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British Politics 1789–1815

The French Revolution

One cataclysmic event shaped the entire politics of the Romantic period. Writing to his friend Lord Byron in 1816, the poet Shelley described the French Revolution, which informed European culture for decades afterwards, as ‘the master theme of the epoch in which we live’. The fourteenth of July 1789 saw the storming of the Bastille prison in Paris by the masses, mobilised into action by a centuries-old grievance over the power and wealth of the aristocracy and, more particularly, by inflationary prices that threatened to place the cost of everyday staples – bread, wine and so on – beyond the means of the common man and woman. The French political system, dependent on an absolute monarchy, a king with huge powers, and a highly unrepresentative parliament which granted privileges to the nobility and the established Roman Catholic Church, made the British government, with its system of parliamentary representation (though this was actually highly limited by modern standards) and tripartite systemic ‘balance’ of King, Lords and Commons – which had been established after the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688 – seem the very model of fairness.

The likes of Voltaire and Rousseau, the so-called philosophes of the eighteenth century (‘philosophe’ means philosopher in French, and the Enlightenment thinkers are generally referred to by this term), had warned of the dangers inherent in the iniquities of the French system of government and lamented the lack of fairness within it. ‘Man is born free’, wrote the latter in his Social Contract (1762), ‘but he is everywhere in chains.’ The philosophes had argued for reform along British lines; however, the actuality of the French Revolution went much further in transforming French society than they could have anticipated as the political reform which they envisaged was replaced by root-and-branch revolution in which previous models of government were abolished along with the system of monarchy.
and the very fabric of the *ancien régime* (the ‘old regime’, as the French system of government before the Revolution is generally referred to). The initially fairly moderate party of revolution, the Girondins, was soon displaced from power by the extremist Jacobin faction, led by Maximilien Robespierre (1758–94), who was instrumental in the execution of King Louis XVI in January 1793. Robespierre’s pitiless rule climaxed in the bloody Reign of Terror of September 1793 to July 1794 in which tens of thousands of the aristocracy, the former queen Marie Antoinette and other so-called enemies of the state – including many Girondins – were guillotined. The year 1793 also saw Great Britain join the European Revolutionary wars in which a pan-European alliance (Austria, the Dutch Republic, Portugal, Russia and others) fought the French republic, and France simultaneously sought to export revolution. Despite the fall and execution of Robespierre in 1794, hostilities lingered on until the Peace of Amiens in 1802, by which time the French Revolutionary government had been replaced. France found herself once again ruled by another monarch, this time no Bourbon potentate but the brilliant young Corsican general Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), who seized power as first consul in 1799 and eventually proclaimed himself Emperor in 1804.

**The Revolution and British Society**

The French Revolution had a seismic effect on British society. It seemed to many at the time that events across the channel might inspire a far-reaching reform in Great Britain itself. Initially, before the bloody tidings of the Terror and the lopping off of the king and queen’s heads reached British ears, and before the country became involved in the Revolutionary wars, leaving British sympathisers of revolution open to charges of a lack of patriotism, even treason, many people were enthusiastic supporters of the Revolution. Certainly the first generation of Romantic poets rallied to the cause, at least in its early days. Wordsworth famously eulogised his reaction to the fall of the Bastille and the Revolution of 1789, which took place when he was an undergraduate at Cambridge University: ‘Bliss was it that dawn to be alive / But to be young was very heaven.’ Similarly Coleridge, who went to the same university in 1791, was also an enthusiastic devotee of French liberty and, indeed, anticipated a corresponding transformation of British society, a new millennium of peace and equality throughout Europe (see ‘Millenarianism’). However, this was no consensual view. Many English people remained wedded to a Church-and-King Toryism, sneeringly labelling friends of the Revolution such as Coleridge and Wordsworth ‘Jacobins’, as if they were followers of the loathed Robespierre and, indeed, enthusiasts for Madame Guillotine herself.
It must also be remembered that not all hitherto left-leaning thinkers approved of the revolution. Edmund Burke, the great Irish Whig politician (the Whigs were the – relatively – liberal eighteenth-century opposition to the Tories) who had been sympathetic to the American Revolution of 1776, caused a schism in liberal circles by publishing his highly antipathetic *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) in which he derided French ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ as mere chimeras, stressed the importance of tradition and continuity within political systems, and chivalrously leapt to the defence of the former Queen of France as a paragon of female virtue whose elegant personage was threatened by the rough attentions of what he labelled the ‘swinish multitude’. The Whig party split and Burke and many of his like-minded colleagues (the ‘Rockingham Whigs’ as they were known) crossed the floor of the House of Commons to sit with the Tory party under Prime Minster William Pitt the Younger (1759–1806), first minister from 1783 onwards, who as a consequence of what he saw as the potential threat of the French Revolution to the British political system transformed himself and his faction from advocates of systematic parliamentary reform into implacable opponents of any form of change to the status quo.

**The ‘Revolutionary Controversy’**

The *Reflections* ignited a political war of words involving some of the most notable of the English Jacobins in what the critic Marilyn Butler has influentially labelled a ‘Revolution Controversy’ instigated by Burke. Central to these debates were the set of London-based thinkers and writers clustered around the radical publisher Joseph Johnson, who swiftly ran to the defence of the Revolution. The first sustained rebuttal of Burke was Mary Wollstonecraft’s, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), which supported the universal rights of mankind in a post-Rousseuanian manner (Wollstonecraft also advocated social as well as political reform in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which argued for a society which would value women as the intellectual and moral equals of men). This was closely followed by Thomas Paine’s hugely successful *The Rights of Man* (1791), a central plank in working-class English radicalism for many decades afterwards. The firebrand Paine, an English emigrant to America and acquaintance of both General Washington and one of his successors as President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, had become the principal propagandist for the cause of the colonists in his incendiary pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), one of the founding documents of the American Revolution. Sensing the chance of fermenting Revolution in the mother country, he returned to Britain in 1787 and published *The Rights of Man* in
which he attacked the ‘rancour, prejudice and ignorance’ of Burke’s *Reflections* and argued that the people themselves should decide a country’s constitution rather than having it imposed from on high by kings, noblemen and priests. Paine was joined in the radical chorus by Wollstonecraft’s future husband William Godwin in his proto-anarchist treatise, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), which envisaged the withering away of all state authority, alongside the demise of formal religion and the institution of marriage. Whereas Paine’s style was populist, witty and passionate, written in a manner intended to appeal to the common people, Godwin’s was measured and stately, advocating highly radical change to the middle classes in a dry and carefully argued manner.

Radical ideas such as Thomas Paine’s began to spark mass protest amongst the English working class, especially after Great Britain joined the Revolutionary wars which were convulsing Europe, as the Austrian Empire, Britain, Prussia, Russia and a number of other states fought against France; 1794 and 1795 saw mass protest meetings against the war and in favour of radical political reform, held in London and the provinces. Alarmed by what they saw as the imminent threat of armed revolution, Pitt’s Tory government, caught up in European war and besieged by internal dissent, introduced tough and repressive measures. Habeas corpus (the right to a trial before a jury of one’s peers) was suspended in May 1794 while the so-called ‘Gagging Acts’ of November 1795 forbade public meetings of more than fifty people unless specifically licensed by a magistrate, and introduced measures to censor the press, which the government saw as disproportionately Whiggish. Many of the leaders of the leading radical association, the London Corresponding Society (LCS), Thomas Hardy, John Thelwall and John Horne Tooke amongst them, were arrested and charged, unsuccessfully, with high treason in the famous treason trials of 1794. They were acquitted in large part because of the intervention of William Godwin’s tract ‘Cursory Strictures’, which demolished the prosecution case, but the LCS never recovered its influence to the same extent thereafter, and English radicalism waned by the turn of the century, not recovering until after the passing of the Napoleonic age.

**The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars**

As the decade of the 1790s wore on, France enjoyed a measure of military success in continental Europe, notably in its annexation of Switzerland, hitherto the bastion of European republicanism and closely associated – given that it was the birthplace of Rousseau – with the concept of ‘liberty’. This event was instrumental in leading both Coleridge and Wordsworth finally to lose patience with the Revolution, a faith which had previously
been severely tried by the Terror and tested by their country’s war with France. Coleridge lamented in ‘France: An Ode’ (1798) that he, a ‘worshipper’ of ‘the spirit of divinest Liberty’, had been betrayed by that country. He describes his initial ecstasies at the Revolution, when he, in ‘slavish’ Britain, reacted with ‘joy’ at events across the channel:

When France in wrath her giant-limbs upreared,  
And with that oath, which smote earth, air, and sea,  
Stamped her strong foot and said she would be free,  
Bear witness for me, how I hoped and feared!  
With what a joy, my lofty gratulation  
Unawed I sung, amid a slavish band.

Coleridge records his personal shame at Britain joining the crowd of reactionary European tyrants such as the Tsar of Russia and the Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire arrayed against republican France: ‘The monarchs marched in evil day, / And Britain joined the dire array.’ Even in the face of the French Terror – ‘A dance more wild than ever maniac’s dream’ – Coleridge hoped that once the spasm had passed the French would return to being a sponsor of freedom and liberty, exporting a new vision of ‘love and Joy’:

‘And soon’, I said, ‘shall Wisdom teach her lore  
In the low huts of them that toil and groan!  
And, conqu’ring by her happiness alone,  
Shall France compel the nations to be free,  
Till love and Joy look round, and call the earth their own!’

Forgive me, Freedom! O forgive those dreams!  
I hear thy voice, I hear thy loud lament,  
From bleak Helvetia’s icy caverns sent –  
I hear thy groans upon her bloodstained streams!  
Heroes, that for your peaceful country perished,  
And ye that, fleeing, spot your mountain snows  
With bleeding wounds – forgive me, that I cherished  
One thought that ever blessed your cruel foes!

By the 1810s, both Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s politics had swung round to the implacable Toryism which led to their denunciation by the likes of Shelley and Byron (to the younger poets, it seemed, in Robert Browning’s memorable phrase, that Wordsworth was now ‘The Lost Leader’), but it is important to realise that the first generation of Romantic poets and the forging of the Romantic literary project, if that is what we might call it, were fashioned by men then of what we now call the left.
At this stage, and in 1797 to 1798 most particularly, it really seemed as if an invasion of Great Britain was likely. Over 100,000 French soldiers of the ‘Army of England’ congregated on the channel coast and British newspapers manifested a mixture of fear and paranoia at the prospect of what they saw as an army of sans culottes (the term means ‘without knee-breeches’ and was applied to the poorer adherents of French republicanism) marching through the Home Counties. Historically, when Britain is caught up in European war, Irish revolutionaries, as the Easter Rising of 1916 demonstrates, have frequently sought to take advantage, and so at the same time as an invasion of England seemed imminent, there were the stirrings of domestic revolution in Ireland, in the 1798 uprising of the United Irishmen led by Theobald Wolfe Tone in favour of French ideals of liberty and with the aim of ridding Ireland of British rule. Tone canvassed a number of the French soldiery, General Bonaparte included, and a small invading force arrived from France to support Tone’s insurrection, but was swiftly put down. The invasion of England, on the other hand, never happened as the French concentrated on war in Austria and Egypt, and Wolfe Tone died in prison, at his own hand, while awaiting execution.

Exhausted by seven years of war, France and its continental enemies agreed a ceasefire in 1800, followed by peace with Britain in the next year, a cessation of hostilities which lasted until May 1803. William Pitt, lukewarm about the truce, was replaced as Prime Minister by the ministry of Henry Addington, formerly Speaker of the House of Commons. Pitt returned as war leader in 1804 when Europe was convulsed by conflict once again. The fighting spread to the Iberian peninsula by 1807, where the young Duke of Wellington led an army which took until 1814 to drive the Napoleonic army out of Spain after a decade’s hard combat, and, most crucially, to Russia where Napoleon, after sensational initial victories and a surge to Moscow, fought an eventually ruinous campaign in 1811–12. In Britain, Pitt, his body emaciated by years of heavy drinking and self-neglect, died in 1806 at the age of forty-six, briefly to be replaced by the coalition ‘Ministry of All the Talents’, which featured both the Tories and such Whig luminaries as Charles James Fox and the politician-dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan. This unlikely ménage lasted less than a year and the Tories were returned to power, remaining there for over twenty years. The following year of 1807 was notable for the abolition of the slave trade (see ‘Slavery, Abolition and African-British Literature’), brought about in large part by the efforts of philanthropic Evangelicals such as Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce, the culmination of two decades of agitation against the iniquities of slavery (the actual freeing of the slaves in the British West Indian plantations would have to wait more than twenty-five years after that).
The Regency

Throughout Pitt’s administration and its successors, the British King, George III, had remained staunchly devoted to the Tory interest. His despised son, however, George, Prince of Wales, favoured the Whig interest, and after the Ministry of Talents the Whigs remained convinced that, should the King die or return to the mental confusion which had disabled him in the 1780s, Prince George would bring them back into power. In this they were mistaken. In 1812, the King lapsed back into madness and the new Prince Regent, now possessed of all the powers of the monarch, retained the Tories in office even after the murder of his Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, in that year, thereby ensuring his transformation from hero of liberty in Whig opinion to drunken, corpulent traitor to the cause (the Prince had a well-known penchant for fine wine, lavish dinners and middle-aged aristocratic mistresses (see ‘Satire’)).

In the first few years of the Prince Regent’s reign, it seemed as if Napoleon, his military strength sapped by his Russian misadventure and by Wellington’s highly successful assault on the French army in the Spanish peninsula, would have to sue for peace. This duly occurred in 1814 when the Emperor abdicated and was banished to the island of Elba and European peace was restored. However, it was short lived. Escaping from his island gaol, Napoleon was enthusiastically welcomed back by the French people and battle swiftly resumed against the anti-Napoleonic alliance of Britain, Russia and Prussia, in the so-called ‘hundred days’ of Napoleon’s return, which ended in June 1815 with his final defeat in Belgium at the Battle of Waterloo by the Duke of Wellington’s British forces and the Prussian army led by Marshal Blücher. Unlike the hapless Louis, Napoleon kept his head but was banished to the South Atlantic island of St Helena. With these momentous events, one of the most remarkable periods in British history ended.

See also Empire and Travel; Ireland and the Catholic Question; Millenarianism; Philosophy; Political Protest; Satire; Slavery, Abolition and African-British Literature.

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