**Lecture 01**

**Radicalism and the loss of the**

**American colonies**

In 1764 there was a serious quarrel over taxation between the British government and its colonies in

America. It was a perfect example of the kind of freedom for which Wilkes had been fighting. The

British government continued to think of the colonists as British subjects. In 1700 there had been

only 200,000 colonists, but by 1770 there were 2.5 million. Such large numbers needed to be dealt

with carefully.

Some American colonists decided that it was not lawful for the British to tax them without their

agreement. Political opinion in Britain was divided. Some felt that the tax was fair because the money

would be used to pay for the defence of the American colonies against French attack. But

several important politicians, including Wilkes and Chatham, agreed with the colonists that there

should be “no taxation without representation”.

In 1773 a group of colonists at the port of Boston threw a shipload of tea into the sea rather than pay

tax on it. The event became known as “the Boston Teaparty”. The British government answered by

closing the port. But the colonists then decided to prevent British goods from entering America until

the port was opened again. This was rebellion, and the government decided to defeat it by force. The

American War of Independence had begun.

The war in America lasted from 1775 until 1783. The government had no respect for the politics of

the colonists, and the British army had no respect for their fighting ability. The result was a disastrous

defeat for the British government. It lost everything except for Canada.

Many British politicians openly supported the colonists. They were called “radicals”. For the first

time British politicians supported the rights of the king’s subjects abroad to govern themselves and to

fight for their rights against the king. The war in America gave strength to the new ideas of

democracy and of independence. Two of the more important radicals were Edmund

Burke and Tom Paine. Paine was the first to suggest that the American colonists should become independent

**Wilkes and liberty**

George III was the first Hanoverian to be born in Britain. Unlike his father and grandfather he had

no interest in Hanover. He wanted to take a more active part in governing Britain, and in particular

he wished to be free to choose his own ministers. As long as he worked with the small number of

aristocrats from which the king’s ministers were chosen, and who controlled Parliament, it did not

seem as if he would have much difficulty.

Parliament still represented only a very small number of people. In the eighteenth century only house owners with a certain income had the right to vote. This was based on ownership of land worth forty shillings a year in the counties, but the amount varied from town to town. As a result, while the mid-century population of Britain was almost eight million, there were fewer than 250,000 voters, 160,000 of them in the counties and 85,000 in the towns or “boroughs”. Only 55 of the 200 boroughs had more than 500 voters. The others were controlled by a small number of very rich property owners, sometimes acting together as a “borough corporation”. Each county and each borough sent two representatives to Parliament.

This meant that bargains could be made between the two most powerful groups of people in each

“constituency”, allowing the chosen representative of each group to be returned to Parliament.

It was not difficult for rich and powerful people either in the boroughs or in the counties to make

sure that the man they wanted was elected to Parliament. In the countryside, most ordinary

landowners also held land as tenants from the greater landowners. At that time voting was not

done in secret, and no tenant would vote against the wishes of his landlord in case he lost his land.

Other voters were frightened into voting for the “right man”, or persuaded by a gift of money. In

this way the great landowning aristocrats were able to control those who sat in Parliament, and make

sure that MPs did what they wanted. Politics was a matter only for a small number of the gentry who

had close connections with this political aristocracy. No one could describe Parliament in

those days as democratic.

However, there was one MP, John Wilkes, who saw things differently. Wilkes was a Whig, and did not like the new government of George III. Unlike almost every other MP, Wilkes also believed that politics should he open to free discussion by everyone. Free speech, he believed, was the basic right of every individual. When George III made peace with France in 1763 without telling his ally Frederick of Prussia, Wilkes printed a strong attack on the government in his own newspaper, The North Briton. The king and his ministers were extremely angry. They were unwilling to accept free speech of this kind. Wilkes was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London and all his private papers were taken from his home.

The government claimed it had arrested Wilkes “of state necessity”. The judge turned down this argument with the famous judgement that “public policy is not an argument in a court of law”. Wilkes won his case and was released. His victory established principles of the greatest importance: that the freedom of the individual is more important than the interests of the state, and that no one could be arrested without a proper reason. Government was not free to arrest whom it chose.Government, too, was under the law. Wilkes’s victory angered the king, but made Wilkes the most popular man in London.

The ruling class was not used to considering the opinions of ordinary people. Between 1750 and 1770 the number of newspapers had increased. These were read by the enormous number of literate people who could never hope to vote, but who were interested in the important matters of the times. They were mainly clerks, skilled workers and tradesmen. Improved roads meant that a newspaper printed in London could be reprinted in Liverpool two days later. Newspapers in their turn increased the amount of political discussion. Even working people read the papers and discussed politics and the royal family, as foreign visitors noticed. “Conversation” clubs met in different towns to discuss questions like “Under what conditions is a man most free?”, or whether secret voting was necessary for political freedom. The fact that ordinary people who had no part to play in politics asked and discussed such questions explains why John Wilkes was so popular. His struggle showed that public opinion was now a new and powerful influence on politics.

Wilkes’s victory was important because he had shown that Parliament did not represent the ordinary people, and that their individual freedom was not assured. As a result of his victory people began to organise political activity outside Parliament in order to win their basic rights.

**Idustrial revolution**

Several influences came together at the same time to revolutionise Britain’s industry: money, labour, a

greater demand for goods, new power, and better transport.

 By the end of the eighteenth century, some families had made huge private fortunes. Growing merchant banks helped put this money to use. Increased food production made it possible to feed large populations in the new towns. These populations were made up of the people who had lost their land through enclosures and were looking for work. They now needed to buy things they had never needed before. In the old days people in the villages had grown their own food, made many of their own clothes and generally managed without having to buy very much. As landless workers these people had to buy food, clothing and everything else they needed. This created an opportunity to make and sell more goods than ever before. The same landless people who needed these things also became the workers who made them.

By the early eighteenth century simple machines had already been invented for basic jobs. They could make large quantities of simple goods quickly and cheaply so that “mass production” became possible for the first time. Each machine carried out one simple process, which introduced the idea of “division of labour” among workers. This was to become an important part of the industrial revolution.

By the 1740s the main problem holding back industrial growth was fuel. There was less wood,

and in any case wood could not produce the heat necessary to make iron and steel either in large

quantities or of high quality. But at this time the use of coal for changing iron ore into good quality

iron or steel was perfected, and this made Britain the leading iron producer in Europe. This happened

only just in time for the many wars in which Britain was to fight, mainly against France, for the rest of

the century. The demand for coal grew very quickly. In 1800 Britain was producing four times as

much coal as it had done in 1700, and eight times as much iron.

Increased iron production made it possible to manufacture new machinery for other industries. No one saw this more clearly than John Wilkinson, a man with a total belief in iron. He built the largestironworks in the country. He built the world’s first iron bridge, over the River Severn, in 1779. He saw the first iron boats made. He built an iron chapel for the new Methodist religious sect, and was himself buried in an iron coffin. Wilkinson was also quick to see the value of new inventions. When James Watt made a greatly improved steam engine in 1769, Wilkinson improved it further by making parts of the engine more accurately with his special skills in ironworking. In this way the skills of one craft helped the skills of another. Until then steam engines had only been used for pumping, usually in coal mines. But in 1781 Watt produced an engine with a turning motion, made of iron and steel. It was a vital development because people were now no longer dependent on natural power.

**The years of revolution**

France’s neighbours only slowly realised that its revolution in 1789 could be dangerous for them. Military power and the authority of kingship were almost useless against revolutionary ideas. In France the revolution had been made by the “bourgeoisie”, or middle class, leading the peasants and urban working classes. In England the bourgeoisie and the gentry had acted together for centuries in the House of Commons, and had become the most powerful class in Britain in the seventeenth century. They had no sympathy with the French revolutionaries, and were frightened by the danger of “awakening” the working classes.

They saw the danger of revolution in the British countryside, where the enclosures were happening, and in the towns, to which many of the landless were going in search of work. They also saw the political dangers which could develop from the great increase in population.

Several radicals sympathised with the cause of the French revolutionaries, and called for reforms in Britain. In other countries in Europe such sympathy was seen as an attack on the aristocracy. But in England both the gentry and the bourgeoisie felt they were being attacked, and the radicals were accused of putting Britain in danger. Tory crowds attacked the homes of radicals in Birmingham and several other cities. The Whig Party was split. Most feared “Jacobinism”, as sympathy with the revolutionaries was called, and joined William Pitt, “the Younger” (the son of Lord Chatham), while those who wanted reform stayed with the radical Whig leader, Charles James Fox. In spite of its small size, Fox’s party formed the link between the Whigs of the eighteenth century and the Liberals of the nineteenth century.

Not all the radicals sympathised with the revolutionaries in France. In many ways Edmund Burke was a conservative, in spite of his support for the American colonists in 1776. He now quarrelled with other radicals, and wrote Reflections on the Revolution in France , which became a popular book. He feared that the established order of kings in Europe would fall. Tom Paine, who had also supported the American colonists, wrote in answer The Rights of Man, in which he defended the rights of theordinary people against the power of the monarchy and the aristocrats. The ideas in this book were thought to be so dangerous that Paine had to escape to France. He never returned to Britain. But the book itself has remained an important work on the question of political freedom.

These matters were discussed almost entirely by the middle class and the gentry. Hardly any working- class voices were heard, but it should be noted that the first definitely working-class political organisation, the Corresponding Society, was established at this time. It did not last long, because the government closed it down in 1798, and it only had branches in London, Norwich, Sheffield, Nottingham and one or two other centres.

The French Revolution had created fear all over Europe. The British government was so afraid that revolution would spread to Britain that it imprisoned radical leaders. It was particularly frightened that the army would be influenced by these dangerous ideas. Until then, soldiers had always lived in inns and private homes. Now the government built army camps, where soldiers could live separated from the ordinary people. The government also brought together yeomen and gentry who supported the ruling establishment and trained them as soldiers. The government claimed that these “yeomanry” forces were created in case of a French attack. This may have been true, but they were probably useless against an enemy army, and they were used to prevent revolution by the poor and discontented.