

## References to Seventeenth-Century Republicanism in the Debate about the French Revolution in England (1789-1791)

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### The English republican heritage and its revival after 1789

As is widely known, the heritage of Seventeenth-Century English republicanism was not lost after the Glorious Revolution and throughout the Eighteenth-Century Whig era.

In the past decades, many historians have illustrated how several elements introduced into English political discourse since the age of the Puritan Revolution and Protectorate by prominent republican theorists (James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, John Milton over all)<sup>1</sup> were kept alive as distinctive features first of “Country” ideology (Bolingbroke),<sup>2</sup> then mostly of radical whiggism and religious non-conformity.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See mainly Michael Downs, *James Harrington*, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1977; John G.A. Pocock, *Historical Introduction to James Harrington, The Political Works of James Harrington*. Edited with an introduction by J.G.A. Pocock, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp. 1-152; Eugenio Capozzi, *Costituzione, Elezione, Aristocrazia. La Repubblica “Naturale” di James Harrington*, Napoli, ESI, 1996; *James Harrington and the Notion of Commonwealth. With a Critical Edition of John Toland's Life... of Harrington, Harrington's Mechanics of nature, and Proposition in order to the Proposing of a Commonwealth or Democracie*, ed. Luc Borot, Montpellier, Publications de l'Université Paul Valéry-Montpellier III, 1998; Jonathan Scott, *Algernon Sidney and the English Republic, 1623-1677*, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1988; Charles R. Geisst, *The Political Thought of John Milton*, London, Macmillan, 1984; Walter S.H. Lim, *John Milton, Radical Politics, and Biblical Republicanism*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and his Circle. The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1968; Quentin Skinner, *The Principles and Practice of Opposition. The Case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole*, in *Historical perspectives. Studies in English Thought and Society. In honour of J.H. Plumb*, ed. Neil McKendrick, London, Europa Publications, 1974, pp. 93-128; Guido Abbattista, *Il Re Patriota nel Discorso Politico-Ideologico Inglese del Settecento*, Introd. a H. Saint-John, Viscount Bolingbroke, *L'Idea di un Re Patriota* (trad. it.), Roma, Donzelli, 1995, pp. XXI-LXXXVIII; *Bolingbroke's Political Writings. The Conservative Enlightenment*, ed. Bernard Cottret, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Most notably Zera S. Fink, *Classical Republicans. An Essay in the Recovery of a Pattern of Thought in Seventeenth-Century England*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1962 (first edition 1945); Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1959; John G.A. Pocock, *Politics, language, and time. Essays in political thought and history*, London, Methuen, 1972; *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975; Enrico Nuzzo, *La superiorità degli stati liberi. I repubblicani inglesi (1649-1722)*, Napoli, ESI, 1984; Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism. Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1990; Blair Worden, *English Republicanism*, in J.H. Burns-M. Goldie (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700*, Cambridge, University Press, 1991, pp. 443-75; Thomas L. Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism. The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988; Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002; Markku Peltonen, *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570-1640*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

The persistence of these elements reveals a changing, yet constant trend of opposition to the “Whig oligarchy”<sup>4</sup> and to its most unpopular traits (patronage, influence of the Prime Minister and of the Cabinet on parliamentary proceedings) in the name of an ideal of “commonwealth” in which virtue and citizenship were seen as one and the same thing, and Parliament was considered an organic, faithful representation of society.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the republican paradigm played a significant role in the debate regarding representative government, constitutional power and individual rights throughout the eighteenth century. Its traces are clearly recognizable during the 1770's in the constitutional framework of the American Revolution, from the Declaration of Independence to the State Constitutions; and, subsequently, especially in the positions of republican anti-federalists like Jefferson and many others in the debate on the Federal Constitution.<sup>5</sup> But an echo of “Commonwealth” culture is also apparent in British politics in the last decades of the century, most notably in the radical campaigns for an electoral reform and the widening of suffrage.<sup>6</sup>

The main issues radical and/or revolutionary eighteenth-century Whigs inherited from “classical” republicanism were essentially related to the claim for a tighter connection between political institutions and civil society: balance of powers, ballot, more frequent elections, rotation of offices, a wider religious tolerance, abolition of hereditary appointments.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, the question at issue here is primarily whether, and to what extent, references to republican culture can be found in the political debate spawned in Britain by the outbreak of the French Revolution.<sup>8</sup> And, particularly, in the “*pamphlets war*”, the heated

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<sup>4</sup> This definition was coined by John H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1660-1730*, London, Macmillan, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> The main historiographical works to describe this influence are Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, Chapel Hill, N.C., University of North Carolina Press, 1969; *Three British Revolutions. 1641, 1688, 1776*, ed. John G.A. Pocock, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1980; *La Ricostruzione di un Impero. Sovranità Britannica e Federalismo Americano*, Manduria, Lacaita, 1996; Bernard Manin, *La Democrazia dei Moderni*, Milano, Anabasi, 1992; *Principes du Gouvernement représentatif*, Paris, Flammarion, 2012 (first edition 1995).

<sup>6</sup> On the republican heritage in the development of Whig, radical and liberal political culture see John G.A. Pocock, *The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform. A History of Ideology and Discourse*, in Id., *Virtue, Commerce, and History. Essays in Political Thought and History, chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 215-310.

<sup>7</sup> The best description of the emergence of such issues in British political discourse and thought can be found in Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 361-422; Historical Introduction to James Harrington, *The Political Works of James Harrington*, pp. 43-76.

<sup>8</sup> On Whig and radical political culture in Britain in the age of French Revolution see mainly, *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*, eds. Margaret Jacob and James Jacob, London-Boston, George Allen & Unwin, 1984; Harry T. Dickinson, *British radicalism and the French Revolution 1789-1815*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell,

controversy generated between 1790 and 1791 by the first major polemical reaction to the revolutionary process: the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by Edmund Burke.<sup>9</sup>

### **Price's *Discourse on the Love of Our Country***

The spark that lighted the flame of that well-known exchange, as is widely recognized, was the *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, delivered by the reverend Richard Price in the Old Jewry, home of the Revolution Society in London, on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1789.<sup>10</sup> Price, minister of the nonconformist Church of Newington Green, was one of the most influential leaders of British radicalism at the time.

Together with scientist and political activist Joseph Priestley and others (James Burgh, Thomas Hollis, John Jebb, William Godwin) Price had attended, since 1760, the association informally known as the Honest Whigs, whose name itself hinted at a direct descent from the republican Whiggism of the Restoration era.<sup>11</sup>

Both Price and Priestley were also members, from 1780 onwards, of the Society for Constitutional Information, established by John Cartwright. Thomas Hollis, one of the members of that circle, promoted new editions of the volumes by founding republican theorists such as Harrington, Milton and Sidney. That group was later to develop into the Revolution Society, established in 1788.<sup>12</sup>

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1985; *Britain and the French Revolution*, ed. Harry T. Dickinson, London, Macmillan, 1989; Gregory Claeys, "The French Revolution Debate and British Political Thought", *History of Political Thought*, 11, 1990, pp. 59-80; James A. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism. Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> The most complete collection of political pamphlets of that period is *Political Writings of the 1790's*, ed. Gregory Claeys, London, William Pickering, 1995 (8 volumes). For a comprehensive survey see G. Claeys, *Introduction*, pp. XVII-LVI.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, in *Political Writings of the 1790's*, ed. Gregory Claeys. Volume 3: *Radicalism and Reform, 1790-1792*, London, William Pickering, 1995, pp. 3-22. On Price, Roland Thomas, *Richard Price. Philosopher and Apostle of Liberty*, London, Oxford University Press, 1924; Carl B. Cone, *Torchbearer of Freedom; the Influence of Richard Price on Eighteenth Century Thought*, Lexington, University of Kentucky Press, 1952; David O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind. The Thought and Work of Richard Price*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977.

<sup>11</sup> On Priestley, see *Science, Medicine, and Dissent. Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)*. eds. Robert G.W. Anderson - Christopher Lawrence, Papers celebrating the 250th Anniversary of the Birth of Joseph Priestley, London, Wellcome Trust/Science Museum, 1987; John R. Clark, *Joseph Priestley, a Comet in the System*, San Diego, Ca., Torch Publications, 1990; Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley. A Study of his Life and Work from 1733 to 1773*, University Park, Pa, Pennsylvania University Press, 1997; *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian*, eds. Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> See Jack Fruchtman, jr, *The apocalyptic politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley. A Study in Late Eighteenth Century English Republican Millennialism*, Philadelphia, American Philosophical Society, 1983. On

Like many other late eighteenth-century radicals, Price rejoiced at the news coming from France in 1789. It was evident, in his eyes, that insurgency of the French against absolute monarchy had marked the birth of a representative government that would soon have wiped away every oligarchic privilege, thus making room for political liberties and equality.

The *Discourse* conveyed his enthusiasm towards that new page of history, and the hope that England might soon follow in the same track. In particular, Price maintained that there were many points in common between the rise of the French Revolution and the English Glorious Revolution. With the difference that the latter had stopped halfway through, since the principles which had been proclaimed in its course hadn't been fully accomplished: the result of that contradiction being an oligarchical regime, in which the fundamental rights of men were not fully enforced. "I would [...] direct you to remember," he said to his listeners on that occasion, "that though the Revolution was a great work, it was by no means a perfect work; and that all was not then gained which was necessary to put the kingdom in the secure and complete possession of the blessings of liberty."<sup>13</sup> And immediately afterwards he specified that after the constitutional settlement reached in 1688, religious tolerance, and above all political representation, were still subject to too many restrictions.<sup>14</sup>

Price's arguments were based on a rather simplistic political doctrine, in which he combined a concept of individual dignity and rights inspired by Christian principles and an ideal of civil society governed by merit and virtue, in which there could be no place for any sort of hereditary and landed aristocracy.<sup>15</sup>

He mentioned, as his sources, the names of Milton, Locke, Sidney and Montesquieu. In his eyes all those thinkers shared the fact that they had "disseminate[d] among [their] fellow-creatures just notions of themselves, of their rights, of religion, and the nature and end of civil government".<sup>16</sup>

Price's insistence on "virtue" as a fundamental feature of a free people (insofar as it leads to both enthusiasm and knowledge) is a clear sign that in the radical circles of that time an echo of seventeenth-century republicanism was still alive. From a historical perspective, however, that echo appears to be more of a cultural and moral-political suggestion than a real scheme of thought. Indeed, Price seems to consider republicanism as a sort of proto-ideology

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the French influence on British republicanism in the early Nineties, Rachel Hammersley, *French Revolutionaries and English Republicans. The Cordeliers Club, 1790-1794*, Rochester, N.Y., Boydell Press, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, p. 17-19.

<sup>15</sup> On Price's political and moral philosophy, beyond the texts previously mentioned, see William D. Hudson, *Reason and right: a critical examination of Richard Price's moral philosophy*, London, Macmillan, 1970.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, pp. 9-10.

of civil and political rights, variously mixed with similarly simplified Lockean references (or, more properly, Lockean *topoi*). Above all, the idea that kings derived their authority from the choice of the people, and were entitled to hold it insofar as they assured and respected their subjects' rights.<sup>17</sup>

### **Burke's reaction to the radicals' revolutionary endorsement: historicist whiggism versus republican “sentiment”.**

In any case, the key role played by Price's *Discourse* within the debate on the French Revolution – and in particular on the relations between the French Revolution, English constitutional history, and the two English Revolutions of the seventeenth century – was mainly due, at the time, not to the originality or to the force of Price's arguments, but rather to the immediate, vehement reply delivered, and then written, by a notable Whig politician, Edmund Burke. A reply that was first exposed in a speech pronounced at the House of Commons on February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1790; and later, in a more articulate (though by no means methodical) form, in the pamphlet/essay titled *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (which was published in October 1790).<sup>18</sup>

Burke, as we know, focused his attack on Price because he perceived in the latter's arguments (and, more at large, in the general consent raised by what was happening in France among British radical and even moderate Whigs) the clear sign of a dangerous trend, that, in his opinion, threatened to dissolve the balance of British institutions and society. Burke's reaction to the *Discourse* consisted essentially of two points.

1) He refused to accept Price's assumption that, as a consequence of the Glorious Revolution, the English people had achieved the right to choose their own kings, as if the

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, p. 13: “Civil governors are properly the servants of the public; and a King is no more than the first servant of the public, created by it, maintained by it, and responsible to it [...]; and the term MAJESTY, which is usual to apply to him, is by no means his *own* majesty, but the MAJESTY OF THE PEOPLE”.

<sup>18</sup> On the context and the genesis of B.'s *Reflections* see at least Craig B. Macpherson, *Burke*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1980, pp. 38-39, 42-50; Frederick P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1985; Yves Chiron, *Edmund Burke et la Révolution Française*, Paris, Téqui, 1987; Gregory Claeys, *Introduction*, in *Political Writings of the 1790's*, cit., vol. I: *Radicalism and Reform: Responses to Burke, 1790-1791*, pp. XX-XXLII; Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke. The Enlightenment and Revolution*, with a Foreword of Russell Kirk, New Brunswick, N.J., Transaction Publishers, 1991; *Burke and the French Revolution. Bicentenary Essays*, ed. Steven Blakemore, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1992; Iain Hampsher-Monk, “Reflections on the Revolution in France”, and “Burke's counterrevolutionary writings”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Edmund Burke*, eds. David Dwan and Christopher J. Insole, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 195-208 and pp. 209-220.

parliamentary monarchy could be seen as a *de facto* republic. He insisted, on the contrary, in asserting that the 1688/1689 process should be seen as being in line with the whole country's constitutional history, i.e. as the gradual establishment of civil and political rights in a common law system of limited and balanced powers.<sup>19</sup>

2) Consequently, he denied the claim (shared by English radicals with French revolutionaries) that there could be such a thing as natural rights of men. The only effective subjective rights were, in his eyes, those confirmed by history, precedent, and custom.<sup>20</sup>

Both assertions implied that Burke deemed any form of “Old Whig”, or “Honest Whig” argument, inspired by a “Commonwealth” heritage, to be incompatible with the reality and principles of the English constitution. Political and social solidity due to hereditary authority was, in his eyes, a key element in the development of the “constitution of liberty”.<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, a society deprived of hereditary monarchs and landed aristocracy, ruled by mere virtue and merit (like the one the British “commonwealthmen” hoped the French Revolution would soon establish), could only lead – he maintained — to the affirmation of a more despotic power.<sup>22</sup>

Burke's historicist view of freedom was, then, totally antithetic to the “classical” English republican tradition. The latter had been, indeed, characterized from its origins by opposition to the “Gothic balance” (the feudal common law tradition which had been elevated to a canon by Edward Coke and John Selden) in favour of a representative system based on elective chambers, aimed to let a “natural” aristocracy take the reins of government.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> On Burke's interpretation of the Glorious Revolution see Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke in Twelve Volumes*, London, John C. Nimmo, 1887 (reprint Hildesheim-New York, Georg Olms Verlag, 1975), vol. III, pp. 248-276. On this topic, N. Matteucci, *Organizzazione del Potere e Libertà. Storia del costituzionalismo moderno*, Torino, UTET, 1976, pp. 67-68, 121-123; *Costituzionalismo*, in *Lo Stato Moderno. Lessico e percorsi*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993, pp. 127-168; G. Claeys, *Introduction*, in *Political Writings of the 1790's*, vol. I, pp. XXX-LIII.

<sup>20</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Works*, pp. 307 -314. On Burke's refusal of natural rights theory and his defence of custom and traditions, see John G. A. Pocock, “Burke and the Ancient Constitution: a Problem in the History of Ideas” (1960), in *Politics, Language, and Time*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 202-232; Luigi Compagna, *La Genesi delle Istituzioni Politiche in Burke*, Roma, L.U.I.S.S., 1992; Mauro Lenci, *Individualismo Democratico e Liberalismo Aristocratico nel Pensiero Politico di Edmund Burke*, Pisa-Roma, Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, 1999, pp. 89-114, 135-149; Antonio Torre, “Edmund Burke nell' Inghilterra di Giorgio III: Politica, Costituzione e Forma di Governo”, in *Giornale di Storia Costituzionale*, 2015, n. 29, pp. 13-45; Maurizio Griffo, “Edmund Burke: Costituzione Mista e Tradizione Storica nell' *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*”, pp. 61-70.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, London, Routledge and Kegan, 1990 (1a ed. 1960). On Hayek's appraisal on Burke., see in particular pp. 54-84.

<sup>22</sup> Edmund Burke, *The Works*, pp. 521-534. On the connection between Revolution and despotism in B. Martin Loughlin, “Burke on Law, Revolution, and Constitution”, in *Giornale di Storia Costituzionale*, 2015, n. 29, pp. 49-60.

<sup>23</sup> On the notion of “Gothic Balance” in Harrington, see James Harrington, *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, in *The Political Works of James Harrington*, pp. 188-207; *The Prerogative of Popular Government*, pp. 397-412. A historical survey on this subject in Pocock, *Historical introduction*, pp. 47-76; Eugenio Capozzi, *Costituzione*,

Not surprisingly, in Burke's works Milton is often mentioned, but only as a poet, and Harrington only once, to set him aside with Plato and Thomas More as “fertile framers of imaginary Commonwealths”.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that Burke opted for a historicist, consuetudinary, evolutionist explanation of English constitutionalism was not only the consequence of the shock produced in him by the English radicals' endorsement of the French Revolution; nor did it appear for the first time in the *Reflections*. He had, indeed, reclaimed ideas that took shape long before his age.

A historicist foundation of English liberties had already been, in various ways, the backbone of the “Whig interpretation of history”<sup>25</sup> during the Augustan age, and in the last decades of the Century it well served the scope of both confirming a view of the English constitution as a system of limited and balanced powers (for example, against the attempts to concentrate the executive power in the Crown, renewed by George III) and admitting the chance of further evolutions of the balance towards the extension of civil and/or political rights.<sup>26</sup>

Burke had adopted it already (though without the emphasis he would later have put on it in the Revolution controversy) as the “official” Whig doctrine, which — he thought — had guaranteed to Britain both stability and change, landed gentry and commercial society, persistence of traditional institutions and individual freedom.<sup>27</sup>

Not surprisingly, when Burke had taken sides in favour of full freedom of expression in the Wilkes' case, and then later had sympathized with the *doléances* coming from the North American colonies, he espoused neither the republican appeals to a “virtuous” body of citizenship, nor the Lockean conception of innate and inalienable rights of nature, but rather the historical continuity of the English constitution.

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*Elezione, Aristocrazia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-129. On Sidney and Milton, see Scott, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-42; Walter S.H. Lim, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-68.

<sup>24</sup> Edmund Burke, *Speech on moving Resolutions for Conciliation with America*, March 22, 1775, in *The Works*, vol. II, p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> I am quoting, of course, the well-known definition framed by Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig interpretation of history*, London, G. Bell and Sons, 1931. The connection between the Whig historical tradition and the paradigm of the “Ancient Constitution” was explored by John G. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law. A Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1957. From the more specific point of view of political thought, see Glenn Burgess, *The Politics of the Ancient Constitution. An introduction to English Political Thought, 1603-1642*, London, Macmillan, 1992.

<sup>26</sup> A view reaffirmed and strengthened, in historiography, by classical works like those by Frederic W. Maitland, *The Constitutional History of England*, Cambridge, University Press, 1908, and Charles H. McIlwain, *Constitutionalism: Ancient and Modern*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1940.

<sup>27</sup> Craig B. Macpherson, *Burke*, in particular pp. 51-70. On a less ideological basis, the co-presence of traditionalist conservatism and socio-economic modernism in Burke's Whiggism is recognized by Pocock, *The Varieties of Whiggism*, and more recently by Claudio Martinelli, *Diritto e Diritti oltre la Manica. Perché gli Inglesi amano tanto il loro sistema giuridico*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014, pp. 38-63; and Torre, *op. cit.*

So, the “Tory” turn that Burke impressed upon his constitutional views from the *Reflections* onwards is not to be seen as a radical departure from the main course of consuetudinary (and, in the radicals' eyes, “oligarchical”) Whig doctrine, but only as a new version (a “defensive” one) of it in a new context, in which Burke outlined two main, possibly fatal enemies to the British liberties:

- 1) financial moneyed interest attempting to eradicate the landed foundation of commercial society;
- 2) intellectuals aiming to encourage a sovereign power overruling every check and balance, to build their fortunes on its service.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, Burke saw a possibly fatal menace in the sympathy showed by British Whigs (including Fox) for the French Revolution: an alliance between the extreme individualism promoted by the *déracinés* and unruly financial business, and the reality (whose perils he swiftly foresaw) of then-newborn ideologies and ideologues.<sup>29</sup>

In this sense – i.e. as inspirer of all the following varieties of anti-ideological (more than reactionary) political thought in European and Western culture – Burke can rightly be considered as the forefather of natural law anti-totalitarian twentieth-century conservatism, in much the same way as thinkers like Russell Kirk and Stanlis have.<sup>30</sup> His Whig background does not strip his conservative, counter-revolutionary post-1789 evolution of meaning, but on the contrary stands at its very root, nurtures it, and gives it meaning.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that Burke, however, did not underestimate the motivating power of republican suggestions exercised on the Whig cultural *milieu* is amply demonstrated the following year, in the self-apologetical *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791) — in which the distance between himself and his former party-fellows on that subject is blatantly evident. He was at this point very careful to stress the difference between republicanism as a form of government

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<sup>28</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 347-350.

<sup>29</sup> For further consideration on this point, see Michael Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the critique of political radicalism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980; Marco Respinti, *Prefazione* to Edmund Burke, *Riflessioni sulla Rivoluzione in Francia*, Roma, Ideazione, 1998, pp. 7-19; Eugenio Capozzi, “Burke, Voegelin e la Lunga Epoca delle Religioni Politiche”, in *Rivista di Politica*, 2016, n. 3, pp. 101-113.

<sup>30</sup> The main sources for the interpretation of Burke as the founder of modern conservatism are Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind. From Burke to Eliot*, Washington D.C., Regnery Publishing, 2001 (ed. orig. 1953), pp. 12-70; Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1958; Id., *Edmund Burke in the Twentieth Century*, in Id., *The Relevance of Edmund Burke*, New York, Kennedy and Sons, 1964, pp. 59-83; Respinti, *op. cit.*; Riccardo Pedrizzì, *Edmund Burke. Le radici del conservatorismo*, Roma, Editoriale Pantheon, 2000; Jesse Norman, *Edmund Burke. The First Conservative*, London, Harper Collins, 2013; *Edmund Burke. The Visionary who invented Modern Politics*, Collins, London 2014.

<sup>31</sup> On this point I don't agree with Martinelli, when he deems “datate e riduttive” those conservative interpretations of Burke's thought (p. 45, n.). Along the same lines, see also Claudio Martinelli, “L'eredità di Edmund Burke nel pensiero liberale e conservatore del Novecento”, in *Giornale di Storia Costituzionale* (2015), n. 29, pp. 187-205.



and what he deemed far more dangerous; i.e. a radically conflictual interpretation of English constitutional history that denied the step-by-step foundation of the limited and balanced government in the name of a potentially limitless new form of power:

Mr. Burke was represented by Mr. Fox as arguing in a manner which implied that the British Constitution could not be defended, by abusing all the republic ancient and modern. He said nothing to give the least ground for such a censure. He has never professed himself a friend or an enemy to republics or to monarchies in the abstract. He thought that the circumstances and habits of every country, which is always perilous and productive of the greatest calamities to force, are to decide upon the form of its government. There is nothing in his nature, his temper or his faculties which should make him an enemy of any republic, modern or ancient. Far from it. He has studied the form and spirit of republics very early in life; he has studied them with great attention, and with a mind undisturbed by affection or prejudice. [...] But the result in his mind from that investigation has been and is, that neither England nor France, without infinite detriment to them, as well in the event as in the experiment, could be brought into a republican form; but that everything republican which can be introduced with safety into either of them must be built upon a monarchy – built upon a real, not a nominal monarchy, *as its essential basis*; that all such institutions, whether aristocratic or democratic, must originate from their crown, and in all their proceedings must refer to it; that by the energy of that mainspring alone those republican parts must be set in action, and from thence must derive their whole legal effect, (as amongst us they actually do,) or the whole will fall into confusion.<sup>32</sup>

Does this mean that we cannot find any sign of the “republican” paradigm in Burke's constitutional and political thought?

It is not entirely so. Like the “Country” ideologue Bolingbroke before him, and not unlike the utilitarian Tory Josiah Tucker, Burke was afraid that the advent of a wholly individualist society might break the “virtuous” balance the English constitution had kept alive for centuries thanks to the persistence of the hereditary principle and of landed interest.<sup>33</sup> But such a deep affection for a world of independent country gentlemen, and his worries

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<sup>32</sup> Edmund Burke, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in *The Works*, vol. IV, pp. 109-110.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. John A. Pocock, “The Varieties of Whiggism”, *op. cit.*, pp. 279-287.

regarding the potentially corruptive effect revolutionary egalitarianism might have on it, were just pale echoes of Old-Whig views, deeply rooted in the period between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. For the British society of his day, Burke deemed necessary both historical continuity and commercial dynamism. Besides, the republican “fossils” still recognizable in his cultural genes had very little in common with the positions of the new, urban radical Whigs, whose ideas were increasingly influenced by Newtonian, Lockean and utilitarian paradigms.

### **Republican *ethos* and natural rights rationalism in Mary Wollstonecraft and Catharine Macaulay**

On the other hand, however, a considerable echo of the old republican model can be found in the first two notable authors who replied to Burke's *Reflections*: Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine Macaulay.

Wollstonecraft<sup>34</sup> came into contact with the “Commonwealth” heritage very early in her life, when she started to attend the non-conformist church of Newington Green, becoming acquainted with Richard Price, who became her spiritual guide.<sup>35</sup> It was from him that she acquired a very basic interpretation of the English republican tradition, whose substance could be summarized in two points:

- 1) a strict relation between political freedom and moral choice (virtue);
- 2) the idea that the people had a fundamental right to choose their own rulers, and to rebel against an oppressive power.

Therefore, not surprisingly, Wollstonecraft was one of the first radical intellectuals to be provoked to reply to Burke's *Reflections*. Just like Price, she thought it obvious that the French Revolution was a step towards progress and freedom. To deny it was tantamount *tout court*, in her eyes, to defending the arbitrary power of monarchs, in France as in Britain.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> In the very large bibliography on Wollstonecraft's life, the most representative works from a properly historical point of view are Margaret George, *One Woman's "Situation". A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1970; Eleanor Flexner, *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Biography*, New York, Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972; Janet M. Todd, *Mary Wollstonecraft. A Revolutionary Life*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000; Wendy Gunther-Canada, *Rebel writer. Mary Wollstonecraft and Enlightenment politics*, DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 2001; Roberta A. Modugno, *Mary Wollstonecraft. Diritti umani e Rivoluzione francese*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 2002.

<sup>35</sup> Wendy Gunther-Canada, *op. cit.*, p. 75; Roberta A. Modugno, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>36</sup> On the influence of the French Revolution on that generation of English intellectuals, with particular regard to Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine, see Steven Blakemore, *Crisis in representation. Thomas Paine, Mary*

In her reply, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* – whose first edition was published anonymously in November 1790 – Wollstonecraft endorses a notion of rights centered on the sheer juxtaposition between privilege and equality, oppression and freedom:

There are rights which men inherit at their birth, as rational creatures, who were raised above the brute creation by their improvable faculties; and that, in receiving these, not from their forefathers but, from God, prescription can never undermine natural rights.<sup>37</sup>

An ideological framework in which the Pricean moral doctrine of freedom as the ability of each man to distinguish right from evil, founded on the perfectibility of human nature, is even more blended with Lockean and Rousseauian suggestions, which had by then become commonplace among radical intellectuals. And in which civil, political and even social rights are often not differentiated, but considered as a whole:

Liberty [...] is a fair idea that has never yet received a form in the various governments that have been established on our beautiful globe; the demon of property has ever been at hand to encroach on the sacred rights of men, and to fence round with awful pomp laws that war with justice.<sup>38</sup>

Upon this basis, Wollstonecraft's main argument against Burke and in favour of the French revolutionaries was of a moral nature: a merely traditionalist grounding for rights was nothing more – she asserted - than a legitimation of privileges and hierarchies whose only foundations are ignorance and prejudice.<sup>39</sup>

The main trace of the English republican tradition in this scheme of thought can be found in the refusal of any political regime based on hereditary hierarchy and on a national

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Wollstonecraft, Helen Maria Williams, and the rewriting of the French Revolution, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, London-Cranbury, NJ, Associated University Presses, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men, in a Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, in *Political Writings of the 1790's*, edited by Gregory Claeys, vol. I: *Radicalism and Reform. Responses to Burke 1790-1791*, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Wollstonecraft accused Burke of maintaining "that we are to reverence the rust of antiquity, and term the unnatural customs, which ignorance and mistaken self-interest have consolidated, the sage fruit of experience" (*ibid.*, p. 14). Regarding her arguments against Burke's defence of tradition and custom, and in favour of natural rights, see Janet Todd, *Introduction to A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, edited by Janet Todd, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1989, pp. 8-9.

Church, in the name of a model of society in which the role and relevance of each person – namely, of each active and independent citizen – is decreed by his/her moral virtue.

Wollstonecraft's *lato sensu* republican contempt for conditions of time-honoured privilege (she never professed, in the book, an overt vindication of republicanism as a form of government as such) drove her to oppose, without hesitation, three traditional elements of British and European societies: slavery (she blames Burke for also considering it an aspect of English constitutional tradition, even though it went against the principles of Christianity); the submission of women (which two years later, as we are all aware, she was to deal with specifically in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*), condemned as both a violation of human rights and a source of moral corruption for women themselves; and even property, which Wollstonecraft didn't condemn in itself, but whose legitimation as such she rejected believing that an attenuation of it in favour of small and medium estates could reveal itself useful to the welfare of the whole society.<sup>40</sup>

A more specific reference to republican doctrines such as Harrington's or Sidney's would be found later, in the already mentioned successful ur-feminist pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), in the pages where Wollstonecraft deprecated standing armies (a typical polemical target for “classical” republicans, who had always preferred citizen militias) equating them, as a source of corruption, to the subordinate condition of women: the main cause, in her view, of the frivolous and idle character of women themselves:

Standing armies can never consist of resolute, robust men; they might well be disciplined machines, but they will seldom contain men under the influence of strong passions, or with very vigorous faculties. And as for any depth of understanding, I will venture to affirm, that it is as rarely to be found in the army as amongst women; and the cause, I maintain, is the same. It may be further observed, that officers are also particularly attentive to their persons, fond of dancing, crowded rooms, adventures, and ridicule. Like the *fair* sex, the business of their lives is gallantry. — They were taught to please, and they only live to please.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> On this point, cf. Roberta A. Modugno, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, pp. 88-112. A reconstruction and an historical assessment of the Burke-Wollstonecraft polemic can be found in Daniel I. O'Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate. Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy*, University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in Id., *A Vindication of the Rights of Men. A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 89. On the republican motives in the second *Vindication*, see Roberta A. Modugno, *Mary Wollstonecraft*, pp. 112-120.

As for Catharine Macaulay, she was the much renowned author of *A History of England from the Accession of James I. to that of the Brunswick Line*, and as a long-time supporter of Radical political groups like Real Whigs and Wilkites - the most predictable advocate of a Radical Whig interpretation of English constitutional history, which was the natural ideological recipient for some *tópoi* of the republican tradition.<sup>42</sup>

In the *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke on the Revolution in France* (published immediately after Wollstonecraft's work, in December 1790) she vehemently challenged Burke's views, mostly by restating her thesis (evidently well-known to Price and to his circle) that the Glorious Revolution had affirmed the right of the people to elect and also depose their kings; and that such a “republican” turn in English history had been subsequently betrayed by the transformation of the Parliamentary monarchy into a corrupt Whig oligarchy.<sup>43</sup>

More than in Price and in Wollstonecraft, though, in Macaulay's *pamphlet* the refusal of an “ancient constitution” underlying English liberties found its primary source in a natural rights-based idea of popular sovereignty, irrespective of historical circumstances and applicable to all national contexts. Macaulay's “republicanism” has in fact very little to do with the complex theories regarding constitutional balance exposed, more than a century earlier, by authors like Harrington, Neville or Sidney. She just echoes a widespread republican “sentiment”, advocating it as a moral support to a natural law, an individualistic-democratic theory, claiming the “native right in the social body to choose its own government”.<sup>44</sup>

### **Thomas Paine: commonplace republicanism and naturalist rationalism.**

The recurring *penchant* to take elements of the English republican heritage into the end-of-the-century debate - as a sort of identification jargon for radicals rather than as proper

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<sup>42</sup> On Macaulay's life and works, see mainly Bridget Hill, *The Republican Virago. The Life and Times of Catharine Macaulay, Historian*, Oxford, Clarendon Press and New York, Oxford University Press, 1992; Vera Nünning, *A Revolution in Sentiments, Manners, and Moral Opinions. Catharine Macaulay und die Politische Kultur des Englischen Radikalismus, 1760-1790*, Heidelberg, C. Winter, 1998.

<sup>43</sup> Catharine Macaulay, *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, on the Revolution in France, in a Letter to the Right Hon. The Earl of Stanhope*, in *Political Writings of the 1790's*, edited by Gregory Claeys, *Political Writings of the 1790's*, vol. I: *Radicalism and Reform. Responses to Burke 1790-1791*, pp. 121-153, and in particular pp. 131-138.

<sup>44</sup> Gregory Claeys, *Political Writings of the 1790's*, p. 135.

political issues or theories —, that we have seen at work in Price, as in Wollstonecraft or in Macaulay, reduced itself to the mere, quasi-axiomatic claim of a republican government in the *pamphlet* that was to gain most success among the critical responses to Burke's *Reflections: the Rights of Man* by Thomas Paine, whose first part was published in March 1791.

Paine's peculiar political and intellectual biography places him rather apart from the English radical Whig *milieu* of his time. This is certainly not the proper place for an in-depth examination of the political theories exposed in his *Common Sense* (1776) and then in *Rights of Man* itself.<sup>45</sup> With reference to the specific topic we are now discussing, however, it must be noted that Paine's interpretation of the French Revolution — in contrast to the views expounded by Burke in the *Reflections* — as logically connected to the advent of a rational doctrine of natural rights (of which the American Revolution and the birth of the United States had been, in his eyes, the first step) was not, in fact, in any way derived from the English “Commonwealth” tradition, with its insistence on civic virtue, natural aristocracy and balance of powers.<sup>46</sup> The “Transatlantic” radical theorist considered instead the republican form of state, the universal rights of man and the democratic/representative form of government to be different but related aspects of the same natural order.<sup>47</sup>

An order to which human societies, in his eyes, should simply adjust, with no particular consideration for the peculiar forms in which the balance between powers and rights had taken form in their own history.

## Conclusions

To sum up, we can say that the writings mentioned here (the most relevant, but certainly not the only notable ones in the dense debate of those years) illustrate some common significant elements with reference to the republican political culture.

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<sup>45</sup> In the very large literature on Paine, the most complete, useful and up-to-date works on his political thought are Gregory Claeys, *Thomas Paine. Social and Political Thought*, Boston, Unwin Hyman, 1989; Jack Fruchtman jr., *Thomas Paine Apostle of Freedom*, New York, Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994; Bernard Vincent, *The Transatlantic Republican. Thomas Paine and the Age of Revolutions*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2005; Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Paine's Rights of Man. A Biography*, London, Atlantic Books, 2006; Maurizio Griffo, *Thomas Paine. La Vita e il Pensiero Politico*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2011.

<sup>46</sup> On the Burke-Paine debate see *The Burke-Paine Controversy. Texts and Criticism*, edited by Ray B. Browne, New York, Hartcourt, Brace & World, 1963; *Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy*, edited by Marilyn Butler, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1984.

<sup>47</sup> This peculiarity of Paine's thought on rights and on representative government is well emphasized by Maurizio Griffo, *Thomas Paine*, pp. 210-297.

Above all, they seem to indicate that the republican “canon”, sedimented between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, initially as a nostalgic throwback to Whig “integrity”, then as a symbolic reference to a possible front in (radical or conservative) opposition to “Whig oligarchy”, had become little more than a suggestion, or a series of rhetorical slogans, in the political disputes of the last decades of the eighteenth century – and, even more evidently, in the controversies surrounding the French Revolution.

The radical Whigs of the time used republican *topoi* mainly as a code of identification, or as a means to trace similarities between the English revolutionary/radical past and the French revolutionary present, in a sort of cross-legitimation (to legitimate the French revolutionaries connecting them to a noble English tradition, or in reverse to legitimate English radical campaigns connecting them to what appeared then as a major historical step towards progress and political liberties).

From a substantial point of view, though, what was left of republican doctrines and “Commonwealthmen” paradigms in the post-1789 controversy was mainly a “sentiment”, that the spokespersons of the radical “counterculture” used to wave in front of their adversaries, variously blending it with (or, we could say, “spicing it up” with) ideological elements of different origin, like Lockean or Rousseauian natural right theory, Newtonian rationalism and Scottish Enlightenment social theory.

Subsequently, through Pitt the Younger's era, the counter-revolutionary wars and the Napoleonic age, the old English republican heritage was to undergo further transformations. In the nineteenth century its echo remained audible in such diverse political trends as Tory/romantic anti-industrialism, Benthamite radical utilitarianism, or socialist communitarianism.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> On that further evolution see John W. Burrow, *Whigs and Liberals. Continuity and Change in English Political Thought*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988; Pocock, *The Varieties of Whiggism*, *op. cit.*