

## **The Case Against Absolutism**

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**Date: 1992**

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The Enlightenment's highest achievement was the development of a tightly organized philosophy, purportedly based on scientific principles and contradicting every argument for absolute monarchy as it generally existed in the eighteenth century. The case against absolutism, as presented by the philosophes and their foreign sympathizers, condemned divine-right monarchy, aristocracy by birth, state churches, and mercantilism. Each was found to be irrational, unnatural, and therefore basically evil.

#### **Basic Arguments In The Case**

One fundamental indictment against absolutism was its lack of human concern. Critics argued that maintaining order by forcing or frightening people into conformity, destroyed the innate human potential for moral judgment. The social environment was responsible for corrupting people, who were naturally good. Human beings could be perfected by removing the corrupting influences. For example, Beccaria insisted that unjust and irrational laws should be changed, so that they would teach morality and not just punish those who were caught. Prisons, argued the English reformer John Howard (1726-1790) should rehabilitate criminals, not brutalize them. These and other eighteenth-century rationalists believed that humanitarian reforms, in conformity with nature's laws, would lead toward unlimited human progress. Their message was voiced effectively by Condorcet, the most idealistic of the philosophes, in his *Progress of the Human Mind* (1794).

Behind Condorcet's humanitarianism was a passionate faith in human freedom. Enlightenment thinkers saw the arbitrary policies of absolute monarchs as violations of innate rights, required by human nature. The most fundamental part of this nature was human reason, the means by which people learned and realized their potential. Learning, as described by Locke in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), consisted entirely of knowledge gained through the senses, interpreted by reason, and stored in memory. There were no internal sources of knowledge; indeed, the mind at birth was like blank pieces of paper, upon which experience would write. The individual, in short, was primarily a thinking and judging mechanism, which required maximum freedom to operate effectively. The best government, therefore, was the government that ruled least. This argument for human freedom was the heart of the anti-absolutist case.

#### **Religious Arguments In The Case**

By the late eighteenth century, organized religion in Europe faced serious problems. The preceding century of religious wars had produced many contending sects and shaken the unquestioning faith of medieval times. Overseas expansion and the resulting contacts with non-Christian religions contributed to the same result. State churches, often used by kings to support corrupt regimes, also undermined respect for traditional Christianity. Added to all of this was the impact of the Newtonian revolution as well as earlier religious persecution of scientists. Between the orderly universe described by scientists and the relative chaos of human society, the contrast was indeed shocking. It led to serious reconsideration of religious ideas and institutions.

For such early thinkers as Descartes, the major theoretical problem was reconciling the mechanistic, self-regulating universe with the traditional belief in an all-powerful God. Descartes solved this problem, for himself, by dividing all realities between the realms of mind and matter. According to Descartes, both realms were governed by a divine will, but they appeared disconnected to human beings. Through science, human reason could accurately comprehend the material world; through faith and theology, the mind might

know, directly from God, those truths beyond the material world of science. Thus, Descartes, a loyal Catholic, sought to reconcile the old and the new. In contrast, his Dutch pupil, Baruch Spinoza, saw mind and matter as dual parts of nature, which was one with God. This pantheistic theory identified God with every natural process, leaving few mysteries to be revealed by theology or supernatural revelation.

John Locke's religious ideas were similar to Spinoza's, but a little more orthodox. In his *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), Locke confirmed the existence of God by the regularities and apparent purposes of nature. He then attempted to prove that Christianity was consistent with natural law. This effort was somewhat self-defeating because it required natural explanations of religious miracles, thus nullifying their traditional religious significance. Nevertheless, arguments for such rational Christianity were quite common, particularly among "enlightened" clergymen in the eighteenth century.

The most popular religious belief of the later Enlightenment was deism. It was held by such well-known figures as Thomas Paine in England, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin in the English American colonies, and Voltaire in France. To deists, God was an impersonal force - the master "clockwinder" of the universe. Generally, they rejected religious miracles and Christ's divinity. People, according to their view, were totally responsible for their actions. This "natural religion" required that individuals act morally without churches, clergy, ritual, or prayers. Although accepting the idea of an afterlife, deists attached no significance to emotional faith as a means to salvation. They placed all reliance on the individual reason and conscience.

Deism was popular but somewhat logically inconsistent. If the universe operated automatically, how could people possess free will and assume moral responsibility? What material evidence indicated an afterlife? Such questions led some thinkers to religious skepticism and even to atheism. Joseph Priestley, who was trained as an English minister and considered himself a Christian theologian, insisted that the soul did not exist independent of the body. David Hume (1711-1776), the famous English skeptic, questioned the existence both of God and of heaven. The most extreme views were professed in France, particularly in the circle of Paul Henri, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789). In *The System of Nature* (1770), d'Holbach denied the existence of God or any human purpose in the universe. Such ideas, however, were held only by a minority of Enlightenment thinkers.

Despite some differences on the details of their beliefs, eighteenth-century rationalists were in almost perfect agreement on one point. They championed religious freedom of conscience. In addition, most were participants in a continuing struggle against the alleged fallacies of organized religion. Hundreds of their writings, especially those of Voltaire and the philosophes, depicted churches and priests as part of a vast conspiracy aimed at perpetuating injustice and tyranny. State churches were special targets for their attacks. Their crusade for religious liberty was particularly threatening to absolutism.

### The Economic Argument

Natural law, a basic concept of the Enlightenment, was applied most consistently and effectively in economic arguments against absolutism. Contradictions that natural law raised in religious theory were not nearly so typical in economics. In addition, by the eighteenth century, developing capitalism clearly indicated the stimulus of profit to individual incentive. This realization, coming with the scientific revolution, strongly suggested that capitalism had outgrown mercantilism, with its state assistance and accompanying controls. The new economic philosophy contended that the free play of economic forces would ensure the greatest prosperity.

Such ideas were promoted by the physiocrats, a group of economic thinkers in eighteenth-century France. Their leading spokesman was Francois Quesnay (1694-1774), the personal physician to Louis XV but also a contributor to the *Encyclopedie*. Originally, Quesnay and his followers opposed Colbert's policy

of subordinating agriculture to government-controlled industry. This narrow emphasis later developed into a comprehensive theory based on natural law. Quesnay, for example, compared the circulation of money to the circulation of blood. He likened mercantilist controls to tourniquets, which shut off a life-giving flow. Quesnay also denounced the mercantilist theory of bullionism, arguing that prosperity depended on production, not gold and silver in the royal treasury. According to another physiocrat, Robert Turgot (1720-1781), selfish profit-seeking in a free market would necessarily result in the best service and the most goods for society.

The most influential advocate of the new economic theory was Adam Smith, a Scottish professor of moral philosophy at Glasgow University, who had visited France and exchanged ideas with the physiocrats. In 1776, Smith published *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, in which he set forth his systematic formulation of ideas. The work has since become the bible of classical economic liberalism, the doctrine of free enterprise, or *laissez-faire* economics.

Smith was indebted to the physiocrats for his views on personal liberty, natural law, and the role of the state as a mere "passive policeman." He argued that increased production depended largely on division of labor and specialization. Because trade increased specialization, it also increased production. The volume of trade, in turn, depended on every person being free to pursue individual self-interest. In seeking private gain, each individual was also guided by an "invisible hand" (the law of supply and demand) in meeting society's needs:

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher,  
the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner,  
but from their reward to their own interests. We address  
ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love ... ^7

[Footnote 7: Adam Smith, *Selections From the Wealth of Nations* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953), p. 12.]

Smith regarded all economic controls, whether by the state or by guilds and trade unions, as injurious to trade. He scoffed at the mercantilist idea that the wealth of a nation depended on achieving a surplus of exports, amassing bullion, and crippling the economies of other countries. In Smith's view, trade should work to the benefit of all nations, which would follow if the trade were free. In such a natural and free economic world, the prosperity of each nation would depend on the prosperity of all.

A number of other thinkers in the late eighteenth century combined or elaborated the ideas of Smith and the physiocrats. In France, d'Holbach repudiated mercantilism, arguing that free trade would permit one nation to supply the deficiencies of another. Jeremy Bentham, in England, followed Smith in developing his idea of utilitarianism "as the greatest good for the greatest number" but denied that economic equality would promote happiness, because it would destroy incentive and limit production. Other commentators, such as Richard Price and Benjamin Franklin, suggested that rising wealth naturally increased the population, except in new lands, where resources were almost unlimited. In one way or another, such propositions supported the basic idea that economic controls were futile or damaging the society.

A few radical thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as Richard Price and Mary Wollstonecraft, toyed with the idea of redistributing property, but the dominant creed was the *laissez-faire* philosophy, which sanctified capitalism and the freely operating profit motive. The so-called economic laws seemed to parallel mathematically proven laws of science. Indeed, the middle classes came to consider free enterprise as practically equivalent in validity to the law of gravitation. In an age of high taxes, contradictory commercial regulations, and expanding opportunities for profit, the new principles seemed to provide practical solutions for all economic problems. They certainly went a long way toward discrediting mercantilism and the Old Regimes built upon it.

## The Political Argument

Economic freedom, like religious freedom, depended ultimately on government, the source of most restrictions or coercion. For this reason, political principles in the case against absolutism were fundamental to all others. They were developed in two main categories: ideas concerning individual rights, and ideas concerning the organization of government. Both categories of thought were directed toward securing individual freedom against unnatural abuses of authority.

According to Locke and most political theorists of the Enlightenment, government existed to maintain the rights of its people. This idea ran directly counter to the divine-right theory, which was held by most reigning monarchs in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Locke at the opening of the period and Rousseau at its end answered the divine-right doctrine with the opposing theory of a "social contract." Thomas Hobbes had used the contract idea to justify royal authority; Locke turned Hobbes' argument around. In his famous *Second Treatise on Government* (1690), Locke contended that political systems were originally formed by individuals for defense of their natural rights to life, freedom, and property, against local or foreign enemies. They voluntarily ceded to government their individual right of protecting their liberties. In this transaction, government's authority was derived from the governed. It was not absolute but limited to maintaining the people's rights, for which it was constituted. When its authority was used for other purposes, the contract was broken and the people were justified in forming another government.

As insurance against abuses of political authority, political theorists of the Enlightenment generally advocated the separation of powers. Locke, for example, proposed that kings, magistrates, legislatures, and judges should share authority and check on one another. Spinoza also stressed the need for local autonomy and a locally based militia to guard against power concentrated in a central government. Montesquieu, although somewhat skeptical about natural laws or Locke's version of the social contract, developed a theory of separation of powers in his *Spirit of Laws*; most of the philosophes subscribed to this idea. <sup>8</sup>

[Footnote 8: See John Locke, *Second Essay on Civil Government* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1955), pp. 2, 63-65, 71, 127-128, 154-170; Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1949), pp. 151-158.]

Political freedom and guarantees for human rights were common goals, but ideas concerning the ideal form of government varied considerably. The majority of the philosophes were not opposed to monarchy, despite their rejection of the divine-right principle. Voltaire believed that the most likely way to attain desirable reforms was through the rule of an "enlightened despot." In a sense, this theory of government was akin to the Platonic ideal of the philosopher-king. A few monarchs professed to accept this role, although their policies did not always match their principles (see ch. 19).

Perhaps the most popular form of government among natural law theorists was constitutional monarchy on the English model. Locke, of course, was the recognized spokesman for the Glorious Revolution and the limited English monarchy established by Parliament. Both Voltaire and Montesquieu were very much impressed with the English system as they understood it. For Montesquieu, it appeared to be a practical balance of traditional forces, which secured liberty without sacrificing order.

Concern for internal order was typical of most political thought in the Enlightenment. Both Locke and Voltaire, to name only two well-known examples, advocated that political power be confined to property owners. This, they believed, would secure sound government against the ignorant masses, at the same time holding open opportunities to intelligent and industrious citizens. Presumably, those with most to lose from anarchy could best be trusted with political rights. Such ideas also squared with the English parliamentary

system, dominated as it was by the propertied classes.

Only a few eighteenth-century rationalists believed in democracy as a form of government. Like their more conservative colleagues, they were afraid of mob action but even more so of monarchs, aristocrats, and large centralized polities. They saw the ballot box as another check on arbitrary government and regarded political rights, particularly the franchise, as the ultimate security for personal liberty.

Because democratic ideas were so uncommon, they were often qualified in their expression. Thomas Jefferson suggested that common men should be represented in government, but he also accepted the property-based franchise. He harmonized the apparent contradiction by advocating that most land should be owned by small farmers. Other vague democratic references, sometimes contradictory, appeared in the political writings of Jeremy Bentham, Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, Thomas Paine, Mary Wollstonecraft, and William Godwin.

Since the late eighteenth century, Rousseau has been somewhat mistakenly considered the greatest democrat among the French philosophes. Admittedly, he respected the republican institutions of his native Geneva, but he did not think them appropriate for a large state such as France. He also exalted the "General Will" as representing the interests of the community or nation over the selfish interests of individuals. By "General Will," however, Rousseau meant the social contract as expressed in generally accepted law. This law secured each individual's freedom, up to the point where it threatened the freedom of others. Rousseau did not clearly oppose democracy, but he was more interested in the abstract ideas of popular sovereignty and equal rights under law. His so-called democracy was most evident in his general opposition to monarchy, aristocracy, and polite society. ^9

[Footnote 9: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Political Economy* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), pp. 118-119; and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954), pp. 19-20, 24-25, 39.]

Such minor differences over forms of government were inconsequential, compared with the points of political agreement among Enlightenment thinkers. All of them rejected the idea of divine-right monarchy, considering kings as the public servants of their peoples and obligated to maintain natural rights for all. These rights to life, liberty, and property, as construed by the philosophes and their rationalist friends abroad, ran directly counter to absolutism.

### The Argument For Women's Rights

The Enlightenment's case against absolutism brought the first clearly stated arguments for women's rights. Although such ideas were not implemented when they were most evident - during the French Revolution - and had largely been ignored when they were expressed earlier, this era saw them entered into the public consciousness.

Although a monarchist and a follower of Descartes rather than Locke, Mary Astell claimed legal equality for women on the basis of their natural rationality in her *Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1694). This call for women's rights was not repeated for decades, but it was echoed in the writings of English women, such as Mary Montague, during the eighteenth century. In France, a number of salonnières, including Madame de Puisieux (1720-1798) and Madame Gacon-Dufour (1753-1835), authored books defending their sex. Outside the salons, between 1759 and 1758, the *Journal des Dames*, a magazine edited by women, preached freedom, progress, and women's rights. At about the same time, in the new United States, Abigail Adams chided her husband because the new American constitution ignored women.

Before the French Revolution, the "woman subject" did not concern many leading philosophers. Rousseau represented most of them when he described the ideal woman's proper role as housekeeper, mother, and quiet comforter of her

husband, who was responsible for her protection and moral instruction. A few thinkers disagreed. Both Hobbes and Locke mildly questioned the idea that women were naturally subordinate to men. D'Alembert thought female limitations resulted from women's degradation by society, and Montesquieu saw absolute monarchy as the cause for women's lack of status. But Condorcet was the only philosophe who made a special plea for female equality. In his *Letters from a Bourgeois of New Haven* (1787), he claimed that women's rationality entitled them to full citizenship, including the right to vote and hold public office. Later, during the Revolution, he advocated full equality for women in public education. For the most part, however, his voice went unheard.

The fall of the Bastille and the subsequent Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen by the French National Constituent Assembly generated a wave of female intellectual agitation. Catherine Macaulay led the way in England, denouncing the prevailing "harem mentality" and advocating a liberal education for women in her *Letters on Education* (1790). In France, the first challenge came from a butcher's daughter and self-educated playwright, Olympe de Gouges (1748-1793). Her *Declaration of the Rights of Women* (1791) called for a social contract, which would give women equal rights in divorce, as well as free speech and assembly. The climax came with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Like Condorcet, Macaulay, and de Gouges, Wollstonecraft used natural law arguments in justifying full civil rights and equal education for women, but she more effectively emphasized her demands with a withering attack upon the prejudice of Rousseau and his supporters. Her passionate appeal would become a future feminist tradition.

For a while during the 1790s, the flurry of concern continued. In England, Wollstonecraft's friend, Mary Hayes (1760-1843) took up the crusade, as did Mary Anne Radcliff (1764-1823), who stressed the lack of economic opportunities for women in *An Attempt to Recover the Rights of Women from Male Usurpation* (1799). Patricia Wakefield (1751-1832) also used an economic approach. Her book, *Reflections on the Present Condition of the Female Sex* (1798), followed Adam Smith in arguing that the exploitation of women would limit prosperity. Other voices were raised in Germany and America. In 1792, Theodore Hoppel (1742-1796) rebuked the French for ignoring women in their new constitution. The American reaction came in the writings of Judith Sargent Murray (1751-1820) and Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), both of whom were influenced by Wollstonecraft.

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