND REFORM

BURKE AND PAINE WERE KEENLY AWARE THAT POLITICAL ideas pointed to political action. Both men were writers and thinkers, but both were also deeply involved in political affairs at a time when the links between ideas and action were unusually clear. Their political ideas therefore point toward two views of political action and change—with Burke drawing on his vision of prescription to make the case for slow, incremental reform and Paine building on his case for a rational politics to argue that only a wholly new beginning from first principles can redeem an illegitimate government.

These views were evident in Burke's and Paine's writings from their earliest political engagements and follow plainly, as we have seen, from their reflections on society and man. But they came to the fore most forcefully in the period of the French Revolution, when the question of just how the means and the ends of political change were related became suddenly urgent and prominent. Burke and Paine were better prepared than most of their contemporaries to take up

these questions, and the passion and intensity with which they did so have ever since defined their legacies.

PAINE'S REVOLUTION FOR JUSTICE

Thomas Paine was a self-declared and unabashed revolutionary. "To have a share in two revolutions is living to some purpose," he proudly wrote to George Washington.¹ That purpose, from Paine's earliest political exploits to the end of his life, was the cause of justice, pursued by an application of reason and principle to government. And as we have seen, Paine believed that such an application must begin from the beginning, so that a profoundly corrupt or broken regime needs to be replaced rather than mended.

Again and again, he expresses disgust with the excuses illegitimate governments make for their mistreatment of their people in an effort to hold on to power. "As time obliterated the history of their beginning," he writes of the despots who founded every old nation, "their successors assumed new appearances, to cut off the entail of their disgrace, but their principles and objects remained the same."² It is simply not possible to fix discrete problems in regimes of this sort, because the principle of despotism has soaked through into every corner and crevice. "When despotism has established itself for ages in a country, as in France," Paine writes, "the original hereditary despotism resident in the person of the king divides and sub-divides itself into a thousand shapes and forms, till at last the whole of it is acted by deputation."³

Nothing short of a total remedy can address such a profound corruption of government. To speak of revolution, therefore, is for Paine to speak of overthrow, of the lifting up of the burden of generations of misrule and iniquity, leaving only the society itself, essentially in its natural state.

Paine was under no illusion that such a general revolution would be easy; nor did he take lightly the risks and problems it entailed. "Mischief is more easily begun than ended," he writes, and revolutions will always carry behind them a train of mischief.⁴ He insists

therefore that he is not enamored of revolutions for their own sake. As a general matter, he writes, "it is better to obey a bad law, making use at the same time of every argument to show its errors and procure its repeal, than forcibly to violate it."⁵ Only when the regime is so fundamentally corrupt as to make the very idea of a good law impossible is more extreme action required. Paine is careful to emphasize this caveat because he wants to be perfectly clear that a government established on the proper principles, not the revolution required to get to such a government, is the goal of his efforts: "It is in the first place necessary that we distinguish between the means made use of to overthrow despotism in order to prepare the way for the establishment of liberty and the means to be used after the despotism is overthrown."⁶

The aim of the revolution is to establish a new order, not a permanent revolutionary state, and only the promise of that new order, together with the abuses of the old one, justifies the revolution. It is an insurrection that aims at the establishment of some stable political arrangement. "The authority of the present Assembly is different from what the authority of future Assemblies will be," Paine writes of the French parliament in the early stages of the revolution. "The authority of the present one is to form a constitution; the authority of future assemblies will be to legislate according to the principles and forms prescribed in that constitution; and if experience should hereafter show that alterations, amendments, or additions are necessary, the constitution will point out the mode by which such things shall be done, and not leave it to the discretionary power of the future government."⁷

But for all these caveats, the mandate Paine describes for revolution is exceptionally broad because he faults the very idea of "monarchical and hereditary government," and not just the particular abuses of particular regimes, for leaving man in a wretched condition.⁸ In some writings (particularly in the first part of *Rights of Man*, written while some of the French revolutionaries, including Paine's friend the Marquis de Lafayette, were still trying to retain some symbolic role for the king in the new regime, and therefore written with some caution) Paine reluctantly acknowledges the right of the people to

choose a monarch. But by the height of the French Revolution, and very clearly by the second part of *Rights of Man*, which was written a little over a year after the first, he declares himself an uncompromising republican. "All hereditary government is in its nature tyranny," Paine writes, and passionately attacks the very notion of monarchy and hereditary aristocracy.⁹

When legitimate governments are established around the world, revolutions should be scarce and citizens should seek to redress grievances by persuasion and legislation. But as long as that is not the case (which it was not in his time in any country except America and revolutionary France, Paine believed), the only remedy at hand was to begin again. The old European regimes were simply no longer adequate in the era of modern knowledge about politics. "Whether the forms and maxims of Governments which are still in practice were adapted to the condition of the world at the period they were established is not in this case the question," Paine writes. "The older they are, the less correspondence can they have with the present state of things. Time, and change of circumstances and opinions, have the same progressive effect in rendering modes of Government obsolete as they have upon customs and manners."¹⁰ The advance of knowledge and civilization, themselves aided by the advance of modern reason and science, make the inadequacy and illegitimacy of old regimes increasingly acute, and the illegitimacy itself can only be addressed by total revolution.

In practice, therefore, Paine argues that the moment requires a complete and utterly new political beginning. People in every nation must throw off the old governments that burden them and must begin again from their social foundations, this time constructing political institutions in accord with the principles of equality, choice, and representation made evident by reason. Paine's idea of revolution is thus less a remedy to a particular set of social and political grievances and more a response to the absence of proper political foundations. He wants to see a return to the natural society that he believes precedes the formation of government and, from that point, the construction of entirely new institutions and practices, unconnected to any that have existed in the old regime. This requires the design and implementa-

tion of thoroughly novel social and political forms. Continuity with the old regimes would itself be proof of the inadequacy of reform. A constitution, in order to work well, "must be a novelty, and that which is not a novelty must be defective," Paine writes.¹¹ Nothing of the prior regime should be retained, and it makes very little sense to look at even more ancient models, like those of Greece and Rome, in establishing a new regime. "Mankind have lived to very little purpose if, at this period of the world, they must go two or three thousand years back for lessons and examples."¹² Instead, we must look not to history but to our new understanding of nature and of the principles of justice and society and begin nothing less than a rebirth.

Clearly, given both his enthusiasm for revolution and his caveats regarding the limited circumstances under which it could be called for, Paine believed that what matters most is what the revolution builds, not what it tears down, and he was careful to make this point explicit too. "In contemplating revolutions," he notes in *Rights of Man*, "it is easy to perceive that they may arise from two distinct causes; the one, to avoid or get rid of some great calamity; the other, to obtain some great and positive good." He continues:

In those which proceed from the former cause, the temper becomes incensed and soured; and the redress, obtained by danger, is too often sullied by revenge. But in those which proceed from the latter, the heart, rather animated than agitated, enters serenely upon the subject. Reason and discussion, persuasion and conviction, become the weapons in the contest, and it is only when those are attempted to be suppressed that recourse is had to violence. When men unite in agreeing that a thing is good could it be obtained, such for instance as relief from a burden of taxes and the extinction of corruption, the object is more than half accomplished. What they approve as the end, they will promote in the means.¹³

Yet even in this very passage, Paine betrays the difficulty of distinguishing destruction and construction in his view of the world. The positive goods he calls upon as examples are "relief" from burdensome

taxes and “the extinction” of corruption—both of which are in fact negative goods. Because he believes a legitimate government can fall into line with the rational and natural order of things, he considers injustice a kind of imposition. Therefore, the enactment of justice is the removal of a burden; the good is the elimination of the bad. For this reason, Paine’s revolutionary writing is in fact almost entirely devoted to the enterprise of bringing down despots and tyrants. Revolution is the elimination of impositions and burdens, which in practice requires the total elimination of the governments responsible for them.

Paine believes that since governing is essentially intellectual work, people have the ability to build a proper government from scratch provided they respect the principles of individual equality and liberty. But the necessary prior task of dismantling a despotic regime is a much more difficult challenge that requires immense political exertion, courage, and commitment. He sees himself above all called to contribute to meeting this challenge, an effort that requires the best and the brightest in an oppressed society—“all that extent of capacity which never fails to appear in revolutions”—to help the people see their way to understanding the failings of their government and to argue for a return to beginnings for the construction of an alternative.¹⁴

Paine believed his particular talent for political argument was especially well suited to the nature of the challenge, which required a kind of awakening. The forms and habits of the old regime can easily disguise its fundamental injustice from the people, since people after all tend to love their country and its symbols and forms and so will bear a lot of pain out of habit. But, Paine writes, “it is, however, curious to observe how soon this spell can be dissolved. A single expression, boldly conceived and uttered, will sometimes put a whole company into their proper feelings: and whole nations are acted on in the same manner.”¹⁵

Properly disillusioned and then instructed in the proper principles of government, every nation has the capacity to liberate itself through revolution and replace a decrepit despotism with a free regime. It is in this sense that Paine famously assures his fellow Americans in 1776 that they can choose to effectively to begin the world anew.¹⁶ We

have it in our power to shake loose of old presumptions, begin from the correct first principles, and so construct a proper government.

Put this way, Paine’s revolutionary ethic turns out to be (in its means, as well as its ends) an applied form of his theory of political life. He seeks to institute change by starting over from scratch, just as he seeks to assess political arrangements by looking back to first origins. He wants to take the method of reasoning about politics employed by Enlightenment liberalism and turn it into a method of acting on politics.

Because his idea of revolution is grounded in principle in this way and involves a kind of liberation of man’s nature from the oppression of false ideas and tyrannical government, Paine believes that its progress will be essentially unstoppable once the obstacles of the old regimes are properly removed. “Government founded on a moral theory, on a system of universal peace, on the indefeasible hereditary Rights of Man, is now revolving from west to east by a stronger impulse than the government of the sword revolved from east to west,” he writes. “It interests not particular individuals, but nations in its progress, and promises a new era to the human race.”¹⁷ This is a revolution concerned not with the replacement of one leader with another. It is moved not by hatred of one king or preference for another, but by the desire for justice enabled by a search for the truth.

Even as things turned sour in France and Paine found himself imprisoned for nearly a year by the revolutionary regime for associating with insufficiently radical factions, he continued to argue that the proper principles were there to be applied, and that any failures of the revolution were merely failures to apply them fully and properly. “All the disorders that have arisen in France during the progress of the revolution have had their origin not in the principle of equal rights, but in the violation of that principle,” he wrote in 1795.¹⁸ Nine years later, having seen the collapse of his great dream and the rise of Napoleon, Paine told a group of French-speaking inhabitants of Louisiana: “You see what mischief ensued in France by the possession of power before they understood principles. They earned liberty in words, but not in fact. The writer of this was in France through the

whole of the Revolution, and knows the truth of what he speaks; for after endeavoring to give it principle, he had nearly fallen victim to its rage."¹⁹ To the extent the revolution did not fully succeed, Paine concludes, it was because it was incomplete, not, as Burke might suggest, because it sought a complete enactment of an inadequate and excessively speculative vision.

This view makes Paine a thoroughgoing revolutionary, well before the idea of the revolutionary as a political character or type had come into vogue. Believing that political change must be total and uncompromising, he is excited by the prospect of overthrowing the existing order so that a new and more rational one may sprout in its place. Paine was exceptionally frank about his advocacy for total revolution, especially once he was ensconced in France. He saw all resistance to a complete new beginning as an expression of corruption or of some invidious private motive and believed that during the exceptional period of the revolution, resistance and opposition must be squashed for the good of the cause.

It is important to understand how far beyond the liberalism of most English Whigs Paine went by espousing these views. By rejecting monarchy in principle, he allied himself with the fringe of the English radicals of the day, but even most of those radicals never went as far as to suggest the abolition of the monarchy in Britain itself. For Paine, despotism was the result of a failure to fully apply the principles of liberty in practice, and so the liberal principles that had emerged from the Whig worldview necessitated an unbending republicanism. It was in this context that in his final letter to Burke, on January 17, 1790, Paine wrote of the zeal of the revolutionaries and their determination to destroy themselves or their country rather than abandon their revolutionary plan.²⁰

It is easy to see why Paine was excited. The events he described, in the opening months of the French Revolution, perfectly embodied his view of how meaningful political change must occur and how a regime properly grounded in Enlightenment rationalism ought to replace an ancient monarchy. The very same events, however, also gave perfect expression to his correspondent's worst fears and deepest

worries. Burke's and Paine's sharp differences were never clearer than at the outset of the revolution in France.

BURKE'S COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY REFORM

"There was a time when it was impossible to make Mr. Burke believe there would be any revolution in France," Paine explains in *Rights of Man*. He was referring to his discussions with Burke just a year before the revolution broke out.²¹ Total revolution in the very heart of Europe seemed to Burke too radical a prospect to believe. And for that very reason, when the revolution did come, Burke could hardly contain his worry about its consequences. The revolution embodied every concern Burke had spent his political life trying to address. It was an outbreak of philosophically inspired radicalism driven by the very theories of human nature and politics Burke had criticized for decades, it sought to cut off a society's links to its past, and it proceeded by acts of mob violence and extremism.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Burke's response, from the moment he became aware of the scale of the violence in Paris until the end of his life about seven years later, was an intense and fiery opposition to developments in France. He had an unswerving dedication to opening the eyes of his countrymen to what he took to be a profound and unprecedented peril. The French regime, Burke writes, "is not a new power of an old kind. It is a new power of a new species."²² Nothing like it had been seen before on the European scene, but it expressed in real-world form the dangers that had for some time been building in the intellectual world. "Never before this time was a set of literary men converted into a gang of robbers and assassins; never before did a den of bravoes and banditti assume the garb and tone of an academy of philosophers," Burke writes in one characteristic flourish of disconcertion.²³

In the American crisis, which he never called a revolution, Burke believed the colonies rebelled against British misrule. But the French were rebelling, he thought, out of zeal for a new theory of man and society and in the process were overturning far more than political

structures. In this sense, it was precisely because the revolution was about pursuing a new order, rather than just rejecting a particular policy or ruler, that Burke thought it went too far. Paine's justification was identical to Burke's indictment. "It is not a revolution in government," Burke writes. "It is not the victory of party over party. It is a destruction and decomposition of the whole society; which never can be made of right by any faction, however powerful, nor without terrible consequences to all about it, both in the act and in the example."²⁴

France after its revolution, according to Burke, was not so much a nation with a different government as a party in an intellectual dispute that spanned borders and had ambitions to reach into every European state. "My ideas and my principles led me in this contest to encounter France not as a state but as a faction," Burke writes in the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*.²⁵ "It is a war between the partisans of the ancient, civil, moral, and political order of Europe against a sect of fanatical and ambitious atheists which means to change them all. It is not France extending a foreign empire over other nations: it is a sect aiming at universal empire, and beginning with the conquest of France."²⁶

And Burke's vehement opposition was clearly motivated by the concern that the revolutionary sect's next conquest would be Britain and, indeed that England's own political radicals were avidly working to set the scene for a new English revolution to follow the French. He was worried that the agitations of such radicals in Britain would give the people, as well as foreigners, the impression that the nation as a whole was about to rebel. And in the *Reflections*, he worked to dispel this notion while reminding his countrymen of the principles of their regime and making the case against revolution as a mode of political change.²⁷

Burke did not deny that the need for serious political change sometimes arose; nor did he deny that the old regime in France had serious faults (though he surely did play these down at times).²⁸ "I am no stranger to the faults and defects of the subverted government of France," he writes, "and I think I am not inclined by nature or policy to make a panegyric upon anything which is a just and natural object of censure. But the question is not now of the

vices of that monarchy, but of its existence. Is it then true, that the French government was such as to be incapable or undeserving of reform; so that it was of absolute necessity that the whole fabric should be at once pulled down, and the area cleared for the erection of a theoretic, experimental edifice in its place?"²⁹ Burke did not object to the desire for political change, but objected to throwing out the entire regime, and with it, he believed, the political tradition of France, to realize such change.

Some of the particular policies of the new regime could well improve the lot of the people in the short run, he notes, as "they who destroy every thing certainly will remove some grievance" and "they who make every thing new, have a chance that they may establish something beneficial." But to excuse the violence and radicalism of the revolution by pointing to some particular benefit of it, a person would have to prove that the benefit could not have been achieved through less radical reform, and this, Burke argued, was simply false. And more important, the harm done by the means and ends of the revolution was far greater than these modest benefits. "The improvements of the national assembly are superficial; their errors, fundamental."³⁰ The old regime may have been barbaric, Burke writes, but the violent revolution has merely unleashed on the world another no less barbaric regime.³¹

Surely these are not the only options. "Have these gentlemen never heard, in the whole circle of the worlds of theory and practice, of anything between the despotism of the monarch and the despotism of the multitude?" he asks.³² "It is with them a war or a revolution, or it is nothing."³³ Burke argues that the failure to see or pursue a middle ground is not an oversight but a prominent feature of the radical worldview of the revolutionaries: "Their despair of curing common distempers by regular methods, arises not only from defect of comprehension, but, I fear, from some malignity of disposition."³⁴

The overthrow of a government is of course not unprecedented, even in the history of Britain. But for the British as for most civilized nations, Burke claims, revolution has been considered justifiable only as a matter of absolutely unavoidable necessity. "Revolution will be

the very last resource of the thinking and the good.”³⁵ The French, however, have made it a rule. “Their idea of their powers is always taken at the utmost stretch of legislative competency, and their examples for common cases from the exceptions of the most urgent necessity.”³⁶ This kind of extremism is very poorly suited to political life. “He that sets his house on fire because his fingers are frostbitten can never be a fit instructor in the method of providing our habitations with a cheerful and salutary warmth,” Burke writes.³⁷

Moreover, necessary revolutions in Britain have generally been undertaken to return the constitution to some balance. They have not sought to completely replace the system of government. Such total revolution, Burke argues, cannot be justified even by necessity, because its consequences are so dire and grave that there must always be a better option. By cutting off political life from all prescription and instituting Enlightenment radicalism as a kind of state religion, the revolution goes beyond the bounds of any necessity and puts in place an incorrigible system—a government so riddled with fundamental problems it can never be made good.³⁸

Why should the revolutionary regime be so thoroughly (and permanently) unsalvageable? Burke sees the regime as the instantiation of the radical views of nature, choice, and Enlightenment reason described thus far, and he believes that when all these are combined and put into action, the result is an unmitigated political disaster, and one that closes off the path to its own improvement.

To begin with, the revolution undoes checks and incentives for moderation and sets wild spirits loose. Its leaders treat France like a conquered country, erasing all vestiges of prior identity and strength.³⁹ They turn the people against one another to weaken every part of society except the new government and seek in particular “to subvert the whole frame and order of the best constructed states by corrupting the common people with the spoil of the superior classes.”⁴⁰ They turn the talents of the nation’s best and brightest against the wealth of its great families.⁴¹ All of this creates new habits of action and thought that powerfully undermine all political order. These habits began before the revolution itself and were essential to it. “A silent revolution

in the moral world preceded the political, and prepared it.”⁴² And once connected with the spectacles of an actual revolution, these habits create a hunger for radical political action—a hunger that leaves people dissatisfied with normal life and thus disinclined to seek stability. “A cheap, bloodless reformation, a guiltless liberty, appear flat and vapid to their taste. There must be a great change of scene; there must be a magnificent stage effect; there must be a grand spectacle to rouse the imagination.”⁴³

Once roused, Burke argues, the imagination will remain so and will seek a target for further spectacles and stage effects. Burke fears the unleashing of political zealotry and fanaticism. A regime built on such theories with a public moved to fanaticism, he writes, will quickly become a “tyranny of a licentious, ferocious, and savage multitude, without laws, manners, or morals, and which so far from respecting the general sense of mankind, insolently endeavors to alter all the principles and opinions which have hitherto guided and contained the world, and to force them into a conformity to their views and actions.”⁴⁴

Setting loose these forces, Burke argues, not only undermines social stability, but also sets the people and the state on a collision course, because the public will soon enough grow tired of its new regime and its unavoidable restrictions on individual liberty just as it was taught to grow tired of the old regime. And the state is certain to overwhelm the populace in such a clash. A revolution driven by a faith in choice and individualism will in time therefore yield a regime that crushes choice and individualism. The political ideas behind the revolution encourage disloyalty to one’s country in favor of Enlightenment principles. But when that disloyalty extends to the new regime itself, the regime will have far fewer resources than its predecessor to call upon in exerting its authority, since it will have crushed the people’s natural calm. Having leveled society, the regime will have only force at its disposal and will find itself compelled to crush dissent. “Kings will be tyrants from policy when subjects are rebels from principle,” Burke writes.⁴⁵ And in that crisis, Burke predicts, the only recourse will be to a military regime and, with it, the end of all the lovely talk

about the rights of man. In the *Reflections*, Burke predicts the rise of a charismatic general to power in such a crisis—a prediction that eerily prefigures the coming of Napoleon.⁴⁶

Indeed, it is precisely because the new regime is built upon a rational plan that it has the potential to wield immense and previously inconceivable power and overrun the individual. “France differs essentially from all those Governments which are formed without system, which exist by habit, and which are confused with the multitude, and with the complexity of their pursuits,” Burke writes.

It is systematic; it is simple in its principle; it has unity and consistency in perfection. In that country entirely to cut off a branch of commerce, to extinguish a manufacture, to destroy the circulation of money, to violate credit, to suspend the course of agriculture, even to burn a city, or to lay waste a province of their own, does not cost them a moment's anxiety. To them, the will, the wish, the want, the liberty, the toil, the blood of individuals is as nothing. Individuality is left out of their scheme of Government. The state is all in all.⁴⁷

Ironically, the regime built explicitly upon the rights of man stands to trample those rights more effectively than any ancient despotism, Burke believes. The revolutionaries have mistaken the external signs of despotism (like nobles and priests) for the causes of it and so, as often happens in history, have fought the wrong enemy and may turn out to embody the very evil they seek to combat. “It is thus with all those, who, attending only to the shell and husk of history, think they are waging war with intolerance, pride, and cruelty, whilst, under color of abhorring the ill principles of antiquated parties, they are authorizing and feeding the same odious vices in different factions, and perhaps in worse.”⁴⁸

Here again, Burke argues that the effort to rationalize politics, to eliminate those sentimental attachments and seemingly vestigial organs, will end up liberating not reason and justice but the passion for

power. His difference with Paine regarding human nature leads to very different expectations of the age of revolutions. Political ideas have consequences, Burke writes, and these should be understood in light of both the permanent limitations of human nature and the successes and the failures of the past. Revolution, he argues, is an inappropriate means of political change because it is not well suited for capitalizing on the implicit lessons of the past or for leaving room for the permanent imperfection of all human undertakings. The challenges of governing are simply too subtle and complex to allow for such blunt force.

The French revolutionaries, as he understood them, simply ignored this complexity. “An ignorant man, who is not fool enough to meddle with his clock, is however sufficiently confident to think he can safely take to pieces, and put together at his pleasure, a moral machine of another guise, importance and complexity, composed of far other wheels, and springs, and balances, and counteracting and co-operating powers,” Burke writes. “Men little think how immorally they act in rashly meddling with what they do not understand. Their delusive good intention is no sort of excuse for their presumption.”⁴⁹

The pleasure that the revolutionaries seemed to take in such destruction of long-standing arrangements only further confirms Burke in his worries. “It is a sour, malignant, envious disposition, without taste for the reality, or for any image or representation of virtue, that sees with joy the unmerited fall of what had long flourished in splendor and in honor,” he writes. “I do not like to see any thing destroyed; any void produced in society; any ruin on the face of the land.”⁵⁰ He believes that this hunger for ruin is a function of a lack of appreciation for the given world. “Ingratitude is indeed their four cardinal virtues compacted and amalgamated into one,” he writes in the *Letter to a Noble Lord*.⁵¹

Thus again, Burke's deepest objections to the revolutionaries and their approach to political change have to do with their attitudes about the past and their relation to it—their assertion that political change must overcome the past, rather than build on it. Burke argues that this view, together with the closely related assumptions of the

revolutionaries regarding nature, choice, and reason, leads to a profoundly misguided approach to political action and political change. What's more, the resulting revolutionary regime not only stands to do terrible damage to society, but would also close off the paths to correcting its own mistakes.

For all these reasons, Burke considers it absolutely crucial to resist the revolution, both by opposing its extension and growth in France and, more importantly, by preventing its importation into Britain. If it is not firmly resisted at the outset and is allowed to seep into the political bloodstream of the British, its effects could be irreversible, he worries. In a famous passage at the conclusion of the *Thoughts on French Affairs*, Burke highlights the difficulty and the danger that counterrevolutionaries since his day have always faced: "If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it, the general opinions and feelings will draw that way. Every fear, every hope, will forward it; and then they, who persist in opposing the mighty current of human affairs, will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself, than the mere designs of men. They will not be resolute and firm, but perverse and obstinate."⁵² Burke clearly worries that the intellectual and almost spiritual appeal of the revolution's call for justice will overwhelm its great practical deficiencies in the minds of the people and that once the revolution has taken firm root, it will be essentially impossible to undo its effects or to remind the people of what it has cost.

He is alert, as well, to the danger of appearing to be merely opposed to change—of seeming to defend the status quo for no other reason than that it is the way things are. On the contrary, Burke argues, he is not defending the status quo but is rather defending an effective means of reform against an ineffective one that threatens to cut society off from the possibility of real improvement.

In light of his vehement opposition to the French Revolution, we are today too easily inclined to dismiss this assertion and to see Burke as merely a defender of the established order. But the facts of his career and the nature of his case against the revolution plainly argue otherwise. Burke was a leader in almost every reform effort

undertaken in Parliament during his three decades in elected office. He sought (often but not always successfully) to reform the nation's finances, trade, and restrictions on Catholics and dissenters. He sought to moderate the excesses (especially the excessive punishments) of the criminal law, to rein in the East India Company, and to bring the gradual end of the slave trade. And he effectively backed the American Revolution. But he always approached the reform of existing institutions from a regard for their pedigree and their worth, seeking to build on what worked to correct what did not, rather than to overturn the foundations of the regime and begin again.

In this sense, Burke's opposition to the French Revolution, especially as laid out in the *Reflections*, involves a contrast between two modes of political change, rather than between two types of regime or views of politics. The contrast Burke draws in the *Reflections* between France and Britain is really a contrast between revolution and reform. The French, he argues, have cut themselves off from their glorious traditions and so, in an effort to correct the faults of their former regime, have introduced worse faults than anyone could have imagined. Their parliament is filled with inexperienced miscreants, their economy in shambles, their population declining, their bureaucracy inept, their laws ill-formed, their credit gone, their money worthless, their coffers empty, their king a slave, their judges fools, and their army falling apart. Meanwhile, England in his telling is basking in the glorious warmth of its old and revered constitution—safe, sound, free, orderly, wealthy, and comfortably munching on crumpets.

There is no question, as Thomas Paine frequently seeks to show, that Burke is exaggerating in both accounts. The details of his descriptions of the revolutionary regime and the events surrounding its emergence are often inaccurate, and his description of the prior two centuries of English history (when his countrymen had, after all, beheaded one king and deposed another) is, to put it mildly, sanitized to make a point.

The point is not that whatever exists must be good, but that reform must proceed gradually for practical, political, social, and moral reasons. In one especially striking passage of the *Reflections*, Burke

works through a long discussion of the achievements and glories of the French throughout the centuries of the Bourbon monarchy. He wonders how the beneficiaries of it all, even in light of the many abuses and other faults of the later years of the regime, could have determined that nothing but total revolution could improve it: "I do not recognize, in this view of things, the despotism of Turkey. Nor do I discern the character of a government, that has been, on the whole, so oppressive, or so corrupt, or so negligent, as to be utterly unfit *for all reformation*. I must think such a government well deserved to have its excellencies heightened; its faults corrected; and its capacities improved into a British constitution."⁵³

When he speaks of the British constitution in this context, Burke means the model of slowly enlarged precedent, not the model of the Lords and the Commons in particular. Reformers should build on their national traditions.

The fundamental insight of his positive case for reform is that a statesman ought to begin from gratitude for what works in his society, rather than from outrage at what does not work. He must begin from a sense of what he has and what is worth preserving and from there build toward what he wants and what is worth achieving. But without question, change is not only inevitable but desirable. And without developing an effective means of change, a nation "might even risk the loss of that part of the constitution which it wished the most religiously to preserve."⁵⁴

This difficult task of preservative improvement is, to Burke's mind, the most demanding and most important of the challenges of political life:

When the useful parts of an old establishment are kept, and what is superadded is to be fitted to what is retained, a vigorous mind, steady persevering attention, various powers of comparison and combination, and the resources of an understanding fruitful in expedients are to be exercised; they are to be exercised in a continued conflict with the combined force of opposite vices; with the obsti-

nacy that rejects all improvement, and the levity that is fatigued and disgusted with every thing of which it is in possession.⁵⁵

Thus, as he famously put it, "a disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve, taken together, would be my standard of a statesman."⁵⁶ And a key to that disposition is that what Burke considers reform must be addressed to specific, discrete problems. "The change is to be confined to the peccant part only; to the part which produced the necessary deviation."⁵⁷ Rather than see the whole state as a problem, he seeks to discern the good from the bad in it. This inclination speaks to his understanding of the character of regimes in general. As we have seen, Burke believes governments exist for very broad reasons, not to advance one particular set of views or rights, but to account for the general welfare of the people and to serve the needs of a complicated society. Rather than see the whole of the system as one success or one failure, he thus sees it as a patchwork of accumulated institutions that may require reform now and then as difficulties present themselves, but that for the most part ought to be left to function.

Unlike the planned regime of the revolutionaries, "the States of the Christian World have grown up to their present magnitude in a great length of time, and by a great variety of accidents. They have been improved to what we see them with greater or less degrees of felicity and skill. Not one of them has been formed upon a regular plan or with any unity of design," Burke writes in the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*.⁵⁸ When something goes awry in this kind of complex organism, the treatment required is more like medicine than engineering: a process of healing that seeks to preserve by correcting.

There is a real art to knowing just how to pull off such a balancing act. And when it is done well, a timely and gradual reform can avert public disaffection and thus avert more disruptive or wholesale changes. "Early reformations are amicable arrangements with a friend in power; late reformations are made under a state of inflammation. In that state of things the people behold in government nothing that is respectable. They see the abuse and they will see nothing else. They fall into the

temper of a furious populace provoked at the disorder of a house of ill-fame; they never attempt to correct or regulate; they go to work by the shortest way: to abate the nuisance, they pull down the house.”⁵⁹

A decade before the French Revolution, Burke led an effort at just such an artful and preventive reform, intended to curb waste and abuse in the appropriation of public money, especially money spent on the lavish upkeep of the royal family and assorted official jobs in the royal residences. These plum jobs often involved no real work and simply rewarded the friends and relatives of the politically well-connected. Seeing the potential for public disaffection with the larger system of government over such waste and abuse, Burke led a successful initiative to clean up public expenditures by painstakingly reviewing every expense on the royal households. Toward the end of his life, he reflected back upon this reform effort, employing terms drawn from medicine to describe the statesman’s task: “I found a great distemper in the commonwealth; and, according to the nature of evil and of the object, I treated it. The malady was deep; it was complicated, in the causes and in the symptoms. Throughout it was full of contra-indicants.” And his mode of treatment was motivated by an understanding of the difference between fixing and replacing an established system that works but that has some problems:

I knew that there is a manifest marked distinction, which ill men, with ill designs, or weak men incapable of any design, will constantly be confounding, that is, a marked distinction between Change and Reformation. The former alters the substance of the objects themselves; and gets rid of all their essential good, as well as of all the accidental evil annexed to them. Change is novelty; and whether it is to operate any one of the effects of reformation at all, or whether it may not contradict the very principle upon which reformation is desired, cannot be certainly known beforehand. Reform is, not a change in the substance, or in the primary modification of the object, but a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained of. So far as that is removed, all is sure. It stops there; and

if it fails, the substance which underwent the operation, at the very worst, is but where it was.”⁶⁰

The challenge, of course, is to tell the difference between what must be preserved and what must be reformed, and Burke acknowledged to the Commons that he could not be entirely certain he had done so correctly in his economic proposals. He could state with confidence only that he had based his proposals on the specifics of the situation rather than a speculative theory of how the royal households should work.⁶¹ And above all, he pursued his reform with a sense of the risks of altering the institutions of the state.⁶² But it was necessary, he says, to avoid public disaffection and to rescue the good name and opinion of Parliament and the monarchy, and so he set out not to innovate but quite literally to re-form, to bring the regime back to health by addressing its particular ailment.

Wholesale innovation, Burke argues, is not a means of progress but rather undercuts the prerequisites for progress by breaking with the past and thus regressing to beginnings. It disrupts a long-standing political order and therefore makes improvements vastly more difficult, as “good order is the foundation of all good things.”⁶³ Instead, statesmen must begin from what they have.

The British have long understood this crucial point, Burke argues. True English principles—true Whig principles—militate against reckless innovation and argue instead for the importance of continuity and stability. Even when they were forced to resort to a kind of revolution themselves, the old Whigs who are his models did so with an eye to preservation. Burke describes how they accomplished this:

The two principles of conservation and correction operated strongly at the two critical periods of the Restoration and Revolution, when England found itself without a king. At both those periods the nation had lost the bond of union in their ancient edifice; they did not, however, dissolve the whole fabric. On the contrary, in both cases they regenerated the deficient part of the old constitution through

the parts which were not impaired. They kept these old parts exactly as they were, that the part recovered might be suited to them.⁶⁴

The failure of the French to do the same meant that their revolution would tear down the old but not build up the new.

THE EMERGENCE OF RIGHT AND LEFT

Because he understood the old Whigs in these terms, Burke reacted with particular resistance and alarm to the attempt by some radicals to portray the Glorious Revolution of 1688 as a kind of preface to the French Revolution. The idea that the Whigs of 1688 had turned their ancient monarchy into merely an elected kingship was central to the case made by the British defenders of the French Revolution, and his alarm at such an argument drove Burke to compose the *Reflections*.

He thus devotes the opening of the *Reflections* and the great bulk of the *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* to answering this argument. In these tellings, the Whigs of 1688, as defenders of the ancient English order, sought to address a severe crisis of legitimacy by finding a means of preserving the structure of the regime and the line of succession despite gross misbehavior by the monarch, rather than starting anew on novel principles. The revolution of 1688, Burke argues, was a necessary exception, but the Whigs of the day made sure it did not become the rule. It was decidedly “not a nursery of future revolutions.”⁶⁵ Indeed, he argues in the *Appeal*, 1688 was “a revolution not made but prevented.”⁶⁶

The debates of his own time, Burke thought, bore no real resemblance to those of 1688, and the simplistic notion that Whigs should be in favor of revolution and that to be against the French radicals made one a Tory mistook the meaning of the crisis. In the early years of the French Revolution, a great many of Burke’s Whig co-partisans disagreed and charged him with betraying the principles of the party. Burke at first brushed off such charges, but as the French Revolution wore on, he came to think that his own differences with his fellow Whigs contained an important lesson about

what the French Revolution meant to the politics of Britain. The British debate about the French Revolution, he concluded, was in a certain sense a debate among Whigs. Or at least it was detached from the debate between parliamentary and royal power—a debate long understood as the distinction between Whigs and Tories. The revolution had wrought a profound transformation of the political landscape and created two new parties divided along a new question.

In the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, Burke argues that it simply no longer made sense to speak of Whigs and Tories as those terms had once been used. “These parties, which by their dissensions have so often distracted the Kingdom, which by their union have once saved it, and which by their collision and mutual resistance, have preserved the variety of this Constitution in its unity, be (as I believe they are) nearly extinct by the growth of new ones, which have their roots in the present circumstances of the times.” And what are these new parties? One party, Burke says, is filled with men who “consider the conservation in England of the ancient order of things, as necessary to preserve order every where else, and who regard the general conservation of order in other countries, as reciprocally necessary to preserve the same state of things in these Islands.” And opposing this party of conservation is “the other party which demands great changes here, and is so pleased to see them every where else, which party I call Jacobin.”⁶⁷

In the wake of the French Revolution, Burke suggests, the Whigs and Tories have been replaced by a party of conservation and a Jacobin party. The question between them is no longer about the prerogatives of the king versus those of Parliament, but is rather about the prerogatives of the existing given regime versus a revolutionary republicanism that would wash it away. In other words, the question that now defined British politics was the question of revolution and reform.

On this point, Burke and Paine largely agreed. Although Burke cites Paine at length as the chief example of the republican arguments he attributes to the radical Whigs, Paine in fact never claims the mantle of the Whigs. Far from attempting to appropriate the authority of 1688, as many English radicals did, Paine disparages the Glorious

Revolution, which he says had been “exalted beyond its value.” He even openly mocks the old Whigs who undertook it. “Mankind will then scarcely believe that a country calling itself free would send to Holland for a man, and clothe him with power on purpose to put themselves in fear of him, and give him almost a million sterling a year for leave to submit themselves and their posterity, like bondmen and bondwomen, for ever.”⁶⁸ The influence and appeal of the Glorious Revolution, he argues, “is already on the wane, eclipsed by the enlarging orb of reason, and the luminous revolutions of America and France. In less than another century it will go, as well as Mr. Burke’s labors, ‘to the family vault of all the Capulets.’”⁶⁹ Of William and Mary themselves, long venerated by Whig champions of the rights of 1688, Paine says they “have always appeared to me detestable; the one seeking to destroy his uncle, and the other her father, to get possession of power themselves.”⁷⁰

Paine effectively makes Burke’s point that the French Revolution, properly understood, does not seek to advance the Whig principles of 1688, but rather sees them as sorely inadequate to the task of correcting unjust regimes. To alter a fundamentally unjust regime in order to preserve it strikes Paine as both illegitimate and pointless. No government has “a right to alter itself, either in whole or in part,” he writes, so that reform without recourse to an original condition or a national convention can only be either inadequate or illicit.⁷¹ In fact, a partial reform strikes him as no better than no improvement at all. “It will always happen when a thing is originally wrong that amendments do not make it right, and it often happens that they do as much mischief one way as good the other.”⁷² In an ill-founded society, the principles of injustice become “too deeply rooted to be removed, and the Augean stables of parasites and plunderers too abominably filthy to be cleansed by anything short of a complete and universal Revolution.”⁷³ Such universal revolution is in fact the only effective means of reform, Paine argues, and he utterly dismisses the distinction Burke insists upon between revolution and reform: “Reforms, or revolutions, call them which you please.”⁷⁴

For his own reasons, therefore, Paine concludes just as Burke does that the familiar political divide in Britain has lost its salience and been replaced by a new question. “It is not whether this or that party shall be in or not, or Whig or Tory, high or low shall prevail; but whether man shall inherit his rights, and universal civilization take place. Whether the fruits of his labors shall be enjoyed by himself or consumed by the profligacy of governments. Whether robbery shall be banished from courts, and wretchedness from countries.”⁷⁵

This new question now pressed upon Europe with great urgency and made for a moment of political transformation. In Paine’s view, the advancement of reason and science made his own time a moment of profound change unlike any prior era and set the tone for a far brighter future: an age of reform, by which he means an age of revolutions, as he puts it in the final words of the first volume of *Rights of Man*:

From what we now see, nothing of reform in the political world ought to be held improbable. It is an age of Revolutions, in which everything may be looked for. The intrigue of Courts, by which the system of war is kept up, may provoke a confederation of Nations to abolish it: and an European Congress to patronize the progress of free Government, and promote the civilization of Nations with each other, is an event nearer in probability, than once were the revolutions and alliance of France and America.⁷⁶

“The iron is becoming hot all over Europe,” Paine then writes in the second volume. “The insulted German and the enslaved Spaniard, the Russ and the Pole, are beginning to think. The present age will hereafter merit to be called the Age of Reason, and the present generation will appear to the future as the Adam of a new world.”⁷⁷ This period will be remembered as the moment of transformation, he argues: “The farce of monarchy and aristocracy, in all countries, is following that of chivalry, and Mr. Burke is dressing for the funeral. Let it then pass quietly to the tomb of all other follies, and the mourners be comforted.”⁷⁸

But in Burke's view, his time differed from the past not because some new truth had been learned or great advance achieved, but simply because the excesses and corruptions of the revolution itself had distorted and transformed English politics: "The present time differs from any other only by the circumstances of what is doing in France."⁷⁹ The basic realities of human nature and of politics have not changed at all, except inasmuch as they must now confront a political force that seeks to ignore or undermine them. And politics seeks in particular to ignore the obligations of the present to the past, and therefore to the future, as Burke sees it.

In this sense, Burke's and Paine's disparate ideas about revolution and reform—a difference that both men suggested was quickly becoming their era's defining disagreement in European politics—can be understood as a disagreement about the relation of the present to the past and about the obligation of every generation to sustain and improve what it was given and to pass it along to those who follow. The dispute over political change concerns the relations of generations in politics. Burke's objection to total revolution draws on his horror at the prospect of abandoning all that has been arduously gained over centuries of slow, incremental reform and improvement. He sees it as a betrayal of the trust of past generations and of the obligation to future ones. Paine's objection to such plodding reform, meanwhile, is that it gives credence to despotism and is moved more by the desire to sustain iniquity than by the desire to address injustice.

Burke believes that human nature and the rest of nature make themselves known in politics through long experience, that human beings are born into a web of obligations, and that the social problems we confront do not lend themselves to detached scientific analysis. For all these reasons, he believes that improvements in politics must be achieved by cumulative reform—by building on success to address failure and by containing the effects of innovation within a broader context of continuity.

Paine, on the other hand, believes that nature reveals itself in the form of abstract principles discovered by rational analysis, that human

beings are entitled to choose their government freely, that government in turn exists to protect their other choices, and that reason can help people see beyond the superstitions that have long sustained unjust regimes. For all these reasons, he believes that improvements in politics must be achieved by thoroughgoing revolution—by throwing off the accumulated burdens of the past and starting fresh and properly.

Their assorted disagreements therefore repeatedly point to a confrontation over the authority of the past and the prerogatives of the present in political life. That profound and unusual terrain of dispute is where we now turn.

118. Ibid., 80–81.
119. Ibid., 260.
120. Ibid., 245.
121. Ibid., 83.
122. Ibid., 214.
123. Paine, *Writings*, 5: 2–3.
124. Ibid., 97–98.
125. Paine, *Writings*, 9: 270–271.
126. Ibid., 272.
127. Paine, *Writings*, 4: 306.
128. Ibid.
129. Paine, *Writings*, 5: 92–93.
130. Paine, *Writings*, 4: 220.
131. Paine, *Writings*, 2: xx.
132. Paine, *Writings*, 8: 195.
133. Ibid., 269.
134. Paine, *Writings*, 5: 232–233.
135. Ibid., 233.
136. Ibid., 234.
137. Burke, *Writings*, 3: 126–127.
138. Burke, *Writings*, 2: 428.
139. Burke, *Writings*, 3: 135.
140. Burke, *Writings*, 2: 194.
141. Ibid., 428.
142. Ibid., 428 and 461.
143. Ibid., 111.
144. Burke, *Appeal*, 106–108.

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1. Cited in Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 270.
2. Ibid., 236–237.
3. Ibid., 19–20.
4. Ibid., 46.
5. Paine, *Writings*, 4: 212.
6. Paine, *Writings*, 9: 276.
7. Paine, *Writings*, 4: 66.
8. Ibid., 232.
9. Ibid., 241.
10. Ibid., 200.

11. Paine, *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2: 281.
12. Paine, *Writings*, 3: 146.
13. Paine, *Writings*, 5: 100–101.
14. Paine, *Writings*, 4: 249.
15. Paine, *Writings*, 5: 46.
16. Paine, *Writings*, 2: 90.
17. *Ibid.*, 224.
18. Paine, *Writings*, 9: 271–272.
19. Paine, *Writings*, 10: 173–174.
20. Burke, *Correspondence*, 6: 70.
21. Paine, *Writings*, 4: 3.
22. Burke, *Writings*, 9: 277.
23. *Ibid.*, 174.
24. *Ibid.*, 253.
25. *Ibid.*, 264.
26. *Ibid.*, 267.
27. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 136.
28. Most notoriously in the *Reflections*; see especially *ibid.*, 89.
29. *Ibid.*, 175–176.
30. *Ibid.*, 292.
31. Burke, *Appeal*, 89.
32. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 173.
33. *Ibid.*, 114.
34. *Ibid.*, 218.
35. *Ibid.*, 81.
36. *Ibid.*, 245.
37. Burke, *Appeal*, 195–196.
38. *Ibid.*, 83.
39. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 230.
40. Burke, *Correspondence*, 7: 388.
41. At one point in the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, Burke actually defines Jacobinism (a term he uses often in his French writings) by pointing to this practice: “Jacobinism is the revolt of the enterprising talents of a country against its property” (Burke, *Writings*, 9: 241).
42. *Ibid.*, 291.
43. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 115.
44. Burke, *Appeal*, 89.
45. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 129.
46. *Ibid.*, 266.

47. Burke, *Writings*, 9: 288.
48. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 190.
49. Burke, *Appeal*, 196.
50. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 188.
51. Burke, *Writings*, 9: 173–174.
52. *Ibid.*, 386. This passage has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly controversy. Some readers (following especially Matthew Arnold) see it as self-criticism on Burke’s part, arguing that he is essentially championing a cause he knows is lost. Others see it as a clarion call for early resistance to the revolution, lest it establish itself too firmly in European politics, and a warning to those inclined to think that if the revolution fails, its evident faults will necessarily persuade people of the essential error of its ways, and so no great effort is required to combat it. I am mostly of the latter view, as the context of the essay strongly suggests that Burke is arguing that the struggle against the revolution must be won at the level of ideas, because once the ideas have sunk in, no amount of practical failure will persuade its adherents of its falsehood. But Burke’s remark certainly contains something of a melancholy reflection on the difficulty of his own cause. (See also Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 318.)
53. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 180 (emphasis in original).
54. *Ibid.*, 72.
55. *Ibid.*, 216.
56. *Ibid.*, 206.
57. *Ibid.*, 72.
58. Burke, *Writings*, 9: 287.
59. Burke, *Writings*, 3: 492.
60. Burke, *Writings*, 9: 154–155.
61. *Ibid.*, 545.
62. *Ibid.*, 483.
63. Burke, *Writings*, 8: 290.
64. *Ibid.*, 72.
65. *Ibid.*, 77.
66. Burke, *Appeal*, 136n.
67. Burke, *Writings*, 9: 326–327.
68. Paine, *Writings*, 4: 101.
69. *Ibid.*
70. Paine, *Writings*, 5: 43n.
71. *Ibid.*, 245.
72. Paine, *Writings*, 4: 77.

CONCLUSION

EDMUND BURKE AND THOMAS PAINE KNEW THAT THE heated controversies that had shaped their public lives would not end with their deaths. In fact, both of them worried that they might not be allowed to rest in peace, quite literally.

As he lay ill in 1797, Burke expressed his dread that should the French radicals and their allies in Britain succeed in spreading their revolution across the channel, they would exhume his body from its resting place to make an example of their staunch opponent. He gave instructions that he should be buried in an unmarked grave kept apart from that of his son and from the plot reserved for his wife, so that his fate need not be theirs. In the end, Burke's family and friends decided to follow the guidance of his written will instead of this fevered deathbed plea, and he was buried alongside his son in a grave bearing the family name in a Beaconsfield churchyard, where his wife joined them some fifteen years later.¹

Paine, too, found himself uneasy about the fate of his earthly remains and reasoned that his enemies (whom he assumed would be motivated by his writings against biblical religion) would be deterred only by the sanctity of a Christian cemetery. The adamant Deist (if

not atheist) therefore ironically sought ultimate protection under the religion of his fathers, leaving this request in his will: "I know not if the Society of people called Quakers admit a person to be buried in their burying ground who does not belong to their Society, but if they do, or will admit me, I would prefer being buried there; my father belonged to that profession, and I was partly brought up in it. But if it is not consistent with their rules to do this, I desire to be buried on my own farm at New Rochelle."²

The Quakers in the end did not allow it, and Paine was indeed buried on his farm. His fears, moreover, turned out to be better founded than Burke's, if not quite for the reasons he expected. Ten years after his death, Paine's remains were surreptitiously removed from his New Rochelle grave by William Cobbett, an English radical who sought to take the body to Britain and erect a glorious memorial to his hero. But Paine's antimonarchical views had not been forgotten in Britain, and the government refused to permit a monument. Cobbett's gambit turned into a fiasco and made him a national laughingstock. Worse yet, Paine's remains were eventually lost. Their final disposition remains unknown to this day.

Burke's and Paine's exceptional concerns about their legacies should not surprise us. They were right to assume that their names and their words, if not their mortal remains, would not be left to rest but would continue to play key roles in the great debate they had helped launch. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and into the twenty-first, both have been frequently appealed to by various political movements. Assorted radical leaders the world over—from the American abolitionist firebrand John Brown to Uruguayan liberator José Gervasio Artigas and countless others in between—laid claim to the legacy of Thomas Paine, as did the mainstream labor and progressive movements in the Anglo-American world. Conservative cultural and political movements—from Romantic poets to reforming Tories to the conservative movement that emerged in America in the middle of the last century—have laid claim to Edmund Burke's name and ideas.

Ironically, our understanding of the Burke-Paine debate has actually suffered some from such persistent political attention to both

men. The revolutionaries who adopted Paine as their own would too often infuse his historical memory with socialist sensibilities that would have been largely foreign to Paine himself. And a great deal of the commentary (and even the scholarship) regarding Burke, particularly over the past century, has seemed to want to make him (even) more temperamentally conservative than he was, in the process overlooking important strains in his thinking.

There has been some modest tempering of these tendencies in both cases, if sometimes through equal and opposite distortions: Paine's role in the American Revolution, for instance, has caused some American conservatives to give him a serious look and to emphasize elements of his worldview they find agreeable. No less an icon of the American right than Ronald Reagan accepted the Republican Party's nomination for president in 1980 by reminding his supporters of Paine's call for transforming failed governing institutions. Burke's emphasis on gradualism, meanwhile, has appealed to some contemporary liberals eager to resist dramatic transformations of the welfare state. No less an icon of the American left than Barack Obama has reportedly described himself as a Burkean eager to avoid sudden change.³

But it is not in these uses and abuses of Burke's and Paine's own names and reputations that we can find the lasting legacy of their debate. By considering the arguments as each man first made them, and not as assorted partisans across two centuries have sought to use them, we can see how the worldviews Burke and Paine laid out still describe two broad and fundamental dispositions toward political life and political change in our liberal age.

The tension between those two dispositions comes down to some very basic questions: Should our society be made to answer to the demands of stark and abstract commitments to ideals like social equality or to the patterns of its own concrete political traditions and foundations? Should the citizen's relationship to his society be defined above all by the individual right of free choice or by a web of obligations and conventions not entirely of our own choosing? Are great public problems best addressed through institutions designed to apply

the explicit technical knowledge of experts or by those designed to channel the implicit social knowledge of the community? Should we see each of our society's failings as one large problem to be solved by comprehensive transformation or as a set of discrete imperfections to be addressed by building on what works tolerably well to address what does not? What authority should the character of the given world exercise over our sense of what we would like it to be?

These questions build on one another, and step by subtle step, they add up to quite distinct ways of thinking about politics. Every person looks upon his country and sees a mix of good things and bad. But which strike us more powerfully? In confronting the society around us, are we first grateful for what works well about it and moved to reinforce and build on that, or are we first outraged by what works poorly and moved to uproot and transform it?

Our answers will tend to shape how we think about particular political questions. Do we want to fix our health-care system by empowering expert panels armed with the latest effectiveness data to manage the system from the center or by arranging economic incentives to channel consumer knowledge and preferences and address some of the system's discrete problems? Do we want to alleviate poverty through large national programs that use public dollars to supplement the incomes of the poor or through efforts to build on the social infrastructure of local civil-society institutions to help the poor build the skills and habits to rise? Do we want problems addressed through the most comprehensive and broadest possible means or through the most minimal and targeted ones? People's answers to such questions likely fall into a pattern. And the answers depend not only on our opinion of the state of our particular society at this moment but also on our assumptions about how much knowledge and power social reformers can really expect to have, and of what sort.

Ultimately, the answers depend as well on people's implicit notion of what our political order—what modern liberalism—really is, exactly. Is it a set of principles that were discovered by Enlightenment philosophers and that should be put more and more completely into practice so that our society can increasingly resemble those philoso-

phers' ideal mix of egalitarianism and liberty? Or is it a living culture built up over countless generations of social trial and error so that by the time of the Enlightenment, especially in Britain, society had taken a form that allowed for an exceptional mix of egalitarianism and liberty? Is liberalism, in other words, a theoretical discovery to be put into effect or a practical achievement to be reinforced and perfected? These two possibilities suggest two rather different sorts of liberal politics: a politics of vigorous progress toward an ideal goal or a politics of preservation and perfection of a precious inheritance. They suggest, in other words, a progressive liberalism and a conservative liberalism.

THE TWO PARTIES TO our political debates still very often answer to these general descriptions. But of course, they do not answer to them perfectly or quite consistently. Burke and Paine offer us a window into the birth of the right and the left, but to see the birth of an idea is not to see its developed state. How both the right and the left have changed from the views laid out by Burke and Paine is at least as interesting as how their views have persisted. This book can, of course, barely scratch the surface of that complex evolution, but even the very broadest outlines can help us see how Burke and Paine remain deeply relevant both as instructive points of origin and as useful correctives for today's right and left.

The fundamental utopian goal at the core of Paine's thinking—the goal of liberating the individual from the constraints of the obligations imposed upon him by his time, his place, and his relations to others—remains essential to the left in America. But the failure of Enlightenment-liberal principles and the institutions built upon them to deliver on that bold ambition and therefore on Paine's hopes of eradicating prejudice, poverty, and war seemed to force the left into a choice between the natural-rights theories that Paine thought would offer means of attaining his goal and the goal itself. In time, the utopian goal was given preference, and a vision of the state as a direct provider of basic necessities and largely unencumbered by the restraints of Paine's Enlightenment liberalism arose to advance it.

We can begin to discern the earliest roots of this way of thinking in Paine's own later revolutionary writings, when he proposes a primordial welfare state. But it advanced a fair bit from Paine's views as over time, some American progressives, influenced by European social-democratic thinking, came to believe in an assertive national government. They thought such a government could both provide some material benefits and clear away some of the social and civic institutions that stood between the individual and the state (institutions that they considered, as Paine did, carriers of backwardness and prejudice). In this way, the government could free people simultaneously from material want and from direct moral obligations to those immediately around them. Such a government would make people more equal to one another and freer of one another, and thus better able to exercise their individual choices.

Today's left plainly exhibits this combination of material collectivism and moral individualism. The role it affords to the government and its links to European social thought might at first suggest that this attitude leans toward communitarianism. But its American form is actually a radical form of individualism, moved by much the same passion for justice that Paine had and by much the same desire to free people of the fetters of tradition, religion, and the moral or social expectations of those around them.

The deep commitment to generational continuity and to the institutions of implicit social knowledge that we have found at the core of Burke's thought remains essential to today's American right, meanwhile. But as Burke himself noted, different societies form such institutions differently, and Americans in particular have always been "men of free character and spirit" to an exceptional degree.⁴ This, and the simple fact that American conservatives are conserving a political tradition begun in a revolution (even if it was not as radical a revolution as Paine insists), has long made the American right more inclined both to resort to theory and to appeal to individualism than Burke was. And the two tendencies are connected: The theory of American political thought most often and most readily at hand for today's

conservatives is an adaptation of the very same natural-rights theories that Paine, Jefferson, and other Enlightenment-liberal founders of America had championed, but which the left eventually abandoned. The tradition of conservative liberalism—the gradual accumulation of practices and institutions of freedom and order that Burke celebrated as the English constitution and that in many important respects the American revolution sought to preserve (not to reject) on this side of the Atlantic—has only rarely been articulated in American terms. For this reason, it is not often heard on the lips of today's conservatives.

And yet, this very same conservative liberalism is very frequently the vision they pursue in practice. It is the vision conservatives advance when they defend traditional social institutions and the family, seek to make our culture more hospitable to children, and rail against attempts at technocratic expert government. It is the vision they uphold when they insist on an allegiance to our forefathers' constitutional forms, warn of the dangers of burdening our children with debt to fund our own consumption, or insist that the sheer scope and ambition of our government makes it untenable.

Today's left, therefore, shares a great portion of Paine's basic disposition, but seeks to liberate the individual in a rather less quixotic and more technocratic way than Paine did, if also in a way that lacks his grounding in principle and natural right. Thus today's liberals are left philosophically adrift and far too open to the cold logic of utilitarianism—they could learn from Paine's insistence on limits to the use of power and the role of government. Today's right, meanwhile, shares a great deal of Burke's basic disposition, but seeks to protect our cultural inheritance in a less aristocratic and (naturally, for Americans) more populist way than he did, if also in a way that lacks his emphasis on community and on the sentiments. Today's conservatives are thus too rhetorically strident and far too open to the siren song of hyperindividualism, and they generally lack a nonradical theory of the liberal society. They could benefit by adopting Burke's focus on the social character of man, from Burke's thoroughgoing gradualism, and from his innovative liberal alternative to Enlightenment radicalism.

Both sides of our politics therefore exhibit in practice deep continuities to their intellectual forerunners, despite being barely aware of these connections, and would be well served by better understanding them. Each group might find some of its worst excesses alleviated a bit by carefully considering the Burke-Paine debate.

One peculiar feature of some prominent contemporary policy debates can make this historical continuity of the left-right divide particularly difficult to see and so is worth a further word. As the great economic debate of the last century has loosened its grip on our politics with the fall of communism and the waning of socialist ideas, American political life has come to be defined by the social-democratic welfare state and its mounting difficulties. Today's progressives are thus often engaged in a struggle to preserve a set of public entitlement programs that their predecessors built over the past century (often employing arguments that, in the cause of preservation, sound downright Burkean). Meanwhile, today's conservatives seek to transform some key governing institutions (often resorting to arguments from classical-liberal principles that ring of Paine). The rhetoric of some key domestic debates therefore sometimes seems almost like a mirror image of the original left-right debate.

But this is a kind of second-order argument about political change—a debate about reforming a set of welfare-state institutions that are themselves intended to advance a certain vision of change. The vision is a progressive archetype that Paine would certainly have recognized: an egalitarian ideal of justice advanced through the application of technical expertise regarding society within a liberal framework. Opposing it is a more conservative ideal that Burke would have found familiar: a case for addressing social problems through evolved institutions (like the family, civil society, religious groups, and markets) that tacitly contain and convey implicit knowledge within a liberal framework. It is very much another instance of the general pattern of ideological division that we have traced back to Burke and Paine's era.

For all that they have certainly evolved over two centuries, the two sides of our politics still often express the basic underlying dis-

positions—toward progress and tradition, choice and obligation, technocratic prowess and a worldly skepticism—evident in Paine and Burke. When it is most itself, each of our parties rather plainly fits the profile that emerges from our study of the great debate of the age of revolutions.

IT MAY BE STRANGE TO THINK that just a few layers beneath our bubbling and contentious political debates there still lurk such profound questions of political philosophy. But as both the lives and the arguments of Burke and Paine help show us, political events are always tied up with political ideas, and seeing those ties can shed a bright light on both the events and the ideas. Philosophy moves history, especially in times of profound social change. And ours, like Burke and Paine's, is surely such a time.

Burke and Paine agreed that politics is always in flux and that the challenge of the statesman is to govern change for the benefit of society. The practical questions that divided them and shaped their assorted theoretical explorations and arguments began from this basic reality. But to what ends, and by what means, should people alter their political and cultural arrangements? Burke and Paine's debate may not provide an ultimate answer, but it offers an unusually deep and serious engagement with a question we must still confront.

In our day-to-day political arguments, we hear echoes of a deeper debate that we easily mistake for remnants of an argument between capitalism and socialism, or for faint precursors of a long-predicted ultimate clash between religious traditionalism and secular cosmopolitanism. But more likely, these echoes are in fact reminders of the defining disagreement of the political order of modern liberalism. That disagreement was given early and unusually clear voice by Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine, and becomes far easier to comprehend when we pay careful attention to what they have to teach us.