

**ASSIGNMENT 2: Using a Primary Source**

Written records provide us with useful information about historical events, everyday life, and the beliefs of different peoples. Historians use two types of written records: primary sources and secondary sources.

**Primary sources** are first-hand accounts based on the experiences of people who were involved in an event. Eyewitness accounts, government documents, treaties, and letters are primary sources. **Secondary sources** are second-hand accounts based on the writings or evidence of others. Textbooks and encyclopaedias are secondary sources.

Some primary sources are written for a particular reason so the writer might not tell a completely objective story. Instead, they might have a particular motive or be attempting to influence public opinion for whatever reason. Therefore, sources have to be judged carefully.

During the feudal period traditional authority remained for the most part unchallenged (with the exception of the odd person like Martin Luther and Galileo). However, the French Revolution unleashed a wave of dissent that encouraged a relatively new political philosophy called liberalism to come to expression. In the decades following the removal of Napoleon Bonaparte from power, Europe's liberals and conservatives fought for or against reform. Two philosophers—Edmund Burke (a conservative) and Thomas Paine (a liberal)—fought for the hearts and minds of people through their writing. Ultimately, change was made possible or the preservation of tradition was justified on the basis of what people thought and believed. For this reason both philosophers had a significant influence on political thought and institutions as they existed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In this assignment, you will read excerpts from both thinkers in an effort to come to a better appreciation for the intellectual basis for liberalism and conservatism. Please take some time to acquaint yourself with the brief biographies of Burke and Paine found below.

**Edmund Burke** (1729-1797 CE) was an Irish born statesman who was a noted author, public speaker and political theorist. He was a member of the Whig Party (conservatives) serving as a Member of Parliament in England for over three decades. He gained notoriety for his expressly conservative views where he argued in favor of maintaining traditional authority and religious beliefs to keep English society strong and stable. Although he was a vocal opponent of the French Revolution, he supported the Americans during their revolution (break) from England. He supported revolution in America for a couple reasons: firstly, America was separated from England by a vast ocean which he believed would protect the Old World from being infected by the New World's ideas of individualism and liberty; also, he thought the American experiment with direct representative democracy would provide some valuable lessons on what was and what was not possible when it came to a republican style government; however, he completely opposed the revolution in France claiming it threatened "good society" by empowering the mob instead of traditional elites who alone understood how to rule. For this reason Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). In this book he discussed the wisdom of continuity, rule of law and the required respect for traditional authority (monarchy).

**Thomas Paine** (1737-1809 CE), was an English political activist, political theorist and revolutionary writer. As a thinker he was a tireless advocate for freedom, liberty and a relatively new concept known as "human rights." Edmund Burke, for his part, poked fun at the concept of a right: he argued any authority human beings possessed came directly from God. He further argued neither revolutionaries nor liberal philosophers could postulate human rights into existence under their own authority. Paine was perhaps Burke's greatest opponent, in that, as a liberal writer he was preoccupied with the virtues of revolution and change to deal with injustice. Paine moved to the United States in 1774 and became the co-editor of a magazine called the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. America at the time was struggling with Great Britain over matters like representative government,

taxation and liberty. Paine began publishing articles immediately having an influence over countless Americans convincing them of the wisdom of revolution and removing the yoke of British oppression. Some historians consider Paine one of the Founding Fathers of the American Revolution because it was his writing, more than any others (Thomas Jefferson included), that inspired people to push for independence from England. In 1791 Thomas Paine wrote *The Rights of Man* in order to defend the aims of the French Revolution (and in part as a response to Burke's book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*). Paine's book was banned and he was charged with treason. He avoided imprisonment by escaping to France where he was given the title of "honorary citizen" by the National Assembly.

**Source #1: Excerpt from Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790)**

The English Revolution<sup>1</sup> resulted in the people acquiring three fundamental rights: the right to choose our own governors, to hold government accountable for their misconduct, and to create and frame a government for Britain. History, even Providence<sup>2</sup>, was on the side of the English and the establishment of the constitutional monarchy now in place. In the history of government, one cannot think of a better product of a revolution than the Crown being limited by a Parliament.

When the French rose up in their revolution of 1789 there was some hope they, too, might establish something akin to the English model; however, the French government came under the influence of inferior men who have taken the movement for change in a republican direction. Believing themselves almost gods the French think that with a few pen strokes, gestures, and speeches, etc. that a monarchy established by God Himself could be undone. But the French, being an entirely different creature, take on the mantle of the Divine and create out of nothing *human* rights. What is such a right? It is an idea and ideas are not sufficient in themselves to guide a people. You need tradition. The notion every person is almost a nation unto themselves is a fiction reflection on the faction of radical revolutionaries.

The people of England will have no share in this. In fact, they utterly disclaim and resist it; they are bound by the wise and real laws of Britain (established at the time of the Revolution). The security England's *Bill of Rights* grants its people is concrete; it is not a hollow promise like a human right but reflects God's own providence and favor of the English people. Fictions like individualism and human rights and a people as sovereign are pure dreams, even destructive nightmares, begging no serious consideration.

The English declaration of rights in 1688 was created by great lawyers and statesmen. The French *Constitution* of 1790 by comparison was created by a bunch of inexperienced enthusiasts. All of England agreed and acted to remove the tyrant, James I. We, all of us, moved together to establish William III and the Queen Mary as constitutional monarchs outlining how they should be eventually succeeded. England's Parliament, reflecting the wishes of the entire population, agreed to collectively limit the power of the Crown; and so we have established perhaps the most enlightened balance of powers ever to exist in government since the days of the Roman Republic. Nonetheless, there is a continuous line of succession that this king, then his son, and his son after that should inherit the real and symbolic authority to govern.

By contrast in France everyone—even a cook or stable boy—might aspire to be a leader of the country. In this newly minted French system everyone and anyone, it would appear, has access to power which if history be our guide cannot but come to ill for the nation. The French claim that they and they alone have established a government in which the people, not superstitious appeals to tradition, decide who is to be

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<sup>1</sup> The English Revolution that Burke is alluding to here is also known as the Glorious Revolution of 1688. This is when an absolute English monarch named James II was replaced by William III as a constitutional monarch.

<sup>2</sup> Providence is a synonym for God. The word providence literally means the "protective care of God."

their leader is false. The English established the best system by keeping the Crown while meaningfully limiting the king's power through a constitution. The English people determined this be so and so it is; and we have lived in amiability and peace and stability since 1689 until this year of 1790. The sheer fact that our government is safeguarded through a logical and traditional succession of one king to the next gives the English system a degree of stability that cannot be replicated in a republic such as the French experiment.

It is true, that, in 1688 the English people used a combination of force and reason to determine what type of government they wished to live under; however, at no time did men take it onto themselves that they were gods themselves capable of creating out of nothing a style and type of government untried. Instead, we improved (with the guidance of God) a more perfect monarchy while maintaining tradition and those things which are best about ourselves. The people of England accept this law, the *Bill of Rights*, and the permanency of the Crown as permanent; it is an act binding us and our heirs, and our posterity, to them, their heirs, and their posterity.<sup>3</sup> The English following Providence's will shall remain, therefore, bound to the Crown in a hereditary allegiance unchanged.

**Source #2: Excerpt from Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* (1791)**

Among the incivilities by which nations or individuals provoke and irritate each other, Mr. Burke's pamphlet on the French Revolution is an extraordinary instance. Neither the People of France, nor the National Assembly, were troubling themselves about the affairs of England, or the English Parliament; and that Mr. Burke should commence an unprovoked attack upon them, both in Parliament and in public, is a conduct that cannot be pardoned on the score of manners, nor justified on that of policy.

There is scarcely an epithet of abuse to be found in the English language, with which Mr. Burke has not loaded the French Nation and the National Assembly. Everything which rancor, prejudice, ignorance or knowledge could suggest, is poured forth in the copious fury of near four hundred pages. In the strain and on the plan Mr. Burke was writing, he might have written on to as many thousands. When the tongue or the pen is let loose in a frenzy of passion, it is the man, and not the subject, that becomes exhausted.

Hitherto Mr. Burke has been mistaken and disappointed in the opinions he had formed of the affairs of France; but such is the ingenuity of his hope, or the malignancy of his despair, that it furnishes him with new pretenses to go on. There was a time when it was impossible to make Mr. Burke believe there would be any Revolution in France. His opinion then was, that the French had neither spirit to undertake it nor fortitude to support it; and now that there is one, he seeks an escape by condemning it.

Not sufficiently content with abusing the National Assembly, a great part of his work is taken up with abusing Dr. Price<sup>4</sup> (one of the best-hearted men that lives) and the two societies in England known by the name of the Revolution Society and the Society for Constitutional Information.

Dr. Price had preached a sermon on the 4th of November, 1789, being the anniversary of what is called in England the Revolution, which took place in 1688. Mr. Burke, speaking of this sermon, says: "The political

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<sup>3</sup> This specific line from Burke is a little cryptic and hard to interpret for some. Basically what Burke is arguing for here is that an agreement was made between William III and the people of England in 1688-1689. This agreement, really an oral contract of sorts, Burke claims is one that binds the people of England to the Crown *forever*. This is what he means by the word *posterity* which literally means "all future generations of people". Ultimately, he was arguing that the English Crown as it existed in 1689 (and in 1790 when Burke wrote *Reflections*) could not lawfully be altered in any way; it was in a sense a perfected institution and the people had an obligation to accept and work within it forever.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Richard Price was a Welsh-born moral philosopher, Unitarian preacher and mathematician. He was also a political pamphleteer active in radical, republican, and liberal causes such as the American Revolution.

Divine proceeds dogmatically to assert, that by the principles of the Revolution, the people of England have acquired three fundamental rights:

1. To choose our own governors.
2. To cashier them for misconduct.
3. To frame a government for ourselves."

Dr. Price does not say that the right to do these things exists in this or in that person, or in this or in that description of persons, but that it exists in the whole; that it is a right resident in the nation. Mr. Burke, on the contrary, denies that such a right exists in the nation, either in whole or in part, or that it exists anywhere; and, what is still more strange and marvelous, he says: "that the people of England utterly disclaim such a right, and that they will resist the practical assertion of it with their lives and fortunes." That men should take up arms and spend their lives and fortunes, not to maintain their rights, but to maintain they have not rights, is an entirely new species of discovery, and suited to the paradoxical genius of Mr. Burke.

The method which Mr. Burke takes to prove that the people of England have no such rights, and that such rights do not now exist in the nation, either in whole or in part, or anywhere at all, is of the same marvelous and monstrous kind with what he has already said; for his arguments are that the persons, or the generation of persons, in whom they did exist, are dead, and with them the right is dead also. To prove this, he quotes a declaration made by Parliament about a hundred years ago, to William and Mary, in these words: "The Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, do, in the name of the people aforesaid" (meaning the people of England then living) "most humbly and faithfully submit themselves, their heirs and posterities, for EVER." He quotes a clause of another Act of Parliament made in the same reign, the terms of which he says, "bind us" (meaning the people of their day), "our heirs and our posterity, to them, their heirs and posterity, to the end of time."

Mr. Burke conceives his point sufficiently established by producing those clauses, which he enforces by saying that they exclude the right of the nation forever. And not yet content with making such declarations, repeated over and over again, he farther says, "that if the people of England possessed such a right before the Revolution" (which he acknowledges to have been the case, not only in England, but throughout Europe, at an early period), "yet that the English Nation did, at the time of the Revolution, most solemnly renounce and abdicate it, for themselves, and for all their posterity, forever."

As Mr. Burke occasionally applies the poison drawn from his horrid principles, not only to the English nation, but to the French Revolution and the National Assembly, and charges that august, illuminated and illuminating body of men with the epithet of usurpers, I shall, without ceremony, place another system of principles in opposition to his.

The English Parliament of 1688 did a certain thing, which, for themselves and their constituents, they had a right to do, and which it appeared right should be done. But, in addition to this right, which they possessed by delegation, they set up another right by assumption, that of binding and controlling posterity to the end of time. The case, therefore, divides itself into two parts; the right which they possessed by delegation, and the right which they set up by assumption. The first is admitted; but with respect to the second, I reply:

**There never did, there never will, and there never can, exist a Parliament, or any description of men, or any generation of men, in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding and controlling posterity to the "end of time," or of commanding forever how the world shall be governed, or who shall govern it; and therefore all such clauses, acts or declarations by which the makers of them attempt to**

do what they have neither the right nor the power to do, nor the power to execute, are in themselves null and void. Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself in all cases as the age and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow. The Parliament or the people of 1688, or of any other period, had no more right to dispose of the people of the present day (in 1791), or to bind or to control them in any shape whatever, than the parliament or the people of the present day have to dispose of, bind or control those who are to live a hundred or a thousand years hence. Every generation is, and must be, competent to all the purposes which its occasions require. It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated. When man ceases to be, his power and his wants cease with him; and having no longer any participation in the concerns of this world, he has no longer any authority in directing who shall be its governors, or how its government shall be organized, or how administered.

I am not contending for nor against any form of government, nor for nor against any party, here or elsewhere. That which a whole nation chooses to do it has a right to do. Mr. Burke says, No. Where, then, does the right exist? I am contending for the rights of the living, and against their being willed away and controlled and contracted for by the manuscript assumed authority of the dead, and Mr. Burke is contending for the authority of the dead over the rights and freedom of the living. There was a time when kings disposed of their crowns by will upon their death-beds, and consigned the people, like beasts of the field, to whatever successor they appointed. This is now so exploded as scarcely to be remembered, and so monstrous as hardly to be believed. But the Parliamentary clauses upon which Mr. Burke builds his political church are of the same nature.

**Complete the following tasks for the text you just read:**

**Note:** your answer must be a minimum of 50 words in length for *all* four of the following tasks. Also, if you use an external source for information you must cite the URL or book that you drew information from. Talk to your teacher about how to include this information in your answers.

**1. Distinguish what information is being given. Using a combination of your intuition and the source material, answer the following the questions:**

- a) Why is Edmund Burke so against France establishing a republican system of government?
- b) Burke claimed that the English people had an obligation to preserve the monarchy forever into posterity. Specifically, Burke said England since the time of the Revolution in 1688 had “most solemnly renounce[d] and abdicate[d] it[s] [right to change government or society] for themselves for all their posterity, for ever.” Thomas Paine gives an articulate and comprehensive response to Burke’s assertion. Summarize and place Paine’s reply in your own words to this specific point made by Burke. I have taken the liberty of placing Paine’s reply in bold.

**2. Distinguish between fact and opinion.** A fact is something that has actually happened; it can be proven or observed. An opinion is a judgement that reflects a person’s belief.

- a) Identify *one* of Burke’s ideas that appears to you to be more *opinion* than *fact*.
- b) Then, in paragraph form, explain exactly what makes you believe Burke’s idea is an opinion as opposed to fact.
- c) Identify *one* of Paine’s arguments that appear to be more of an opinion than a fact.
- d) Then, in paragraph form, articulate why exactly Paine’s idea is more of an opinion than a fact.

**3. Evaluate the reliability of the source.**

- a) Making direct reference to source #2 identify two examples of Paine attacking Burke's arguments. Then explain what Paine is trying to achieve by attacking Burke in these ways.

**4. Use the source to draw conclusions about a historical development.**

- a) Based on what you have read which of the two writer's ideas—Burke or Paine—best reflects the democratic spirit (*zeitgeist*) of the 18<sup>th</sup> century? Explain.