Revolution and human rights thought in the political philosophy of Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Laetitia Barbauld

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Abstract
The Age of Reason is first and foremost an age of public reasoning. Equipped with a fresh and indeed unprecedented consciousness of feasibility and responsibility, educated citizens start to participate actively – and in many cases by taking personal risks – in discourses on political, religious and philosophical issues. In this article, I will highlight two core issues of the late eighteenth century – the dispute about the legitimacy of the French Revolution as well as its underlying philosophical conceptions and the rising human rights idea – and thereby revisit the interventions of three women who, though rediscovered in various fields of research, still have to gain their due recognition as pre-eminent political philosophers of their time.

Keywords
Edmund Burke, Enlightenment philosophy, French Revolution, rights of (wo)man, women’s history of ideas

By now, the idea of the history of Enlightenment as a history of male ideas only has well and truly moved from fact to fiction. Over the course of the last few years, an increasing interest has developed in the female figures of that defining era of modern consciousness. However, by trying to do justice to the minority of female thinkers who decided to break ranks with the common rules of conduct and their foundational dichotomies of the domestic and the public realm, the study of their works and the contemplation of their lives through a predominantly feminist lens (‘In what way did they contribute to the

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emancipation struggle of women?’) tend to overlook other, no less insightful features of their accomplishments.

Furthermore, such approaches, despite their noble intentions, risk categorizing female thinkers in a manner very similar to one they themselves all too often eagerly tried to avoid, i.e. that of women writers. In general, one is ill-advised to look back at the history of (women’s) ideas and expect contemporary views on women’s status and rights to pour out of every single line a woman put down on paper. By doing so, one neglects that women’s rights was but one issue preoccupying the minds of late eighteenth-century educated contemporaries among multiple related, but distinct, issues that needed addressing: for example, the abolition of slavery; the reformation of the criminal law system; religious conflicts and the question of toleration; the criteria for legitimate government and resistance against it, respectively; and, above all, the overarching topos of the rights of man – in modern language: human rights.

Three lives – in and out of time

The examples of the three contemporaries at the centre of this contribution are testament to this assessment in several ways.

The female patriot

Catharine Macaulay (1731–91), commonly referred to as one of the most renowned historians of her time, was a celebrated figure of British republican radicalism, but shared the fate of many others so actively involved in public affairs at the time: she was soon forgotten after her death. Her nine volumes of the History of England from the Accession of James I. to that of the Brunswick Line (1763–83) represent the pinnacle of her work, which also includes several pamphlets and philosophical treatises. Unfortunately, until very recently it did not encourage many to see her as a substantial political thinker. Or, in the words of Karen Green, as ‘one of the . . . persistent, and widely read advocates of parliamentary reform and democratic representation’ (2018: 47).

Born Catharine Sawbridge in Kent and growing up a half-orphan after her mother died in childbirth, she experienced the standard education of girls born into well-off families during that time.¹ Much more than to her private tutor, however, as a teenager she was drawn to her father’s library and in particular to the books on antiquity and republicanism. Aged 29, she married the physician George Macaulay, with whom she had one daughter. Her weekly circle of intellectuals in Newington Green offered a forum for the exchange and discussion of radical ideas. Contrary to what was expected of him as a man of his time, her husband encouraged her to continue writing and was obviously proud of his talented wife and her career, which was considered ‘unladylike’ by many (Hill, 1992: 15). Her History made her famous overnight even across the Atlantic, where founding fathers of the United States of America such as George Washington, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson highly valued her commitment to the republican cause.² And even David Hume – as the author of History of England her prominent predecessor in that field – asked for a copy of her work and congratulated her on it, not without charmingly pointing out their differing ideological outlooks.³ After her husband’s death, Macaulay married William
Graham, a ship’s steward more than 20 years younger, thereby providing a convenient cause for many to openly despise her (see also Temple, 2003).

Later, she withdrew from public life, producing her *Treatise on the Immutability of Moral Truth* (1783) and *Letters on Education* (1790) – a medley on moral philosophy, philosophy of religion and humanistic education in a style reminiscent of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s discourse to his fictional mentee Émile (‘Hortensia’) – and, as her last piece, the *Observations*, a reply to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections* (treated in more detail in the next section). Macaulay’s *Letters* are in line with the greater trend of her era to focus on the formation and modelling of a new genus of human being built on empiricist philosophy, according to which acquired experience instead of innate ideas is constitutive for human cognition. Within this focus, the human condition as such becomes susceptible to change, or more aptly, *improvement*. Feasibility and responsibility ultimately coincide:

> in these enlightened days, when we have gained some useful insights into the wondrous fabric of the human mind, which might be done in the way of education towards the happiness of nations and individuals, but, good God! what use are we making of our advances in knowledge? (1790a: 13f.)

Macaulay’s contributions to philosophical ethics in particular remain underestimated, even though many of the ideas she put forward, such as the relevance of the faculty of empathy (see also Greentree, 2019), turned out to be very influential in the context of evolutionary ethics as well as ‘ethics of care’ approaches.

**The new genus**

Macaulay’s last two works connect her to another outstanding thinker of the British Enlightenment: Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–97), who is predominantly known today as a proto-feminist and for her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), even though her works extend to various fields of practical philosophy, most importantly political philosophy and humanistic education. Indeed, she owes the cornerstones of her pedagogical theory to Macaulay, prompting some to opine that Wollstonecraft in this regard more than once ‘comes close to plagiarism’ (Green, 2012: 425). Reviewing Macaulay’s *Letters on Education* for the *Analytical Review*, Wollstonecraft addresses her role model and senior by 28 years as ‘This masculine and fervid writer’, and attests to Macaulay’s ‘very superior powers of [the] mind’ (1989d: 309). She repeatedly praises her ethical principism and moral sentimentalist outlook: ‘The pernicious effects which public executions and slaughterhouses have on the manners of the people at large, as equally incompatible with benevolence and equity, are very cogently and forcibly insisted on’ (1989d: 315). Only when it comes to the issue of women does Wollstonecraft cautiously lament: ‘The observations on this subject might have been carried much farther’ (1989d: 214) – something she herself had already undertaken in her first work *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on the Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787), where she severely criticized the naturalized gender roles young women are squeezed into and which she would expand upon so resolutely two years later in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In it, Macaulay is again lauded as ‘the woman of the
greatest abilities, undoubtedly, that this country has ever produced. – And yet this woman has been suffered to die without sufficient respect being paid to her memory’ (1989b: 174). Macaulay’s *Observations* share the cause of Wollstonecraft’s first magnum opus, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) – a powerful reply to Burke and the first of a series to follow, including the one by Macaulay. Wollstonecraft’s approaching Macaulay with a letter attached to a copy of her *Vindication* is the only verified acquaintance between the two. Macaulay forwarded to her a warm reply and an offer of further correspondence – which was rendered obsolete by her death only six months later and is described by Wollstonecraft as a serious regret (see 1989b: 175).

However, Wollstonecraft’s family background greatly differed from her idol’s. As Bridget Hill explains, in contrast to Wollstonecraft, Macaulay never had to care about earning her living: ‘Perhaps the most important difference between the two women was that Wollstonecraft had herself early experienced poverty and deprivation’ (1992: 186). The world Wollstonecraft was born into was not very pleasant from the beginning. Her father’s social decline, his alcoholism and violence cast a dark shadow over her childhood. In her youth, Wollstonecraft struggled to find her place in a society that, generally speaking, could not imagine any other female identity than the one of a married mother and housewife. In trying to earn her living through her own hard work and without depending on her impoverished family or any husband, Wollstonecraft worked as a lady’s companion, head teacher, tutor, translator and finally as a writer. She had not experienced any education beyond elementary school, and taught herself philosophy, literature and history, as well as French and German. Continually supported and encouraged by the radical publisher Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft gained a foothold in his circle of progressive intellectuals and dissenters.

From a present-day perspective, Wollstonecraft – like Macaulay, except to a slightly greater degree – appears to be fairly distant from the mainstream thinking, judgements and manners of her time. A sort of estrangement also echoes when she, for example, calls herself ‘the first of a new genus’. Unsurprisingly, the majority of her work – which encompasses several translations, hundreds of reviews and letters, as well as six monographs – constitutes a critique of the present, in her own words, ‘corrupt state of society’ (1989b: 91). When she died in 1797 after giving birth to her second daughter – Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein* – Wollstonecraft left behind a life’s work that rendered her both famous and infamous. Whereas her contribution to the grounding of women’s rights in various degrees inspired generations of feminists in the nineteenth and, to lesser degree, the twentieth century, any reduction of her oeuvre solely to the feminist cause clearly underestimates her expansive philosophical horizon.

In contrast to Macaulay, the ruin of Wollstonecraft’s reputation came about after her early death, although polemical animosities already followed in the wake of her second *Vindication* (see, e.g., Taylor, 1792). Not only did the antagonistic turn of public sentiments towards the advancing revolution in France have its impact on the reception of her work; her private life also came under scrutiny – at least after her great love, radical philosopher William Godwin, published his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1798 (1989b). Moreover, doubts pertaining to the beneficial effects of Wollstonecraft’s liberal educational principles arose in the course of the so-called Kingsborough scandal – centring on her former mentee Margaret King who joined
the revolutionary Society of United Irishmen – during the Irish Rebellion of 1798 (see esp. Todd, 2005).

The princess of poets

Whereas Mary Wollstonecraft turned from her parents’ Anglican faith to Protestant reformist convictions over the course of her radicalization (though she totally preferred scepticism towards the end of her life),9 Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743–1825) was born into a genuine dissenter family in Leicestershire.10 Her father John Akin, headmaster of a dissenter academy, guaranteed a decent education for young Laetitia, who, for the rest of her life would display a deep fascination for antique art and philosophy, just like Macaulay. In 1774, she married Rochemont Barbauld, teaching together with him at the Palgrave academy, another dissenters’ college, for over a decade. Even though the marriage was generally a happy one, her husband’s emerging psychological disorder posed a considerable challenge to both of them. An added burden was the fact that the two had no children of their own, eventually prompting them to adopt one of her brother’s sons.11

In 1773, Barbauld entered the literary stage with her Poems. It was none other than Mary Wollstonecraft who expressed her admiration of her work, in particular of her poem An Address to the Deity, which Wollstonecraft included in her Female Reader (1989e [1789]). Like Wollstonecraft, Barbauld initially devoted herself to the writing of educational literature (Lessons for Children, 1778–88), likewise displaying a broad understanding of education: ‘Education, in its largest sense, is a thing of great scope and extent. It includes the whole progress by which a human being is formed to be what he is, in habit, principles, and cultivation of every kind’ (1825f: 396). With An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts (1825b [1790]) she moves on to the realm of politics and religion (see later section for more detail). A statement in favour of the – temporarily – frustrated efforts to bring an end to the Atlantic slave trade follows (An Epistle to William Wilberforce, Esq. on the Rejection of the Bill for Abolishing the Slave Trade, 1791). To give a detailed summary of Barbauld’s works, however, is impossible since (great?) parts of her unpublished writing have simply been lost: some were destroyed in the bombings of London during World War II. The fame Barbauld aggregated for her poetry and political-philosophical contributions could not withstand the outrage following her Eighteen Hundred and Eleven (1812), which condemns Britain’s warring with France and paints a disturbing picture of the Empire’s downfall. In this poem, Barbauld not only predicts its ruin12 (‘fate to rank amongst the names that once were great’ (1825h: 236) and the shift of influence in favour of America, but also attributes to her native country considerable historical guilt. The scandal surrounding this piece and the attacks from the public and reviewers were probably the reason why Barbauld was never to publish again.13

Similar to Catharine Macaulay, the rediscovery of Anna Laetitia Barbauld in recent years has almost exclusively been a project of literary or feminist studies. While her recognition as an icon of the Enlightenment has become commonplace (‘Hers was a voice of the Enlightenment, her issues were its issues’, McCarthy, 2008: xi), Barbauld is still predominately seen as a ‘literary woman’, ‘poet’ or ‘writer’. But Barbauld was not only intimately acquainted with ancient and contemporary philosophy: she tackled
genuine philosophical questions in the fields of anthropology, religion and justice, and founded her political interventions on philosophical methods. However, what distinguishes Barbauld from the mainstream of academic philosophy – from which she as a woman was excluded, regardless – is her critique of a certain over-rationalizing understanding of philosophy, i.e. theoretical philosophy disconnected from practical philosophy. According to Barbauld, ‘metaphysical speculations of space and time, necessity and freewill, and a thousand others, may safely be left for that age which delights in such discussions. They have no connexion with conduct’ (1825i: 336). Whether Barbauld did in fact meet her contemporaries Wollstonecraft and Macaulay in person is not confirmed. Against such expectations based upon the obvious parallels in their biographies and ideological outlooks, one has to keep in mind that even though radicals represented a tiny minority of British society at the time, they did not constitute a homogeneous group and moved in different circles (Nünning, 1998: 44).

**Philosophy?**

What these three contemporaries share, however, is not only their republican, liberal stance and exceptional careers compared to the vast majority of their sex at that time: the self-assurance that Macaulay, Wollstonecraft and Barbauld exhibit in their manifold interventions is unabatedly astonishing. What Green points out with reference to Macaulay and Barbauld holds true for all three of them: ‘They divested themselves almost completely of the self-deprecation characterizing earlier women writers’ (2013: 171). Moreover, to a greater or lesser degree, their contributions to philosophy remain underestimated. That each of them was much more than descriptors such as essayist, poet or writer suggest, still is barely discussed in their conventional reception.

Of course, one could ask what the added value is in assuming them to be primarily philosophers when philosophy was anything but a differentiated branch of science in the eighteenth century and the distinctions between writer/philosopher/historian also prove tricky in other cases, e.g. Montesquieu or Voltaire. Yet, insofar as philosophy is concerned with the eternal questions, by labelling someone’s oeuvre philosophical we signify that it contains relevance beyond its originator’s immanent horizon of time. In that sense, it is a crucial difference whether one principally calls Macaulay either a historian (see Hill, 1992) or an Enlightenment philosopher (Green 2012, 2013), since the latter insinuates that her work is meaningful to us not only as historically interested individuals but as citizens struggling – just to mention one example – with comparable challenges in terms of founding a government based on the people’s choice against the background of growing discomfort with mass democracies.

**Debating the French Revolution and the ‘right of resistance’**

Soon after the storming of the Bastille in Paris in July 1789 and the forced relocation of Louis XVI – no longer ‘King of France’ but ‘King of the French’ – to the capital in October, and following a turbulent summer that inter alia witnessed the Declaration of the Rights of the Man and Citizen by the newly set-up National Assembly, all over Europe discussions
began as to whether this revolution was a model or rather a warning for the world. Was it justified resistance of an oppressed people against their tyrant king or, on the contrary, a malicious excess of ressentiment? Underneath these questions, even more profound issues lurked with weighty implications attached to their treatment: what is the relation between governed and governor in the context of legitimating power from below (‘sovereignty of the people’) – instead from above (‘divine right of kings’)? What are the legitimate ends of government when people without it would still be endowed with natural rights?

**Confronting Edmund Burke**

When Edmund Burke (1729–97) – famous for his work on aesthetics and renowned for his favourable (‘Whig’) opinion on the Glorious Revolution 1688 – published his critique of the events and their underlying theoretical conceptions only six months after the outbreak of the French Revolution (*Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event. In a Letter*, 1790), he did not provide a fundamental critique from outside, i.e. from ideologically solidified monarchism, but rather from within a liberal republican framework in principle. The numerous replies to Burke turned out all the more acrimonious, beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, who presented her first *Vindication* in less than four weeks to a British public still partly in favour of the French way. Among the reactions to Burke’s *Reflections* we find names such as George Rous, James Mackintosh, Brooke Boothby, John Scott, Thomas Christie and also Wollstonecraft’s friend Thomas Paine (*Rights of Man*, 1791–2), her later husband William Godwin (*Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 1793) as well as, as previously mentioned, Catharine Macaulay.

Being the only female critics to challenge Burke’s assessment of the French Revolution and its underlying philosophical principles, Wollstonecraft and Macaulay make a curious pair: the 31-year-old Wollstonecraft, an unknown in the field of political discourse, and the seasoned Macaulay (commonly referred to as ‘our female patriot’), according to Elizabeth Frazer ‘a famous woman in the sense that chinaware figurines of her were manufactured by the Crown Derby porcelain factory’ (Frazer, 2011: 603). Whereas Macaulay’s essay was her very last one, for Wollstonecraft the *Vindication* was the precursor for her masterpiece on women’s rights which, according to Gunther-Canada, might have never been written without this primary intervention (1998: 145). Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men* was first published anonymously. It was read and discussed widely. When a second edition revealed its author to be a woman, many reacted in sheer disbelief, speculating whether they had been presented with a fictitious lady (1998: 130f.). Wollstonecraft’s response to Burke can be described, in Bridget Hill’s words, as ‘an angry, if unstructured, and passionately expressed work’ (1995: 182). That Burke’s *Reflections* were inspired by sermons by her aged friend and mentor Richard Price to the Revolution Society, whom Burke vigorously attacked, only fuelled Wollstonecraft’s indignation, which has often been referred to as bad style (Sapiro, 1992: 25f.). However, Jane Hodson speculates that Wollstonecraft quite wittingly made use of this mode of expression as ‘a philosophically informed strategy’ (2007: 113) since she was convinced only an immediate intellectual reaction to a question or a challenge of the mind, respectively, is able to capture one’s authentic ideas and to guarantee
their appropriate literary transport. Indeed, the search for sincerity constitutes a lifelong concern of hers. Her self-descriptions in her second Vindication also point in that direction when Wollstonecraft declares that she would ‘try to avoid that flowery diction’ (1989b: 76) or states: ‘I shall be employed about things, not words’ (1989b: 67).

In contrast, Macaulay’s reply, ‘the culmination of a lifelong investigation of republican theory and democratic practice’ (Gunther-Canada, 1998: 147) and more sedate in rhetoric, was not her first argument with the member of the House of Commons. Already in 1770, they had debated Whig politics and the significance of the Glorious Revolution. Burke himself regarded her as the most able of his critics, stating that ‘the Amazon is the greatest champion amongst them’ (cited in Nünning, 1998: 40). Apart from these differences between the two responses, Wollstonecraft and Macaulay not only shared an ideological framework; they also applied some similar argumentative strategies, in particular in charging Edmund Burke with being a traitor to the Whig cause, and with applying over-sentimental rhetoric. The latter in particular is a meaningful manifestation of their strategy of breaking with the conventional identification of gender and (ir-)rationality: just as women can be fully fledged, rational participants in public discourses, men are not innately determined to be immune to affect-based flaws.

Revolution as a right or folly?

In order to understand what led Wollstonecraft and Macaulay to spearhead or join, respectively, the opposition against Burke, one has to take a look at his Reflections, their aim and focus. Above all, they – branded by Mackintosh as ‘the manifest of the Counter Revolution’ (1791: xi) – constitute a critique of the principle of (unrestricted) sovereignty of the people, which he opposed from a pragmatic constitutional monarchist’s position.

The question as to whether the French were justified in revolting against their ruling monarch – just like the issues of rights in general and the right to resistance in particular – is intimately interwoven with a set of theories that, unlike any other, has shaken traditional narratives of legitimate government to the core: the social contract theories. Drawing on Scottish political thought (Klieforth and Munro, 2004), and particularly the writings of George Buchanan (1506–82) and his teacher John Major (1467–1550), theorists like Thomas Hobbes, John Milton and John Locke operate with a more or less explicit thought experiment: what if man was providing for his own life without the yoke of government and state institutions restricting his original liberty? Would this hypothetical man in a state of nature be better off or worse? Worse in many relevant aspects, social contract theorists reply – and, with that said, reconstruct the motives which led man into a regulated order of society where the monopoly of force predominately lies with state institutions. Through exactly this manner of argumentation, Thomas Paine was able to lay down as a conclusion in his famous reply to Burke: ‘Man did not enter into society to become worse than he was before, not to have fewer rights that he had before, but to have those rights better secured. His natural rights are the foundation of all his civil rights’ (2003: [1791–2]: 169).
Once the telos of government is settled in the particular way of securing formerly natural rights, not only is the horizon opened up for the modern, democratic constitutional state, it also suggests the question: What if the ruling governors are remiss in fulfilling their specific mandate? Is one authorized to (actively) resist? In the philosophy of Hobbes (‘the Liberty to disobey’) we can already find strong hints that such an implication in terms of a right to resistance is located at the heart of social contract theories.\^18

Unsurprisingly, Burke denies the end of the state defined by the safeguarding of rights: ‘Government is not made in virtue of natural rights which may and do exist in total independence of it, – and exist in much greater clearness, and in a much greater degree of abstract perfection’ (1894 [1790]: 310). Although he affirms the right to resistance in principle, he sets a very high standard of justification in a given case: ‘Governments must be abused and deranged indeed, before it can be thought of; and the prospect of the future must be as bad as the experience of the past’ (1894: 271). Concerning France, he definitely denies that the monarch’s injustice legitimizes a revolution. Revolution should always, according to Burke, remain ‘the very last resource’ (1894: 271). In order to avoid resorting to such a remedy, Burke advises against bestowing too many duties on the state: ‘Society is, indeed, a contract . . . but the state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern, to be taken up for a little temporary interest, and to be dissolved by the fancy of the parties’ (1894: 359).

Conversely, Wollstonecraft draws on the reservoir of social contract theories when declaring self-preservation to be the ‘first law of nature’ (1989a: 16) but in a quite original way she determines the end of the compact as the unfolding of man’s ‘intellectual powers’ (1989c: 115). Macaulay, even though not at ease with a Hobbesian social contract (1790b: 14) – which she suspects of supposedly anti-egalitarian assumptions, thereby repeating the arguments of Locke (1988 [1689]) according to which more danger would spring from the state itself than the state of nature once the sovereign is entitled to absolute power – already in her History emphasized the people’s right to resist any ruler who does not fulfil his duty according to the social contract, i.e. guarantees their natural rights (Macauley, 1763–83: 430ff.). Referring to Locke and Milton, Macaulay argues that the right to resistance or revolution, respectively, ‘will meet with little contradiction in a country enlightened with the unobstructed ray of rational learning’ (1763–83: 431). Without such a political philosophical position affirming the accountability of the ruler, ‘all governments are equal tyrannies; the destroyers, not the preservers of the rights of nature’ (1763–83: 435).

**Popular sovereignty and human nature**

Clearly Burke has seen through Richard Price and his sympathizers (‘our new fanatics of popular arbitrary power’, 1894: 265) in their appeasing representation of popular sovereignty. When Price attests to the present British king being one of the few lawful ones since his power rests on the ‘choice of his people’ (cited in Burke, 1894: 248), thereby seemingly agreeing to the legitimacy of this monarch while at the same time destroying the very foundation of hereditary monarchy as such, Burke accuses Price of ‘a most unfounded, dangerous, illegal, and unconstitutional position’ (1894: 248f.). Abundantly
clearly, Burke summarizes the implications of that novel doctrine: ‘if his Majesty does not owe this crown to the choice of his people, he is no lawful king’ (1894: 249). Burke fears that people would get ‘gradually habituated to it, as if it were a first principle admitted without dispute’ (1894: 249) and claims to speak in the name of the vast majority of the British subjects when he declares: ‘They look upon the legal hereditary succession of their crown as among their rights, not as among their wrongs, – as a benefit, not as a grievance, – as a security for their liberty, not as a badge of servitude’ (1894: 264). If the British had wanted to establish the principle of popular sovereignty, they could have done so during the Glorious Revolution. Since they preferred not to, this ‘is a proof that the nation was of opinion it ought not to be done at any time’ (1894: 253f.).

When it comes to the ultimate objective of government, Burke refuses the social contract narrative in its extreme version. Even if man does not transfer all of his natural rights to the societal state, he ‘abdicates all right to be his own governor’ (1894: 310). Burke’s mantra reads: ‘Men cannot enjoy the rights of an uncivil and of a civil state together’ (1894: 310). The reason for Burke’s position here lies in a deep unease towards the unrestricted liberty of the people whom he identifies with unsubdued passions: ‘This [government] can only be done by a power out of themselves’ (1894: 310). Any infinite congruence between the ruling and the ruled, which Burke sees established in the doctrine of popular sovereignty, must from his perspective lead to disorder and mischief. For him, no need exists to congratulate the French on the path they have chosen since their version of liberty is not in harmony with government, administration, religion or peace and order (1894: 241f.). Burke plainly states: ‘The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints’ (1894: 242).

On the other hand, Wollstonecraft interprets the early phase of the French Revolution as the promise of a ‘universal diffusion of liberty and happiness’ (1989a: 25). Likewise Macaulay, who praises the French experiment as ‘the most important to the dearest interests of mankind, the most singular in its nature, and the most astonishing in its means’ (1790b: 6). Vindicating the French – in particular in their efforts to reform the clergy and jurisprudence (1790b: 75) – she writes: ‘Every providence, therefore, by which any insuperable object to this transcendent blessing appears to be taken away, must rationally draw forth ejaculations of gratitude from the benevolent Christian’ (1790b: 21). Yet, she abstains from a deterministic view; the question raised by Burke as to whether popular sovereignty is compatible with the human condition must be left open for future assessment: ‘We can gain no light from history; for history furnishes no example of any government in a large empire, which, in the strictest sense of the word, has secured to the citizen, the full enjoyment of his rights’ (1790b: 87f.).

The great chain of being

Macaulay’s vision of universal rights pertains to another line of discomfort vis-à-vis the French model articulated by Burke. In general, he expresses a fundamental anxiety in view of the truly radical transformation manifested in the uprising of the French. In this world-historical perspective, he declares, ‘It looks to me as if I were in a great crisis, not of the affairs of France alone, but of all Europe, perhaps of more than Europe. All
circumstances taken together, the French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world’ (1894: 243f.). What seems to burden Burke are the inherent dynamics of this departure from traditional unquestioned stabilities and certainties: ‘Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos’ (1894: 244).

In the end, this is the eristic nucleus of the confrontation between Wollstonecraft and Macaulay, on the one hand, and Burke on the other, which lies in a radically contrapositive outlook regarding the authority of established traditions – not only in the realm of politics but of society as a whole (see also Halldenius, 2017; Coffee, 2017). Whereas ‘Burke looked back to a golden age which was lost’ (Gunther-Canada, 1998: 145), Macaulay and Wollstonecraft put their trust in the Enlightenment’s promise of a future ‘garden more inviting than Eden [that] would then meet the eye’ (Wollstonecraft, 1989a: 56).

What Burke could so easily refer to as a given horizon of commonly shared understanding, Vera Nünning describes as the notion of ‘the chain of being’, i.e. the conviction that a natural, hierarchical order connects all things – and men (1998: 54ff.). This notion defined the status of women as well as that of lower classes, both of whom were generally relegated to serving and obeying – an unacceptable view not only for Wollstonecraft, whose ‘indignation was roused by the sophisticated arguments . . . in the questionable shape of natural feelings and common sense’ (1989a: 5). Based on Burke’s premise, she argues, neither could the reformer Jesus of Nazareth19 be justified in his opposition to dominant sentiments and traditions, nor could the American Revolution be praised, let alone the slave trade be abolished, that ‘atrocious insult to humanity’ (1989a: 14f.). Against Burke’s arguments from tradition, Wollstonecraft sets a sanguine progressiveness:

There is no end to this implicit submission to authority – some where it must stop, or we return to barbarism; and the capacity of improvement, which gives us a natural sceptre on earth, is a cheat, an ignis-fatuus, that leads us from inviting meadows into bogs and dung-hills. (1989a: 14)

She accentuates her argument against Burke by even drawing a comparison between his defence of a hierarchical society with the caste system in India (1989a: 51).

Wollstonecraft pleads for nothing less than a comprehensive reform of society, and her excursions on the moral shortcomings of the aristocracy – in terms of their politics of marriage and treatment of children, which lead to sacrificing individuals and their rights to collective interests (1989a: 22f.) – produce a powerful proof of her integral philosophical approach that does not acknowledge a fundamental divide between the private and public, the social and political realm. Here, ironically, Wollstonecraft shares Burke’s view of the family as the ‘platoon’ destined to guarantee society’s perfect condition (Hunt, 2002). The crucial difference, however, lies in the stipulation of this ideal. As opposed to Burke, in her eyes, it is a non-patriarchal society. As Eileen M. Hunt summarizes her point of view: ‘Since the family is the cradle in which human beings are socialized, the egalitarian transformation of the family leads to the egalitarian transformation of society as a whole’ (Hunt, 2002: 100).
Disenchantment

Whereas Edmund Burke already identified despotic tendencies at the inception of the French Revolution (‘By hating vices too much, they come to love men too little’, 1894: 458), both Wollstonecraft and Macaulay initially defended revolutionary excesses – either by calling attention to the unrealistic nature of expecting an unbloodied revolution (Macaulay 1790b: 24), by seeing exaggerations in their description (Wollstonecraft 1989a: 26f.), or by pointing to the previous conditions under the ancien régime (Macaulay 1790b: 26). These perspectives, however, changed in the face of the Terror. Mary Wollstonecraft had personal experience of the degeneracy of the revolution when she moved to France in December 1792. She most probably only avoided a fate like Thomas Paine’s due to her lover Gilbert Imlay and she fled Paris heavily pregnant in January 1794. Among her belongings was An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution, putting her life at risk once more. Wollstonecraft – while still vindicating the goals of the revolution as such – now exposes the Jacobins as ‘anarchists’ and ‘monsters’ (1989c: 145) who, with their personal deficits in character, were predominantly responsible for the wrongs committed during the revolution. Guilt is also attributed to the mob, in Wollstonecraft’s description ‘barbarous beyond the tiger’s cruelty’ (1989c: 234). Not only has her anthropological optimism been severely affected by her experiences but also her political philosophy, when she for the first time utters reservations about the sovereignty of the people. It should ‘only . . . be attained where a nation is truly enlightened’, otherwise, as is the case with the French, it ‘consisted in making them tyrants’ (1989c: 193). Finally, mistakes in the course of revolutionary changes in societies seem to be inevitable: ‘Every nation . . . in changing its government from absolute despotism to enlightened freedom, will, most probably, be plunged into anarchy, and have to struggle with various species of tyranny before it is able to consolidate its liberty’ (1989c: 213).

Macaulay, who travelled to Paris in 1777, did not live to witness the course of the French Revolution. What she might have said in light of its further developments is speculation. However, we can find a similarly disillusioned turn in the outlook of Anna Laetitia Barbauld, who also knew France from a visit in 1786. Even though she did not submit a response to Edmund Burke, Barbauld was in line with his critics. This cannot only be inferred from her previously mentioned poem Eighteen Hundred and Eleven but also from the 1792 poem On the Expected General Rising of the French Nation (1825j: 180f.) in which Barbauld euphorically hails the revolution (‘Let your great spirit, roused at length, Strike hordes of despots to the ground’), and hopes for France to ‘rise the model of the world’. Yet like Wollstonecraft, Barbauld had her very own rude awakening. In a letter from 1813, she admits to a friend:

I do not know what we can gather from the contemplation of all these revolutions, but this; that the concerns and destinies of all the world are too high for us; that we must wait the winding up of the drama, and be satisfied in promoting and enjoying the happiness of our own little circle. (1825k: 140).

Beyond the citizen: striving for universal rights

As has become apparent from the preceding section, the opposition between British radicals and pragmatists was to a considerable degree shaped by the strong impulse radiating
from France to reflect on their own constitution and to examine in light of this example the nature of liberties and rights within one’s own political framework. Whereas Burke contented himself with the rights of Englishmen which he classified as superior to French rights of man, Macaulay, Wollstonecraft, and Barbauld argued the case for universal rights transcending social class, religious affiliation and sex in a variety of ways.

Such a principle of political equality – a key term used by British radicals of that time – is a direct challenge to the majority view, which granted equality before God, but certainly not in society. Hence, advocating a conception of equality pertaining to the realm of rights in concrete terms was a most radical stance. According to this perspective, rights that are dependent on a birthright in a given country and not on the plain feature of membership of the human family are futile since they are presumptuous. As Macaulay puts it: ‘It is an arrogant pretension because it intimates a kind of exclusion to the rest of mankind from the same privileges; and it is beggarly because it rests our legitimate freedom on the alms of our princes’ (1790b: 31f.). Wollstonecraft counters Burke’s refutation of the concept of human rights to the benefit of (hierarchically structured) civil rights: ‘The Briton takes the place of the man, and the image of God is lost in the citizen!’ (1989a: 15). Barbauld takes the same route in her stigmatization of the national pride accompanying such reasoning in her farsighted Sins of Government, Sins of Nations (1825c [1793]), where she argues the case for overcoming national boundaries and for the internationalization of peace and justice. States, legally still in a state of Hobbesian war with each other, are nevertheless morally responsible for each other in Barbauld’s eyes (‘not the less bound to all the duties of neighbours, – to mutual sincerity, justice and kind offices’ (1825c: 396)) and first and foremost should abstain from claims to providential superiority (1825c: 399).

The foundational humanism shared by all three women in their support of universal rights has a more or less explicit religious backdrop, for example when the common origin of all humankind in its creator is emphasized, but is not exclusively dependent on such premises. This is demonstrated by Wollstonecraft stating ‘that we are formed of the same earth, and breathe the same element. Humanity thus rises naturally out of humility’ (1989a: 205f.). In line with their inclusion of all human beings into equal moral relevance is a firm opposition to the institution of slavery.

Given that all three of them dedicated major parts of their work to addressing the education of youth, it is crucial to bear in mind the hopes of humanizing a new generation of enlightened minds related to these efforts. When Wollstonecraft, for example, stresses that domestic affection ‘open[s] up the heart to the various modifications of humanity’ (1989b: 230) and hence was the ‘first source of civilization’ (1989a: 22) or Macaulay talks about the positive effects social intercourse with animals has on the empathy of children (1790a: 125), it becomes clear that their hopes for the enlightened reform of society are built on practice rather than arid moral doctrines.

Women’s human rights

Despite women’s key role in the education of the next generation in this humanistic sense, their rights and duties are not confined to the traditional realm of hearth and home. This is the well-known view of Wollstonecraft, earning her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*
major attention. It is her lifelong credo – in line with seventeenth-century feminist Mary Astell – that both men and women would profit from a better education of the latter because ‘the two sexes mutually corrupt and improve each other’ (1989b: 209). Ceaselessly striving to charm the male world, women’s dignity does not rest in themselves but depends entirely on their sexual attractiveness. And worse, this desirability necessarily has to vanish in the course of aging – depriving women of their societal ‘worth’. Hence, Wollstonecraft states: ‘If then women do not resign the arbitrary power of beauty – they will prove they have less mind than men’ (1989b: 91). According to her, women’s right to higher education is the guarantee of the enhancement of their full dignity:

Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience; but, as blind obedience is ever sought for by power, tyrants and sensualists are in the right when they endeavour to keep women in the dark, because the former only want slaves, and the latter a play-thing. (1989b: 93)

The granting of full human rights to women, she argues, would contribute not only to their personal happiness but to the common good: ‘Would men but generously snap our chains, and be content with rational fellowship instead of slavish obedience, they would find us more observant daughters, more affectionate sisters, more faithful wives, more reasonable mothers – in a word, better citizens’ (1989b: 220).

But what about Macaulay and Barbauld? Less is known about their views on women’s rights, and speculation has arisen as to why they devoted so few lines to this issue. As already argued in the beginning, contemporary expectations tend to miss the historical realities that had more than one momentous ‘battleground’ of ideas. In the case of Macaulay, it can be suggested that under the notion of the universal rights of man, women are already subsumed. When she, for example, counters Burke with the demand of a ‘fair and equal representation of the whole people’ (1790b: 48) there can hardly be any doubt that this is meant to include women as well. Karen Green, however, considers it possible that ‘Since she aspired to be read and to be taken seriously, perhaps . . . she shrank from publishing such extreme views’ as the ones Wollstonecraft put forward (Green, 2012: 426). What Macaulay in fact did share with Wollstonecraft was a firm opposition to Rousseau’s philosophy of female education and gendered excellence (see 1790a).

For Barbauld and Macaulay, Green emphasizes another interesting feature likely to explain their (relative) reservations about more explicitly dwelling on women’s rights: ‘Both seem to have been confident of their equality with, or superiority to, the men they knew; and they experienced egalitarian relationships with their brothers and husbands’ (2013: 161). In the case of Barbauld, one could add, religion also functioned as a shared experience of equal dignity, rendering it unnecessary to insist on something she apparently had already achieved:

The temple is the only place where human beings, of every rank and sex and age, meet together for one common purpose . . . This is the only place, to enter which nothing more is necessary than to be of the same species. (1825d: 446)

Barbauld’s position is also interesting insofar as her alleged ambiguity has even brought her the attribution of an ‘anti-feminist’ (see Bradshaw, 2005). On the one hand, her poem
To a Lady with Some Painted Flowers (1825g: 100f.) – criticized by Wollstonecraft in her second Vindication (1989b: 122f.) and maybe also in her praise of Macaulay as a woman who does not content herself with flowers but rather strives for intellectual achievements – metaphorically equates women with flowers who in the end are made to please. In the eyes of Wollstonecraft this is an ‘ignoble comparison’ (1989b: 122f.). In another poem, The Rights of Woman, on the other hand, Barbauld appeals to the ‘injured woman’: ‘Rise, assert thy right!’ (1825l: 185). What has, however, obviously disturbed many feminist readers is its final verse where Barbauld invites women to overcome the fight for women’s rights by transcending their rhetoric: ‘That separate rights are lost in mutual love’ (1825l: 187). It seems that for Barbauld, like Wollstonecraft and most probably also Macaulay, the complementarity of the two sexes by no means excludes their equal rights and worth as human beings endowed with the same faculties, but the actual utopia lies in cooperative fellowship beyond the scheme of rights.

Undivided freedom of religion and the secular state

In the mosaic of the Enlightenment’s pressing issues, women’s human rights shared the spotlight with concerns no less delicate in their potential for turning traditional societal norms and certainties upside down. In her stance on the right to freedom of religion without disadvantages in terms of public careers, Barbauld occupies a special position in our triad of female philosophers. Her An Address to the Opposers of the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts (1825b [1790]) – published anonymously (‘A Dissenter’) – is directed against the British Test Acts of 1673–8, which laid down membership of the Church of England as a precondition for public office, with the taking of Holy Communion functioning as a test. These laws were directed predominately against Catholics, but also discriminated against any other nonconformists, prompting Barbauld to raise her voice against a denominationally confined state denying equal rights to its citizens.

To the Church of England, she addresses criticism in terms of its lacking generosity and makes sport of its weakness by speaking of its stubborn attachment to state power despite the ‘exclusive privileges and rich emoluments, stately with her learned halls and endowed colleges, with all the attraction of her wealth, and the thunder of her censures’ (1825b: 357). Barbauld calls for a secularization of the state in exactly that manner – that a particular denomination must not function as a form of privileged citizenship: ‘We wish to be considered as children of the state, though we are not so of the church’ (1825b: 359). The state should act as ‘the father of us all’ and the Church of England ought to abandon its ‘ill-sorted union’ with it (1825b: 359). She makes it clear that this effort is not about begging for alms: ‘No, gentlemen, we wish to have it understood that we do claim it as a right. It loses otherwise half its value’ (1825b: 359). Barbauld carefully distinguishes equal rights from mere toleration. Thus, any argument according to which dissenters already enjoy full toleration misses the point of the discussion. In a characteristic Enlightenment tone, Barbauld emphasizes: ‘It is time so near the end of the eighteenth century . . . to speak with precision, and to call things by their proper names. What you call toleration, we call the exercise of a natural and inalienable right’ (1825b: 360) and adds the diagnostic question: ‘Can ye not discern the signs of the time? The minds of men are in movement from the Borysthenes to the Atlantic’ (1825b: 371). In a laconic
Barbauld draws the picture of a new age no longer adjusted to the division of men along social boundaries and sees in ‘religion and civil politic . . . the two necessary but opposite elements of fire and water’ (1825b: 375).

Before reaching out her hand to her adversaries (‘We see in you our future friends and brethren’ (1825b: 370)), Barbauld forcefully asserts: ‘You will grant us all we ask. The only question between us is, whether you will do it today; – tomorrow you certainly will’ (1825b: 370f.). Published in March of the same year as Burke’s, Wollstonecraft’s as well as Macaulay’s pamphlets, Barbauld’s Address testifies to another female radical’s belief in universal human rights.

Conclusion

Attracted by the Enlightenment’s promise of political as well as moral progress, Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Laetitia Barbauld did not content themselves with just waiting for its realization by others. They proved conventional views on women’s intellectual capacities wrong via their own respective example and joined the struggle for universal human rights and society’s (r-)evolutionary reformation, transcending national, confessional as well as gender boundaries in a holistic humanism.

Striving to make sense of the various epochal changes emerging and surrounding them, they ventured forth to form and voice their opinions, just as they did not shy away from correcting them when necessary. In addition, they all shared a strong preference for practical philosophy. Merely trying to understand the world was obviously never enough when, in their eyes, so many dimensions of the body politic were in dire need of correction. This makes their approach a fascinating integrative and radical one in the true sense of the word. When talking about rights, neither of them remains within the rights discourse only. Rather, a sort of ‘nurturing liberalism’ traces the conditions of possibility of a renewed, healed society to its very roots in domestic/educational relations. From this point of view, without the early and constant cultivation of both tender hearts and autonomous reason in men and women, no public freedom and universal happiness are to be expected.

Notes

1. For a detailed biography of Macaulay, see Hill (1992).
2. In 1785 Macaulay also travelled to the United States and met key figures of the American Revolution. See also Nünning (1998: 5, 41f.).
3. Hume replied in a letter that her ‘cause of liberty . . . is noble and generous, but most of the partisans of that cause, in the last century, disgraced it, by their violence, and also by their cant, hypocrisy and bigotry’ (quoted in Hill, 1992: 42).
4. An exception in this regard is Engster (2001).
5. In this letter Wollstonecraft writes: ‘You are the only female writer who I coincide in opinion with respecting the rank our sex ought to endeavour to attain in the world. I respect Mrs Macaulay Graham because she contends for laurels whilst most of her sex only seek for flowers’ (cited in Todd, 2003: 185f.). For an interpretation of the latter reference, see ‘Beyond the citizen’ above.
6. For her biography, see especially Gordon (2005); Todd (2002); Sapiro (1992).
7. For an overview of the ‘typical British reformative perspective’ of the two, see Bernez (2006).
8. This is her self-depiction written in a letter to her sister Everina (see Todd, 2002: 2).
9. For Wollstonecraft’s religious views, see also Browne (2019).
10. For an overview of her life, see McCarthy (2008).
11. In a letter to her brother, she explicitly addresses her grief (1825m: 9f.). Indeed, the children at her school are a kind of substitute, but not a truly satisfactory one. Interestingly, what Barbauld laments is not that these children are not their own in terms of genealogy, but that she is restricted in educating and modelling them according to her very own ideals. This is but another hint at how strong the focus on, or obsession with, humanistic education is, something which Barbauld has in common with her Enlightenment companions.
12. A similar line of cultural memento mori is also put forward by Wollstonecraft in her second Vindication when she submits that ‘the time may come, when the traveller may ask where proud London stood? When its temples, its laws, and its trade, may be buried in one common ruin’ (1989b: 37).
13. For the history of her reception and in particular the question ‘How does a respected, even revered, woman poet, who left behind a body of work so varied, disappear from anthologies, and thus the canon?’ see Watson (2010).
14. For an account of the controversy in detail, see Whale (2000). For an overview of the critical reception of the Reflections, see Claeys (2000).
15. For their differing view on this decisive event in Britain’s history, see Nünning (1998: 128ff.).
16. As Wollstonecraft puts it: ‘I beseech you to ask your own heart, when you call yourself a friend of liberty, whether it would not be more consistent to style yourself the champion of property, the adorer of the golden image which power has set up?’ (1989a: 13).
17. Wollstonecraft complains: when you should argue you become impassioned’ (1989a: 8), and accuses Burke of ‘a mortal antipathy to reason’ (1989a: 10). See also Macaulay (1790b: 42). This line of critique (‘theatrical representation’) is also found in Thomas Paine’s reply (2003 [1791–2]: 148). Furthermore, Wollstonecraft not only criticized him for a sentimental but, more seriously, an unphilosophical approach: ‘I glow with indignation when I attempt, methodically, to unravel your slavish paradoxes, in which I can find no fixed principle to refute . . . how frequently you draw conclusions without any previous premises’ (1989a: 10).
18. Hobbes recognizes an individual right to deny obedience any time the survival – the primary motive to surrender to state power – is threatened. He even grants this right to convicted criminals (1985 [1651]: 199; 269); see also Curran (2007). Later, others would explicitly emphasize a general collective right of resistance.
19. This is not the only illustration Wollstonecraft chooses in order to work against Burke’s identification of British pious citizens versus frantic French atheists. She also explicitly guards against any charge of atheism (1989a: 9).
20. Paine, who formerly defended the outrages in France on the grounds that they ‘were not the effect of the principles of the Revolution, but of the degraded mind that existed before the Revolution, and which the Revolution is calculated to reform’ (2003 [1791]: 159), was incarcerated for almost one year and only through sheer luck evaded execution.
21. ‘They have “the rights of men”. Against these there can be no prescription; against these no argument is binding: these admit no temperament and no compromise: anything withheld from their full demand is so much of fraud and injustice’ (1894 [1790]: 307f.).
22. Barbauld (1825c: 395; 1825e); Wollstonecraft (1989a: 14); Macaulay (1790a: 190f). For a detailed investigation into Wollstonecraft’s perspective in that regard, see Ferguson (1984).
23. The last paragraph reads: ‘Gay without toil, and lovely without art, They spring to cheer the sense, and glad the heart, Nor blush, my fair, to own you copy these, Your best, your sweetest empire is – to please’ (1989b).
24. In her *Against Inconsistency in our Expectations*, Barbauld states: ‘There is a cast of manners peculiar and becoming to each age, sex, and profession . . . Each is perfect in its kind. A woman as woman: a tradesman as a tradesman’ (1825a: 194).

25. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1989b: 105); Macaulay, *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke* (1790b: 50). Recently, the misleading perspective on Barbauld regarding the cause of women has been corrected by Penny Bradshaw (2005).

26. This characterization was coined by Engster (2001) in regard to Wollstonecraft but is also appropriate for Macaulay and Barbauld.

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