



Reto Suter **Political Utopias  
at the Time  
of the  
Revolution Debate  
in England,  
1789–1796**



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# 1. Introduction

“The most palpable of all classes of knowledge is that I am, personally considered, but an atom in the ocean of mind.”<sup>1</sup> In the initial years of the French Revolution, belief in the power of reason ran deep in the English public. Members of all social classes saw the Fall of the Bastille as a symbol for the work of progress in human history. At the close of the period of the *Enlightenment*<sup>2</sup>, when the first signs of the Industrialisation began to show,<sup>3</sup> English optimism concerning human potential for improvement in the domain of reason was at its peak; the future seemed to hold infinite possibilities. William Godwin’s statement from book VIII of *Political Justice* points in this direction. To him, mankind was one vast receptacle of reason in which the individual intellect was but the tiniest speck. If this collective mind could be educated and led onto a higher level, were there any limits to what it could achieve? Belief in the intellectual potential of humanity had been soaring during the entire 18<sup>th</sup> century; however the advent of the French Revolution raised expectations once again. Thus, the Nonconformist Minister Richard Price could write in November 1789:

I have lived to see a diffusion of knowledge which has undermined superstition and error. I have lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever, and

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- 1 Godwin, William. An Enquiry concerning Political Justice, and its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness (1793). In: Mark Philp (ed.). *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, vol. 3. (Pickering Masters Series). London 1993, p. 445.
- 2 “A broad term for 18th-century philosophical movements in which the power of human reason was stressed and obscurantist religious and political practices criticized. Fed by scientific as well as philosophical discoveries, the Enlightenment had a profound effect throughout Europe upon economic and political development, by creating a climate conducive to research and innovation; its influence can be seen in both the French and American revolutions.” Cook, Chris. *Dictionary of Historical Terms*. 2nd edn. New York 1990, p. 118.
- 3 Hobsbawm, Eric J. *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848*. London 1962, pp. 28–29.

nations panting for liberty, which seemed to have lost the idea of it. I have lived to see thirty millions of people, indignant and resolute, spurning at slavery, and demanding liberty with an irresistible voice, their king led in triumph, and an arbitrary monarch surrendering himself to his subjects.<sup>4</sup>

The ideas of the philosophers had taken root; the French population had begun to understand its rights and decided to act in order to secure them. Price admired the revolutionaries' achievements and was sure that their example would positively influence matters in his home country.<sup>5</sup> He stands representative for the two English interest groups which most of all welcomed the French Revolution as a boost to their own particular cause, since he combined both their concerns in his thought: the Dissenters struggling to achieve the same social and political rights as orthodox Anglicans and the political opposition in and outside parliament demanding a reform of the state's constitution.<sup>6</sup> The movement for parliamentary reform, which had declined in the second half of the 1780s, received a new impetus and became more vehement than ever before.<sup>7</sup> Price was, moreover, convinced that the French Revolution did not stand as an isolated incident in human history, but saw it as a step on mankind's way towards greater reason and understanding, a development which had begun long before. He believed that the principles behind the events in France were the same that had led to the Glorious Revolution in England one hundred years earlier.<sup>8</sup>

But not all observers of the Revolution shared Price's optimism as to its significance. Most prominent among his critics, Edmund Burke replied in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*<sup>9</sup> that far

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4 Price, Richard. *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789). 4th edn. In: D.O. Thomas (ed.). *Richard Price: Political Writings*. (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought). Cambridge 1991, pp. 176–196, p. 195.

5 Ibid., p. 191.

6 Claeys, Gregory. *The French Revolution Debate in Britain. The Origin of Modern Politics*. (British History in Perspective). Basingstoke 2007, p. 9.

7 Dickinson, H. T. *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. London 1977, pp. 232, 236–237.

8 Price, Discourse, pp. 189, 195–196.

9 Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Ed.: J. C. D. Clark. Stanford, California 2001, pp. 141–415.