

# Rights of Man

Not to be confused with [Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#).

*Rights of Man* (1791), a book by [Thomas Paine](#), including 31 articles, posits that popular political revolution is permissible when a government does not safeguard the natural rights of its people. Using these points as a base it defends the [French Revolution](#) against [Edmund Burke](#)'s attack in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).<sup>[1]</sup>

It was published in two parts in March 1791 and February 1792.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 1 Background

Paine was a very strong supporter of the [French Revolution](#) that began in 1789; he visited France the following year. Many English thinkers supported it, including [Richard Price](#), who initiated the [Revolution Controversy](#) with his sermon and pamphlet drawing favourable parallels between the [Glorious Revolution](#) of 1688 and the [French Revolution](#). Conservative intellectual [Edmund Burke](#) responded with a counter-revolutionary attack entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), which strongly appealed to the landed class and sold 30,000 copies.<sup>[3]</sup> Paine's *Rights of Man* was printed by [Joseph Johnson](#) for publication on 21 February 1791, then withdrawn for fear of prosecution.<sup>[3]</sup> [J. S. Jordan](#) stepped in and published it on 16 March.<sup>[3]</sup> The 90,000-word book appeared on 13 March, three weeks later than scheduled. It sold as many as one million copies and was, "eagerly read by reformers, [Protestant dissenters](#), [democrats](#), [London craftsman](#), and the skilled factory-hands of the new industrial north."<sup>[4]</sup>

## 2 Arguments

Paine argues that the interests of the monarch and his people are united, and insists that the [French Revolution](#) should be understood as one which attacks the despotic principles of the [French monarchy](#), not the king himself, and he takes the [Bastille](#), the main prison in [Paris](#), to symbolise the despotism that had been overthrown.<sup>[3]</sup>

[Human rights](#) originate in [Nature](#), thus, rights cannot be granted via political charter, because that implies that rights are legally revocable, hence, would be privileges:

It is a perversion of terms to say that a charter gives rights. It operates by a contrary effect—that of taking rights away. Rights are inherently in all the inhabitants; but charters, by annulling those rights, in the majority, leave the right, by exclusion, in the hands of a few... They... consequently are instruments of injustice ... The fact, therefore, must be that the individuals, themselves, each, in his own personal and sovereign right, entered into a contract with each other to produce a government: and this is the only mode in which governments have a right to arise, and the only principle on which they have a right to exist.

Government's sole purpose is safeguarding the individual and his/her inherent, inalienable rights; each societal institution that does not benefit the nation is illegitimate—especially monarchy and aristocracy. The book's acumen derives from the [Age of Enlightenment](#), especially from the *Second Treatise of Government*, by [John Locke](#).

The fuller development of this position seems to have been worked out one night in France after an evening spent with [Thomas Jefferson](#), and possibly [Lafayette](#), discussing a pamphlet by the Philadelphia conservative [James Wilson](#) on the proposed federal constitution.<sup>[3]</sup>

### 2.1 Reformation of English Government

*Rights of Man* concludes in proposing practical reformations of English government: a written Constitution composed by a national assembly, in the American mould; the elimination of aristocratic titles, because democracy is incompatible with [primogeniture](#), which leads to the despotism of the family; a national budget without allotted military and war expenses; lower taxes for the poor, and subsidised education for them; and a progressive income tax weighted against wealthy estates to prevent the emergence of a hereditary aristocracy.

## 3 Aristocracy

Principally, *Rights of Man* opposes the idea of hereditary government—the belief that dictatorial government is necessary, because of man's corrupt, essential nature. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) [Edmund Burke](#) says that true social stability arises if the nation's

poor majority are governed by a minority of wealthy aristocrats, and that lawful inheritance of power (wealth, religion, governing) ensured the propriety of political power being the exclusive domain of the nation's *élite social class*—the nobility.

*Rights of Man* denounces Burke's assertion of the nobility's inherent *hereditary wisdom*; countering the implication that a nation has not a right to form a Government for governing itself. Paine refutes Burke's definition of Government as "a contrivance of human wisdom". Instead, Paine argues that Government is a contrivance of man, and it follows that *hereditary succession* and hereditary rights to govern cannot compose a Government—because the wisdom to govern cannot be inherited.

## 4 Heredity

Edmund Burke's counter-revolutionary *Reflections on the French Revolution* delineates the legitimacy of aristocratic government to the 1688 Parliamentary resolution declaring William and Mary of Orange—and their heirs—to be the true rulers of England. Paine puts forward two arguments against this view. Firstly, he argues that "Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself in all cases as the age and generations which preceded it." Secondly, Paine counters that the institution of monarchy should not be historically traced from 1688, but from 1066, when William of Normandy forcibly imposed his Norman rule upon Englishmen.

Thomas Paine's intellectual influence is perceptible in the two great political revolutions of the eighteenth century. He dedicated *Rights of Man* to George Washington and to the Marquis de Lafayette, acknowledging the importance of the American and the French revolutions in his formulating the principles of modern democratic governance.

Thus, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* (*Déclaration des droits de l'Homme et du citoyen*) can be encapsulated so: (1) Men are born, and always continue, free and equal in respect of their rights. Civil distinctions, therefore, can be founded only on public utility; (2) The end of all political associations is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; and these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression; and (3) The nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty; neither can any individual, nor any body of men, be entitled to any authority, which is not expressly derived from it.

These capsules are akin to the self-evident truths concept that the U.S. Declaration of Independence expresses.

## 5 Analysis and public impact

According to Mark Philp, "In many respects *Rights of Man* is a disordered mix of narrative, principled argu-

ment, and rhetorical appeal—betraying the composite materials Paine used and the speed with which it was composed."<sup>[3]</sup>

It was quickly reprinted and widely circulated, with copies being read aloud in inns and coffee houses, so that by May some 50,000 copies were said to be in circulation."<sup>[3]</sup> Of the 300 or more pamphlets which the revolution controversy spawned, *Rights of Man* was the first to seriously damage Burke's case and to restore credit to the French both in Britain and America."<sup>[3]</sup>

The publication of *Rights of Man* caused a furore in England; Paine was tried *in absentia*, and convicted for seditious libel against the Crown, but was unavailable for hanging, being in France and never returning to England. (Sir Archibald Macdonald, 1st Baronet served as the prosecutor.)

Thomas Paine was not the only advocate of the rights of man or the only author of a work titled *Rights of Man*. The working-class radical, Thomas Spence, is among the first, in England, to use the phrase as a title. His 1775 lecture, usually titled *The Rights of Man*, and his later *The Rights of Infants*, offer a proto-geoist take on political philosophy mirroring Paine's work *Agrarian Justice*.<sup>[5]</sup> Paine's acquaintance Mary Wollstonecraft, whom he met via their common publisher, wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* as one of the very first responses to Burke's attack on Richard Price. Her work was in print in December 1790, and was well reviewed. She extended the arguments in the book for which she is best remembered, the 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

Paine's visionary two-part call for republicanism and social welfare was generations ahead of its time when published in 1791.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 6 See also

- *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* – a fundamental document of the French Revolution, adopted in 1789
- Thomas Muir (political reformer)

## 7 References

- [1] "*Rights of Man*".
- [2] "Taking Liberties – Star Items – Paine's *Rights of Man*".
- [3] Mark Philp, 'Paine, Thomas (1737–1809)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2008 accessed 4 July 2012
- [4] George Rudé, *Revolutionary Europe: 1783–1815* (1964) p. 183
- [5] "thomas spence.co.uk – Home".

- The 1789 French *Déclaration des droits de l'Homme*

## 8 External links

- Full (and abridged) texts at Squashed Philosophers Archive
- *Rights Of Man* public domain audiobook at LibriVox

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