



Rights of Man

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This philosophical argument written in two parts published separately in 1791 and 1792, answers Edmund Burke's vituperative attack on the French Revolution in REFLECTION ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE (1790) by justifying the principles of modern republican governments. Paine attempts not only to justify the French Revolution but also to use the United States as a primary example of democracy in action.

In Part I, Paine attacks the notion of monarchy and privilege. Unlike Burke, who supported hereditary privilege, Paine argues that each generation has the right to establish its own system of government. No nation can legally be ruled by a hereditary monarchy. The French people, therefore, could rightfully depose Louis XVI and establish a republican regime. Government is for the living, not the dead, so hereditary power is by definition illegitimate. No generation has the right to establish a government binding on future generations, so Burke's argument for hereditary power is essentially bankrupt.

In Part II, Paine uses the example of the American Revolution and the new American constitutional government to demonstrate the superiority of a republican over a monarchical system. Monarchies foster wastefulness and courtly excesses while republics encourage frugality and fiscal responsibility. Monarchies lead to war, republics to peace. Framed by elected representatives and approved by the people of a nation, constitutions form the basis of all legitimate governments.

This tract is an example of 18th century positivism. Paine argues throughout that humankind can reach its full potential under republican governments which allow individuals to live free of privilege and caste.

Like Rousseau and Locke before him, Paine believed that environmental influences create the individual and that a benevolent form of government can bring about human happiness. This basic assumption continues to inform our political debates today.

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