

POLITICAL THOUGHT IN THE AGE OF REVOLUTION 1776–1848

BURKE TO MARX

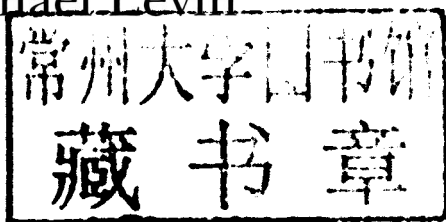
MICHAEL LEVIN



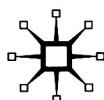
POLITICAL THOUGHT IN
THE AGE OF REVOLUTION
1776–1848

BURKE TO MARX

Michael Levin



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'A comprehensive, stimulating, well-written and scholarly but accessible account of the main strands of European political thinking between 1776 and 1848.'

—**Gregory Claeys**, *Royal Holloway, University of London*

The years between the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789 and the European Revolutions of 1848 saw fundamental shifts from autocracy to emerging democracy. It is a vital period in what may be termed 'modernity': that is of the western societies that are increasingly industrial, capitalist and liberal democratic. Unsurprisingly, these years of stress and transition produced some significant reflections on politics and society.

This indispensable introductory text considers how a cluster of key thinkers viewed the global political upheavals and social changes of their time, covering the work of:

- Edmund Burke
- Thomas Paine
- Jeremy Bentham
- Georg Hegel
- Alexis de Tocqueville
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

Lively and approachable, it is essential reading for anyone with an interest in modern history, political history or political thought.

Michael Levin is Emeritus Reader in Politics at Goldsmiths, University of London. His previous publications include *The Spectre of Democracy: The Rise of Modern Democracy as Seen by its Critics* (1992) and *J.S. Mill on Civilization and Barbarism* (2004).

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It is an age of Revolutions, in which everything may be looked for.

Thomas Paine.

Whatever happens, every individual is the child of his time: so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts.

G.W.F. Hegel.

Preface

The years from 1776 to 1848 saw fundamental shifts from the politics of the court to that of the masses and from autocracy to emerging democracy. It is a key period in what may be termed 'modernity', the main components of which we shall discuss in Chapter 2. Unsurprisingly, these years of revolution, stress and transition produced some fundamental reflections on politics and society. In this relatively brief period, we have an extremely rich cluster of some of the most significant thinkers in the whole long history of social and political thought. It is their ideas that we shall be examining in this book. These thinkers all engaged theoretically and, in some instances, practically with the great revolutionary events of their time, and produced some of the classic accounts of revolution and social change¹. We start with Edmund Burke who was one of the main defenders of the American colonies in their dispute with the British Crown and also the most influential critic of the French Revolution. As a British Member of Parliament, he did his utmost to influence government policy on these events. He also, like Jeremy Bentham, gave practical help to refugees fleeing revolutionary France. Thomas Paine was the most significant advocate of American independence, took part in the revolutionary struggle there and later both defended the French Revolution from Burke's attacks and became a deputy in the French parliament, where, at great risk to himself, he pleaded, in vain, for the life of King Louis XVI. Jeremy Bentham was a critic of traditional law and wanted legal systems rationalised. The revolutions seemed to provide just the opportunities that he wanted, though, to his great regret, his recommendations were not followed. Bentham was, though, made an honorary citizen of revolutionary France, as was Thomas Paine. Georg Hegel recognised that the French Revolution was the outcome of recent developments in thinking

but rejected the ways in which such ideas were implemented, for liberal individualism seemed to neglect the need for community and social coherence. Alexis de Tocqueville came from a family of victims of the French Revolution. He studied the American political system to discern the extent to which democracy could be kept compatible with freedom. He also wrote a classic eyewitness account of the 1848 French Revolution, after which, for a short period, he became French foreign minister. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels did not write in any detail on the 1789 revolution, yet it was a fundamental influence on their thinking, for it provided their model of how one class overthrows and succeeds another, in consequence of which one socio-economic structure is replaced by another. Engels played a minor military role in the German revolution of 1848–9, the failures of which he and Marx eventually attributed to the relatively undeveloped state of the industrial proletariat.

With Burke, Hegel and Tocqueville, we find a critical attitude to modernity, perhaps centrally on account of its destruction of community. Our four radical critics of the old order do so on quite different bases: Paine on lack of rights; Bentham on lack of happiness; and Marx and Engels on class exploitation. However, too simple and apparently clear-cut divisions between conservatives and radicals neglect their significant affinities. For example, Burke noted the rise of a new class to power, Hegel criticised the irrationality of many traditional procedures, and Tocqueville outlined the injustices of the old regime in France.

Though this work draws on some of my previous writings, it has principally been a product of my retirement. This has made it a great pleasure as it has been completed away from the pressures of recent academic life. I worked on it merely when I felt so inclined. Since ending my teaching career, my main official link with the university world has been as a convenor of the Seminar in the History of Political Ideas at the Institute of Historical Research, London University. I'm grateful to my fellow convenors and other members of the seminar for providing such a congenial and stimulating forum for the discussion of political ideas. Fellow Convenor Gregory Claeys read the Burke and Paine chapters and kept me writing by the simple expedient of frequently asking how I was getting on with it. I am very grateful to him, and also to David McLellan for helpful comments on the Marx and Engels chapter.

Thanks also to Sonya Barker, my editor at Palgrave Macmillan, for always being positive. Finally I'd like to say that my basic intention has been to write an introductory account that is intelligible to undergraduate students taking courses in the history of political thought.

Chronology

1721. Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*.
1729. Jan. Birth of Edmund Burke.
1734. Voltaire, *Lettres philosophiques*.
1737. Jan. 29. Birth of Thomas Paine.
1746. Diderot, *Pensées philosophiques*.
1747. Voltaire, *Zadig*.
1748. Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*.
Feb. 15. Birth of Jeremy Bentham.
1750. Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Arts and Sciences'.
1755. Rousseau, 'Discourse on Inequality'.
1757. Hume, *Natural History of Religion*.
1759. Voltaire, *Candide*.
1760. Bentham goes to Queen's College, Oxford.
1762. Rousseau, *Social Contract*.
1765. Dec. Burke elected MP for Wendover.
1770. Aug. 27. Birth of Hegel.
1772. Warren Hastings appointed Governor of Bengal.
1773. Dec. Boston tea party.
1774. April. Burke, 'Speech on American taxation'.
Nov. Paine arrives in Philadelphia.
Burke elected MP for Bristol.
1775. March. Burke speech on Conciliation with America.
1776. Jan. Paine, *Common Sense*.
April. Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*.
July. American Declaration of Independence.
Paine enlists in American army.
Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*.
Dec. First number of Paine, 'Crisis'.
1777–9. Paine elected by Congress as Secretary to Committee of Foreign Affairs.

1780. Burke becomes MP for Malton.
1781. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.
October. British surrender at Yorktown.
1782. March. Burke becomes Paymaster-General.
June. Burke resigns from Shelburne administration.
1783. Feb.–Dec. Burke became Paymaster-General again.
1787. United States Constitution ratified.
1788. Attempted impeachment of Warren Hastings begins in the House of Lords.
Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*.
Paine returns to England.
- 1788–93. Hegel studies theology at the University of Tübingen.
1789. May. States-General meets.
June. French National Assembly established.
July 14. Fall of the Bastille.
Aug. 4–11. French decrees abolishing feudal rights.
Nov. Richard Price defends French Revolution.
Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*.
- 1789–90. Paine in France.
1790. Nov. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.
1791. Feb. Paine, *Rights of Man*, part one.
June. Flight to Varennes of French royal family.
Aug. Burke, 'Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs'.
1792. Feb. Paine, *Rights of Man*, part two.
June. Paine charged with sedition in London.
Aug. Louis XIV deposed.
September. French monarchy abolished.
Paine escapes to France and represents Calais in the French Convention.
Bentham made an honorary citizen of France.
Dec. Paine's trial *in absentia* for seditious libel.
1793. Jan. Execution of Louis XVI.
Dec. Paine arrested and held in Luxemburg prison, Paris.
- 1793–1800. Hegel employed as a tutor in Berne and then in Frankfurt.

1794. Jan. Paine, *Age of Reason*, part one.
 July. Fall of Robespierre.
 Nov. Paine released from prison.
1795. Kant, *Eternal Peace*.
 Paine readmitted to French Convention.
1796. Paine, *Age of Reason*, part two.
1797. July 9. Death of Burke.
 Paine, *Agrarian Justice*.
- 1801–7. Hegel teaches Philosophy at the University of Jena.
1802. Oct. Paine returns to the United States.
1804. Napoleon crowned Emperor of France.
1805. July 29. Birth of Alexis de Tocqueville.
1807. British slave trade abolished.
 Hegel edits a newspaper in Bamberg.
1808. Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*.
 Hegel becomes principal of a secondary school in
 Nürnberg.
1809. Bentham met James Mill.
 June 8. Death of Paine.
1813. Robert Owen, *A New View of Society*.
1815. June 18. Battle of Waterloo.
- 1816–18. Hegel teaches philosophy at the University of
 Heidelberg.
1818. May 5. Birth of Karl Marx.
- 1818–31. Hegel teaches philosophy at the University of Berlin.
1819. Bentham's 'Radical Reform Bill' published.
1820. Nov. 28. Birth of Friedrich Engels.
1821. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*.
- 1822–3. Hegel first gave his lectures on what became *The
 Philosophy of History*.
1830. July 26–30. Revolution in France.
 Riots in Germany.
 Belgium won independence from
 Holland.
 Polish uprising suppressed.
1831. Nov. 14. Hegel dies of cholera.
 May 1831–Feb. 1832. Tocqueville travels to the
 United States of America with Gustave de Beaumont.
1832. British first parliamentary Reform Act.
 Death of Bentham.

- 1833. Slavery abolished in British colonial possessions.
- 1835. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1.
- 1835–7. Engels in high school in Elberfeld.
- 1838. July. Engels's first visit to England.
- 1839. Feb. First Chartist Convention met in London.
Tocqueville elected to French Chamber of Deputies.
- 1840. Feb. German Workers' Educational Society founded in London.
Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2.
- 1841. Tocqueville elected to the French Academy
- 1841–2. Engels's military service in Berlin.
- 1842. Oct. Engels met Moses Hess and became a communist.
Nov. First meeting between Marx and Engels.
- 1843. Marx, 'Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right'.
Marx, 'On the Jewish Question'.
- 1844. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.
- 1845. June. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.
- 1846. Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*.
- 1848. Feb. Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.
Revolution in Paris.
March. Revolution in Vienna, Budapest, Berlin, Milan, Venice.
April. Chartist demonstration on Kennington Common.
Tocqueville elected to the French Constituent Assembly.
May. Frankfurt parliament opens.
Dec. 10. Louis Napoleon elected President of the French Republic.
- 1849. April–May. Collapse of Frankfurt parliament.
May. Tocqueville elected to the Legislative Assembly.
June–October. Tocqueville serves as French Minister of Foreign Affairs.
- 1850. Marx, 'The Class Struggles in France 1848 to 1850'.
Nov. Engels moves to Manchester to work for Ermen and Engels.
- 1851. Dec. Tocqueville arrested after opposing coup d'état of Louis Napoleon. Imprisoned for 1 day.
- 1852. Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte'.
- 1856. Tocqueville, *The Old Régime and the French Revolution*.

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1

The Historical Context

In one of the best-known social history books of the last century, Eric Hobsbawm famously designated *The Age of Revolution*.¹ For him, it was the period between the French revolutions of 1789 and 1848, which he describes as witnessing ‘the greatest transformation in human history since the remote times when men invented agriculture and metallurgy, writing, the city and the state’. His subject was not merely France, but ‘the transformation of the world’ caused by both the French Revolution and the ‘contemporaneous [British] industrial revolution’.² In the same vein, Jay Winik has more recently described the late eighteenth century as ‘the age that gave birth to the modern world. It is also arguably one of the most significant eras in all of human history.’³

The Atlantic Revolution 1776 and 1789

‘The French Revolution has been regarded by subsequent generations as the emergence of the modern political world. It comprised a paradigm shift that irrevocably changed the way in which we think.’⁴ To some, the revolution seemed like a thunderbolt that dropped unannounced out of a clear blue sky. Though it had no precedent in French history, it did have its antecedent causes. The state, for example, was in severe financial difficulties. The wealthiest citizens were exempt from taxation, and both state regulation and internal customs barriers curtailed the development of trade and industry. The Treasury was burdened both by its own cumbersome organisation and by a few decades of unsuccessful imperial competition with Great Britain, losing

out to Robert Clive in India and General Wolfe in Quebec, though gaining some vicarious, though not financial, compensation through entering the War of American Independence on the rebel colonists' side.

In medieval Europe, it was common for monarchs only to summon councils or parliaments when they were in financial difficulties. Consequently, in August 1788 Louis XVI requested the Estates-General to meet the following year. It had last convened in 1614, so there was understandable uncertainty concerning some of the procedures. That it contained three houses – the clergy, the nobility and the Third Estate – was beyond dispute. What now proved contentious was whether to accept the old pattern of voting by Estate, in which case the two privileged orders of aristocracy and clergy could always outvote the Third Estate by two to one. The king had wanted the old traditions followed, but he gave way to pressure from the Third Estate in allowing them to double their traditional number of deputies to 600, leaving the other two Estates with 300 deputies each. So, unwittingly or otherwise, he conceded the principle that was soon to undermine the old regime that numbers were to be granted political weight.

The unresolved problem of whether the Estates should vote separately or together was pre-empted on 17 June 1789 when the Third Estate, by 491 votes to 89, proclaimed itself a National Assembly and called upon members of the other two Estates to join it in reforming France. The consequences of this decision were to seal the fate of the old regime, for in that change of terminology is encapsulated a key polarity between medieval and modern understandings of politics.

The transition from reform to revolution occurred less than a month later, when the old fortress of the Bastille was stormed on 14 July. This event, more symbolic than substantial, has remained the most iconic and famous moment of the revolution. Then on the night of 4–5 August, the aristocracy renounced most of their privileges. Feudal dues, noble status and even the system of Estates were all swept away. Massive and long-entrenched inequalities had been removed. The new presuppositions found expression in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, decreed by the National Assembly on 26 August and 'modelled mainly on the manifestos set out by the Americans some years earlier'.⁵ Among its pronouncements was the belief that 'Nature has made all men free and equal', that 'No man should suffer for his religious beliefs',