

the world. The precision with which he took aim at human-made Absolutes was highly unusual in his day, and it suggests another most important source of his contemporary relevance. Paine began his public career as a proto-trade unionist and critic of the enslavement of Africans. He then smashed into the pseudo-divine structures of monarchy so cherished by the governing political classes of his day. He did so initially in the name of 'the people' or 'the nation', terms which he used interchangeably. But he soon came to question the very principle of popular sovereignty. Especially after witnessing first-hand attempts by figures as different as Robespierre and George Washington to abuse political power in the name of 'the people', he concluded that the notion of 'the people' as a unified God on earth from whom all power and wisdom emanates was a mirror image of the old doctrine of monarchy that it fought to replace.

To see 'the people' as an invented fiction prone to misuse by populist dictators was a bold move. But perhaps more electrifying was Paine's thunderous attack on organised religion itself. Paine was certainly not the first to query Christianity, but the way in which he did so made scepticism about all organised religion a subversive living force. Paine's point was as simple as it was explosive. Talk of sacred Scriptures, God's designs, and the sanctity of the Church, he argued, was just talk - the talk of mere mortals bent on empowering themselves over others, whom they labelled patronisingly as sinners in need of a Saviour.

Paine's various attacks on the dogmas responsible for powerlessness were not intended to push citizens into a void of confused disbelief. Life without dogmas was possible, Paine thought, but only inasmuch as individuals cultivated their own personal morality as well as joined with others as public beings, as citizens enjoying certain entitlements and honouring certain duties within a global system of constitutional governments

guaranteeing social justice and civil and political liberties, including citizens' right to be different. Paine suffered because he defended this vision. He nevertheless managed to move the world a few feet towards republican democracy. Some might dismiss Paine as a dead, white European male. But he can only be described as such because of the intellectual and political breakthroughs that he helped to bring about.

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Revolutions, States, and Democracy

The introductory course in Politics (IPOL108) at the University of Westminster is unlike most other first-year courses in Britain. Its themes are the outbreak of revolutions, the struggle for democracy, and the development of the modern state. The course looks at the political, ideological and social forces which precipitated revolutions in Britain, the United States and the former Soviet Union and which subsequently led to their development of particular types of states and societies.

Beginning with an examination of the key concepts of revolution, the modern nation-state, and citizenship, the course focuses on a comparison of the politics and social life of the three countries. In the British context it examines such topics as the political circumstances and ideas of the English revolution in the mid-seventeenth century; the various forces which influenced the British pattern of state development; the Burke-Paine controversy; and the current crisis of the Keynesian Welfare State. In the American case the course considers the Revolution of 1776, the ideas and events which influenced the writing of the American Constitution, the New Deal, and the extent to which the

Constitution's goals have been changed in practice during the past two centuries. The third section of the course examines the rise of the Soviet Empire out of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. It also considers the rise of Stalinism, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and recent moves towards democracy and dictatorship within that region.

The course was a child of the so-called 'velvet revolutions' of central and eastern Europe in 1989-1991. It is currently under review, and any student reactions about its strengths and weaknesses would be welcomed by seminar leaders and staff involved.

Next Issue:

Chris Sparks on Uncertainty

Dr. Boyer on Citizenship Culture

Insight on Alain Touraine

Review of Philip Green's
Democracy

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"A Democrat"
anonymous political satire, c.1789.