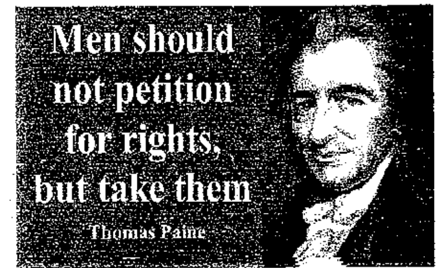
Yuval Levin, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the birth of the Right and Left,* Reviewed by Frances Chiu



OVER THE YEARS, if not centuries, much ink has been spilled on the conflicting philosophies Of Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine in the French Revolution debate. Yuval Levin's *The Great Debate* is yet another contribution to the debate spurred by Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and Paine's *Rights of Man*, albeit aimed at a popular audience rather than cultural and literary historians. As Levin himself announces in the opening pages of his book, he seeks to "examine Burke's and Paine's disagreement and to learn from it about both their era's politics and ours" by "taking apart each man's views of history, nature, society, reason, political institutions, freedom, equality rights and other key subjects". In short, he sets out to compare their different political philosophies and their relevance to conservatives and progressives.

Given Levin's leanings to the Right as a contributing editor to *The National Review* and fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Center think-tank, however, it's not surprising that *The Great Debate* is biased in favor of Burke. To be sure, there are praiseworthy elements even for Paineites. Perhaps because the book began life as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, Levin manages to eschew those drastic misinterpretations of Paine that have dogged the Right. Unlike the recent cohort of so-called "common sense conservatives"--namely, the likes of Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, and Herman Cain--Levin makes no effort to claim Paine as a conservative; nor does he take the opposite route of branding Paine a "socialist" or "communist."

But that's as far it goes. For all of Levin's efforts to maintain an even keel, *The Great Debate* winds up as a Burkean take on Paine and the French Revolution—granted, at a safe distance of over 200 years. Here, Burke is clearly set up as the more sophisticated thinker of the two. The elder statesman, according to Levin, demonstrated not only a prevailing sense of political justice in his writings on America, Ireland, and India, but also a savvy recognition of the sinews of power. Unlike Paine, as Levin reiterates throughout, Burke was keenly aware of "the complexity of social and political life" and "the role of mutual obligations inherited via centuries of inherited knowledge".

If Burke's views are supposedly more complex, however, the same cannot be said for Levin's analysis of Paine. Instead, it is uncannily redolent of Burke's shrill denunciations of Richard Price, whose *Discourse on the Love of our Country* spurred the writing of *Reflections*. For just as Burke pooh-poohed Price for his "metaphysics" and "abstractions", Levin describes Paine's ideas in much the same manner, variously referring to them as "abstract", "metaphysical" and "philosophical". We are informed, for instance, that Paine was prone to promulgating an "abstract freedom" and "a rather abstract and theoretical mode of expression" by making a "case for the revolution" that is "strikingly philosophical". He even accuses Paine of devoting "very little time on the suffering of the French lower classes under the old regime or the abuses and excesses of the French aristocracy"--while forgetting Paine's boots-on-the-ground account of the events leading up to the fall of the Bastille and the events of October 6, 1789; yet some pages later, Levin proceeds to acknowledge the same omission in Burke's *Reflections*. The problem with Paine's enlightened liberalism as a whole, Levin explains, is that it "emphasizes government by consent, individualism, and social equality, all of which are in tension with some rather glaring facts of the human condition"; too often, liberals conveniently forget that "we are born into a society that already exists, that we enter this society without consenting to it, that we enter it with social connections and not as isolated individuals, and that these connections help define our place in society and therefore often raise barriers to equality". The overall implication, of course, is that Paine's liberal vision smacks of a Hobbesian "unconnected, individual selfish liberty as if every man was to regulate the whole of his conduct by his own will".

But is that so? It is here that Levin's right-wing biases--much like Burke's anti-revolutionary sentiments--derail his argument. Those aware of 1790s politics and our own, are surely cognizant of the false dichotomies involved. Let's not forget that, if anything, it was the likes of Paine and his fellow radicals who grasped the concrete realities of life that somehow eluded Burke and other conservatives. Curiously enough, even though Levin sees fit to quote from Paine's statements on poverty in *The Case of the Excise Officers* and in *Rights of Man*, he manages to overlook the ex-staymaker and former excise officer's acute grasp of the difficulties posed by taxes on daily necessities for the middle classes and poor--or punishment at the gibbet following a theft compelled by extreme hunger. Levin forgets too that Paine was no less cognizant of the effects of violent state punishments on the populace: a discovery that continues to be reinforced by 20th- and 21st-century sociologists.

More to the point, it is challenging to discern Levin's oft-quoted sense of "mutual obligations" amongst the aristocracy, squirearchy, their Tory defenders, not to mention our own apologists for the 1%. After all, Burke had willingly conceded in *Reflections* the less than compassionate attitudes of the aristocracy to their social inferiors; nor were they so generous to the poor as he pointed out indirectly in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. The lord who rode roughshod over a farmer's crops in pursuit of a fox most likely felt few qualms, let alone any inklings of "mutual obligations". Ditto the French nobleman who clamored for even lower taxes while paying the peasants tilling his soil a mere pittance. Today, much the same can be said for oil and gas CEOs in their push for fracking, oblivious to environmental dangers faced by nearby communities. Or for McDonalds and Walmart CEOs adamantly insisting that $8 an hour is an adequate wage. The fact is that this conservative trope of "mutual obligations" has long served as a convenient excuse to keep the 99% in order, to distract them from perceiving the imbalance of power and wealth. Is it any wonder that Paine and later generations of populist democrats, labor activists, abolitionists, suffragettes, and Occupy all came to demand a larger role for the government in overseeing the best interests of all citizens rather than those of a select few? Therein lie the true "mutual obligations".

Continued on Page 7, *The Great Debate*

The Great Debate, from page 6

Levin, nonetheless, leaves us some food for thought in his conclusion. It is ironic, he remarks, that liberals have defended public entitlement programs by means of Burkean appeals to tradition, while conservatives have sought to "transform some key governing institutions". But perhaps it's not altogether fortuitous when we recall that the elderly Paine himself appealed to the spirit of 1776 while Burke persisted doggedly in his attempts to impeach Warren Hastings for his misrule in India, to the surprise of many, including Burke's younger brother, Richard, who wondered why "he cared so much about brown people." Ultimately, though, the fact of the matter is that "abstract" principles like reason, rights, and justice do matter a great deal. That's why even the Right occasionally makes clumsy and unconvincing attempts to appeal to the ideals of diversity, equality, and liberty. So while Burke may have ostensibly won the battle when the French revolution degenerated into chaos, we can still agree that Paine won the war of ideas.

The Great Debate, Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of the Right and Left, by Yuval Levin, 2013, New York: Basic Books

Frances Chiu, a faculty member at The New School, has taught an online course on Paine and the Enlightenment. She is now teaching a course on 19th century horror and writing a guide book on Rights of Man *for Routledge Publications. She contributes to literature and history professional journals. She is a TPF Board member who resides in Connecticut.*