

Evaluating War of Ideas - Jacobin and Anti-Jacobin Concepts

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Abstract

The war of ideas in the late eighteenth century was an important watershed moment in British history. It signified the pouring over of radical ideas inspired by the French Revolution. This tumultuous period in history affected the discourses on politics, gender, literature and culture. Debates on gender, human rights and reflections on the political scenario shaped further discussions on law and women's rights. This paper will explore the clash of ideals through select works of Jane West, Thomas Paine, Edmund Burke, Rousseau, Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More. An attempt has also been made to trace the different modes of thought about radicalism circulating during this time.

Keywords: *Eighteenth century, Radicalism, Jacobin, Revolution, Gender*

In France, the war of ideas in the form of intellectual differences has been fought in many forms, especially in the late eighteenth century. The political battle of ideologies started with the tyranny of Louis XIV (1754-1793), King of France. This war of ideals was influenced by French bourgeois philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Voltaire (1694-1778) and Montesquieu (1689-1755). The French Revolution was carried out against aristocratic, tyrannical and despotic power. The monarchy and church were exploiting the common people, and both these institutions were displaying their hypocrisy. For instance, in churches, the clergymen were preaching to the common people about a belief system in which they had lost their faith. The Revolution also unleashed, in many senses, a philosophical war of ideas. There were aristocrats who were

unwilling to allow people to control their fate and lives and, on the other hand, influenced by the American Revolution and the writings of the philosophers and other intellectual thinkers of the time there was a considerable rise in the number of people who came to believe in ideas of freedom from aristocratic power. These dreams gave hopes where they could live lives on their terms and be able to choose their representatives.

The ideological war in England in the 1790s was influenced by the French Revolution, where society was divided into two camps of revolutionaries and anti-revolutionaries. In the revolutionary camp, most people belonged to the middle class, just like the insurgents in the French Revolution. Needless to say, this middle class was progressive and most of the people belonging to the aristocratic class were deeply conservative. In her book *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975), Marilyn Butler convincingly discusses this polarization as she sees it in the literary and social realms. During this discussion, Butler highlights the division of Jacobins as progressive and anti-Jacobins as conservatives.

The Anti-Jacobins, or the conservatives, used to believe in emotions, sentiments and feelings. They were anti-revolutionaries. They have critiqued revolutionary ideology. For instance, Edmund Burke remains one of the tallest figures amongst the anti-revolutionaries. He critiques revolutionary ideology in his treatise *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In this treatise, he defends all aristocratic classes and the monarchy. This work reveals that Burke expected anarchy to break out right after the French Revolution. It is quite conspicuous that he critiques dissenters. He says that tradition and authority are to be respected and maintained. And further, talking about the 1688 Glorious Revolution in England, he interestingly uses that conservative revolution to show it as a progressive and even radical revolution.

The Anti-Jacobins, or the conservatives also mistrusted the self. One finds this representation in most of their novels or other literary works, where the characters who were shown to rely on themselves rather than on some patriarchal figure of authority or tradition, were always shown to be the cause of suffering not only for themselves but also for their own community as a whole. The progressives were against emotions, sentiments, feelings and sensibility. Their emphasis was on reason. Robert Bage (1730-1801), William Godwin (1756-1836), Thomas Holcroft (1745-1809), Thomas Paine (1737-1809) and

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) were some of the most prominent writers of this group. Their works highlighted the importance of the individual self and stressed the significance of being able to make decisions by relying on reason rather than being influenced by authority, tradition, or patriarchal figures. For instance, Paine in his book *Rights of Man* (1792), challenged Burke's anti-revolutionary ideas, which he talked of length in his book *Reflections on the Revolutions in France* (1790). He says that this revolution was not against the monarch but was against the monarchy, as a system of exploitation that had for centuries oppressed the people of France, who were now willing to change their modes of thinking and living. Talking about Burke's ideas of the goodness of monarchy and how those ideas were for all time, Paine says:

It requires but a very small glance of thought to perceive that, although laws made in one generation often continue in force through generations, yet they continue to derive their force from the consent of the living. A law not repealed continues in force, not because it cannot be repealed, but because it is not repealed; and the non-repealing passes for consent. (p. 14)

He then continues to show how the French Revolution happened and the important role that the people played in the fall of the Bastille on 14 July 1789. Paine uses these ideas to evaluate that with the French Revolution, there was a change in the way people now wanted to govern themselves and in the way they saw the idea of the nation changing. As Paine advocates, in a monarchy, the sovereignty of the nation lives in the person of the King, but in a democracy, the sovereignty lies in the people of the nation, in other words, it is with the people and not with any one person. Wollstonecraft also contested Burke's ideals. In her book *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), she says that men should get equal property and also be treated on an equal footing as far as gender is concerned. Incidentally, *Vindication* is a direct response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Family was yet another ground on which Burke and Wollstonecraft differed. Another ground on which Wollstonecraft and Burke differed was on the role of the family. In *Family Feuds: Wollstonecraft, Burke, and Rousseau on the Transformation of the Family* (2006), Eileen Hunt Botting examines how family was an important site of gendered power struggles. Rousseau was among the first to begin his discussions on the family and its role in society, while Burke and Wollstonecraft joined in and further shaped these discourses. In eighteenth century English society, the family and the rules

governing its existence were important topics of discussion. It generated ideas on the treatment of women, gender roles, marriage, family property and so on. In their discussions on the nature and evolution of family, Rousseau and Burke feared a complete breakdown of the patriarchal nature of the family. To them, the family was the space that taught people about morality and social norms. The family was also a cushion against the infringement of the 'modern'. For Burke, the family was associated with the feminine and "beautiful" – something that did not sit well with Wollstonecraft, especially with the rising consciousness and awareness of women's participation in roles beyond the domestic.

Literary scholars from both sides of the establishment were publishing books that went against each other, and they counter-argued ideas through their literary publications. This clash was taking place in the public realm. It is also important to mention that they were critiquing each other's ideas, but at the same time, they were also following each other's views; in other words, there were many common beliefs in their works. They used this belief according to the situation, time and context. Burke's advocacy for the Glorious Revolution and American Revolution and his anti-revolutionary approach related to the French Revolution is the best example of the argument mentioned above. Godwin also, in his work *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793), presents his views which are against the institutional tradition. He emphasizes individual liberty because he believes that governance always cultivates tyranny and exploitation through manipulation and power. He is also against the institution of matrimony. Overall, it would not be inappropriate to say that he was the champion of anarchy.

In the late eighteenth century, an ideological war over the issue of women's rights and empowerment is increasingly evident. During this time, the condition of women was deplorable. This pathetic condition can be judged by the fact that an important philosopher of the time, Jean Jacques Rousseau, in his treatise on education, *Emile* (1762), spoke about women in the most degrading terms. In Book Five of *Emile*, he says that women were made for man's delight, they ought to make themselves pleasing, their proper business is to bear children, and they are dependant for their honour, reputation and conduct on men. They did not have any socio-political or economic rights; and patriarchal principles restricted their freedom. They were objects of pleasure. After their marriage, they became the property of their husband. She had no

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right over her possessions. The man had complete control over her body. In other words, the woman's body belonged to her husband as his property. Two prominent women, Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More aired different ideas for the progress of women and led the way for many women to articulate their desires. Wollstonecraft's *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) talks about socio-political and economic progress for women. She emphasises on the individual progress of women and equal rights as enjoyed by men. She says that women are equal to men and can exercise free will in their lives. She expressed a strong dislike for astrology and other superstitious ideologies. She critiques Rousseau and wants women to develop as good mothers, but at the same time, she also wants women to grow as educated beings in the social world. In the essay titled "Reflections on Inequality, Respect, and Love", Sylvana Tomaselli writes:

Like most eighteenth-century thinkers Wollstonecraft did not conceive of women as passive victims of the social and historical process. Unlike many of her near contemporaries, however, such as Diderot and Rousseau, she did not think of the history of woman as a narrative of her emancipation from her abject subjection to man in the state of nature. (2016, p. 20)

Tomaselli further writes –

The condition of women, and men for that matter, was proportionate to the means of their commodification and that, in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men*, was inherently linked to property accumulation through marriage, and in her later writings, through the intensification of the culture of conspicuous consumption in commercial society. (p. 20)

According to Wollstonecraft, women are not sexual objects created for the pleasure of men, as Rousseau writes in his fifth book of *Emile*. Her entire idea contradicts Rousseau's idea about women, which is visible in chapter Five of *Emile* (1762). It is ironic, on the one hand, that Rousseau states in the opening line of *The Social Contract* (1762) that "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (p. 156). Unlike Wollstonecraft, More also discusses the same issue, but in different ways. Her evangelical ideas overshadow her concerns about female education. According to a critic, More indicates that women should be passionless, this view is problematic since More's ideals over the female issue is influenced by evangelicalism. According to Patricia Demers and N. K. Miller,

More was the first woman whose ideas of the germs of Victorian traditions are visible. She emphasises female education in the context of religion in her treatise *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education: With a View of the Principles and Conduct Prevalent among Women of Rank and Fortune* (1799). She says that through education, women can become good mothers. She advises that a woman should participate in works of charity, they should try to educate the poor, go to orphanages, and do other social work. She also emphasises that women should satisfy their sexual appetite only through the institution of marriage. She also had opinions on what books women should read. Thus, it is evident that while both Wollstonecraft and More talk about the progress of women, More binds women to institutions for any progress. More embodied a complex ideological position as she was advocating for women's education and moral advancement within the established patriarchal framework. Moreover, while Wollstonecraft sees women as equal to men, More sees women as sexually inferior to men. The two women's ideologies and advocacy for women's agency were an important driving force in eighteenth century English women's consciousness about their rights and roles in society as well as in their homes. In *Before Victoria: Extraordinary Women of the British Romantic Era*, Elizabeth Campbell Denlinger writes about the two "political and social extremes" inhabited by these two women. Unlike Wollstonecraft, who defied any definition, More was known as a moral reformer who was almost like a Christian saint. Denlinger notes how motherhood was important to both of these women's political concerns. While More viewed motherhood as a practice that should be carried out from the home, Wollstonecraft saw a mother's "best life" while participating in civil and public life in general. More's paradoxical thoughts about women and motherhood involved the development of individual education for the benefit of children.

The future of these gendered ideologies became prevalent in two different ways. More's ideals progressed in the Victorian world since the repression of women was strong and enforced with might and the concept of monster and angel was popular during the period those women who were submissive, polite and blind followers of patriarchy were treated as angels while those women who were rebellious against patriarchy even through their rational approach they were considered as monsters. The character of Helen Burns as an angel and the character of Bertha Mason as a monster in *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte

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Bronte (1816-1855) is the best example. Wollstonecraft's revolutionary ideology was enforced only in later times since the radical part of her ideas were seen to be useful only later for their radicalness. Twentieth-century feminist critic Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) accentuates the opinion of Mary Wollstonecraft in her own literary works. Her essay on Mary Wollstonecraft also proves her championship related to the concept associated with female upliftment. The political sensibilities of More and Wollstonecraft were quite prominent in their literary works titled *Maria: or The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and *Coelebs in Search of a Wife. Comprehending Observations on Domestic Habits and Manners, Religion and Morals* (1808). She writes that "Wollstonecraft's heroine has been crippled by sensibility, while More shows her readers the dangers of excess sentiment through secondary characters, but both authors see the value of intelligent, decisive, even strong-minded women" (162). It is evident in each of the above cases, that there can be no one or definite way of evaluating these ideological positions. They are constantly in conflict with one another and are also being influenced by opposing ideologies.

The enduring influence of Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge, reveals the future trajectory of these ideologies. They were optimistic about the Revolution in the early years but later they became pessimistic and were saddened by the tyranny and despotism that the Revolution had fallen into. The later generation of Romantic poets like Shelley and Keats, were inspired by the French Revolution and had hoped that the old ideals would also change in Britain making way for newer ones. Ideas about the potential of the Revolution and the hopes associated with it are found in the works of Shelley where he talks about revolution against the ideology of the ruling class in *Ode to the West Wind* (1820), *Ode to Liberty* (1817) and *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). John Keats also talks about these ideas in his poems *Hyperion* (1820) and *The Fall of Hyperion* (1856). In "The Politics of the Greater Romantic Poets", J. W. Thomas (1921) writes about the political leanings of some of the major Romantic writers such as Robert Southey, Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Old Tory Thomas Scott, Byron, Shelley and Keats. In his essay, Thomas writes about how Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey were initially quite aligned with the radicalism of the Revolution but later on became conservative. While acknowledging the initial similarities between Coleridge, Wordsworth and Southey, Thomas writes of a "second likeness" – that of a "common failure... to appreciate domestic problems". He writes,

All showed interest enough in questions of foreign politics, and-even in later years-unusual individuality for Tories. When France came to represent Tyranny rather than Liberty, all three turned against her, finally, with varying degrees of acquiescence, accepting the return of the Bourbons as the best solution of the inter- national difficulty. All three, it must be noted, rejoiced at the rise of the Spanish people against the French. (1921, p. 20)

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