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ARTICLE

The Downfall of All Slavish Hierarchies: Richard Price on Emancipation, Improvement, and Republican Utopia

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Scholars have been paying increasing attention to the republican theory of liberty developed by the eighteenth-century British radical Richard Price. This article studies his narrative of a revolution of liberty, which consists in the downfall of oppressive powers, the establishment of republican institutions, and the introduction of a utopian age. In distinction from work that has focused on the millennial aspects of Price's narrative of emancipation, I highlight its political contexts and functions, situating its early development in utopian speculations about agrarian equality and population, demonstrating how the American Revolution had transformed it into a rallying cry for revolutionaries, and reconstructing its role as a source of politically mobilizing hope. This study differs from much of the scholarship on Price in looking beyond the Anglo-American context and presenting his work as part of a European conversation on the prospects of republican utopia, a conversation whose participants included Rousseau, Turgot, Mirabeau, and Condorcet.

The Welsh-born, London-based Dissenting minister, philosopher, and political radical Richard Price was one of the influential writers on liberty in the Age of Revolutions. In his best-selling defense of the American Revolution, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (1776), Price offered a systematic philosophical account of the concept of civil liberty, arguing that it consists in the power of individuals and communities to govern themselves.[1] In Britain dozens of writers had criticized his account of liberty as dangerously subversive, but in America and in France Price became known as one of the leading "friends of liberty."[2] The French economist and statesman Turgot wrote to Price, "you are almost the first of the writers of your country, who has given a just idea of liberty."[3] The Duc de

[1]Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (London, 1776), 6–18.

[2]On the debate provoked by Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* see Yiftah Elazar, "The Liberty Debate: Richard Price and His Critics on Civil Liberty, Free Government, and Democratic Participation" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University, Princeton, 2012).

[3]Richard Price, *The Correspondence of Richard Price*, ed. W. Bernard Peach and D. O. Thomas, 3 vols. (Durham and Cardiff, 1983–94), henceforth *CRP*, 2: 12.

la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, president of the French National Constituent Assembly, later referred to Price as "that great Apostle of Liberty."[4] More recently, the historian Annelien de Dijn has described Price's account of civil liberty as "one of the clearest and most coherent expositions of the republican theory of freedom to be published in the eighteenth century."[5]

The aim of this article is to improve our understanding of Price's work by looking beyond his *theory* of liberty and examining his *narrative* of emancipation. In its final form, formulated in the years 1784–9, this is the narrative of a "revolution in favour of universal liberty," which is ignited in America, set ablaze in France, and set to engulf the entire globe.[6] It is a captivating story about the transformative, revolutionary power of the principles of liberty.

For the sake of clarity, the narrative of emancipation can be broken down into four successive stages: the diffusion of the principles of liberty, the downfall of slavish hierarchies and governments, the establishment of republican institutions, and the future period of improvement. The formulation and diffusion of the principles of liberty by writers such as John Milton, John Locke, Algernon Sidney, Montesquieu, Turgot, and Price himself was supposed to enlighten the minds of individuals across the globe and to encourage them to overthrow the "oppressors of the world" in religion and in politics. "Remove the darkness in which they envelope [*sic*] the world," wrote Price, "and their usurpations will be exposed, their power will be subverted, and the world emancipated."[7]

The overthrow of oppressive powers—"the downfall of all slavish hierarchies and governments," as Price described it—was supposed to lead to the establishment of "a system of perfect liberty, *religious* as well as *civil* ."[8] In speaking of a system of perfect liberty, Price referred to a system of republican institutions that would realize the principles of liberty as self-government. Amongst other things, it would include laws protecting the power of individuals to follow their own judgment in civil and religious affairs, laws securing the power of all free agents to participate in government through adequate and responsive political representation, and confederative institutions securing the self-government of communities.[9]

[4]François Alexandre Frédéric de La Rouchefoucauld, Duc de Liancourt to Price, 11 Aug. 1789, in *The Correspondence of the Revolution Society in London, With the National Assembly, and With Various Societies of the Friends of Liberty in France and England* (London, 1792), 4–5.

[5]Annelien de Dijn, "Republicanism and Democracy: The Tyranny of the Majority in Eighteenth-Century Political Debate," in Yiftah Elazar and Geneviève Rousselière, eds., *Republicanism and the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2019), 66–88, at 65. On Price as a theorist of republican liberty see Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, 1997), 27 n. 2, 29, 34–5, 40, 64, 71; Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1998), 12–13, 50; Vivienne Brown, "Self-Government: The Master Trope of Republican Liberty," *The Monist* 84/1 (2001), 60–76; Elazar, "The Liberty Debate."

[6]Richard Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World* (London, 1784), 1–8, quote at 2; Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London, 1789), 48–51.

[7]Price, *Discourse*, 11–15.

[8]Richard Price, "On Providence," in Price, *Four Dissertations* (London, 1767), 1–194, at 8; Price, *Revolution*, 20, original emphasis.

[9]Price, *Civil Liberty*, 6–30; Richard Price, *Additional Observations on the Nature and Value of Civil Liberty* (London, 1777), 1–15; Price, *Revolution*, 20–49.

Finally, the emancipation of humanity was supposed to introduce a utopian "period of improvement" on earth, in which human affairs and human beings themselves would be dramatically improved. The two ideas, emancipation and improvement, were inextricably bound together in Price's thought. The increasing intellectual improvement of humanity since the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution was supposed to lead toward its emancipation. Emancipation, in turn, was supposed to precipitate further, unbounded improvement, by allowing the unfettered pursuit of truth and enabling individuals to realize their potential as rational, moral, and religious beings.[10]

Focusing on Price's story of the emancipation of humanity, the article follows its intellectual development in his work. The most renowned formulation of this narrative is in a sermon that Price delivered on 4 November 1789, the sermon that provoked Edmund Burke into writing his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). But the narrative already appears in Price's work four decades earlier, in 1759.[11] Much of the article examines the changing contexts and functions of the narrative in these four decades. It discusses Price's early formulation of the narrative in the context of his preoccupation with freedom from religious oppression. It reconstructs his embracement, in the 1760s, of a speculative scenario proposed by the Scottish minister Robert Wallace of an egalitarian government whose contagious example spreads across the globe. It recovers Price's shift, during the American Revolution, from the Abbé Raynal's and Denis Diderot's split vision of American glory and European corruption to Turgot's suggestion that America could serve as a model for the improvement of the world. And it recounts Price's development of the narrative of emancipation in its boldest version in the aftermath of the American Revolution, in dialogue with allies such as Mirabeau and Condorcet. Throughout, it interprets the political function of the narrative as the employment of a utopian vision in order to offer mobilizing hope to reformers and revolutionaries facing civil and religious domination.

In the scholarship on Price, the ideas of emancipation and improvement have received relatively little attention, which is somewhat surprising given the impact of Price's work on these topics in the late eighteenth century: the marquis de Condorcet described Price as one of the "first and most illustrious apostles" of "the doctrine of the indefinite perfectibility of the human species"; John Adams criticized Price and his friend Joseph Priestley for the "mighty discovery" of "the perfectibility of man" and described them as "honest enthusiasts carried away by the popular contagion of the times"; Robert Malthus probably had Price in mind in his polemic against the "prophets of perfection," as Robert Mayhew has argued.[12] There are two recent studies, however, in relation to which I would like to position

[10]Price, *Revolution*, 20; Richard Price, *The Evidence for a Future Period of Improvement in the State of Mankind, with the Means and Duty of Promoting It* (London, 1787).

[11]On the role of Price's sermon in inspiring Burke's *Reflections* see F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, *1784–1797* (New York, 2006), 252, 282.

[12]Marie-Jean-Antione-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, "The Sketch" (1795), in *Condorcet: Political Writings*, ed. Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati (Cambridge, 2012), 102; John Adams and Benjamin Rush, *The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush 1805–1813*, ed. John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair (Indianapolis, 2001), 68; Robert J. Mayhew, *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet* (Cambridge, MA, 2014), chap. 2.

my interpretation of Price: Jack Fruchtman's work on the republican millennialism of Price and Priestley, and Jonathan Israel's incorporation of Price into his account of the Radical Enlightenment.[13]

Fruchtman has argued that Price and Priestley merged in their political thought the traditions of Christian millennialism and classical republicanism to form a political theology that made political action a means to the end of bringing about the millennium, the thousand-year kingdom of Christ on earth prior to the final judgment.[14] While acknowledging Price's use of millennial language, the approach taken here diverges from Fruchtman's in highlighting the political contexts and functions of Price's narrative of emancipation and improvement. Furthermore, Fruchtman has situated Price's work in the context of English political thought. His study can be seen as part of a broader attempt in the scholarship on Price to carve out the role of Rational Dissent in an English or British or Anglo-American Enlightenment.[15] But neither the important context of Dissent nor the idea of an English Enlightenment should be reified to the extent of obscuring Price's self-understanding as a citizen of the world and practical role as part of an international network of radical friends of liberty. This article differs from Fruchtman's account and from much of the scholarship on Price in looking beyond the Anglo-American context and reconstructing his work on emancipation and improvement as part of a European conversation on the prospects of republican utopia.

Jonathan Israel has provided a corrective to overly localized readings of Price by portraying him as one of the leading representatives of the European Radical Enlightenment. In doing so, he has rightly emphasized Price's radical and democratic conception of improvement.[16] Indeed, Price's narrative of emancipation and improvement is a quintessential scenario of revolutionary enlightenment, in the eighteenth-century sense of "enlightenment" as the diffusion of the light of

[13]Jonathan I. Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, 2009); Jack Fruchtman, "The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth-Century English Republican Millennialism," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 73/4 (1983), 1–125. Two other treatments of Price's views on improvement are worth mentioning: Henri Laboucheix, *Richard Price as Moral Philosopher and Political Theorist*, trans. Sylvia Raphael and David Raphael (Oxford, 1982), 129–37; George Marshall Reynolds, "Providence and Progress: Richard Price's Idea of Progress" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 1974). My account differs from the latter two studies in focusing on Price's narrative of emancipation and reconstructing its political contexts and functions. Reynolds depicts Price as breaking with "the narrow eudaemonist theories of the French" and "anticipating the spiritual progressivism of the German school from Lessing to Hegel" (see his Abstract), while I highlight Price's agreement with Turgot and Condorcet.

[14]I Follow Fruchtman's usage of the term "millennialism"; see Fruchtman, "Apocalyptic Politics," 4–6. On Price's millennialism see also Christopher Burdon, *The Apolcalypse in England: Revelation Unravelling, 1700–1834* (Basingstoke, 1997), 108–12.

[15]On the contribution of Dissent to the British Enlightenment see Knud Haakonssen, ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, 1996); and the work published in the journal *Enlightenment and Dissent* (1982–2016). On the idea of an English Enlightenment see Roy Porter, "The Enlightenment in England," in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich, eds., *The Enlightenment in National Context* (Cambridge, 1981), 1–18.

[16]Israel, *Revolution of the Mind*, 2–3, 10–12, 15, 30–32, 48–9, 58–9, 89–91, 237–8.

truth.[17] In this case, it was the light of the true principles of liberty that was supposed to bring about a revolution of liberty, which would eradicate dominating governments and churches and enable the unfettered pursuit of moral and religious truth.

Yet Israel's account of Price reminds us, again, that the categories we use in thinking of the Enlightenment—secular/religious, global/national, radical/moderate—must not be reified to the extent that they obscure the complexity of texts and impede our ability to learn from them. In his account of the Radical Enlightenment, Israel has attempted to fit Price's work into his schematic distinction between radical "Spinozists" and moderate "providentialists," and in doing so has dismissed or distorted Price's commitments to Arianism, dualism, and special providence, producing a caricature of Price.[18] My intention here is neither to vindicate Price's metaphysical and religious commitments nor to dismiss them, but to reconstruct a republican utopian narrative that bridged national boundaries as well as differences in metaphysical and religious commitments.

The doctrine of improvement

Between 1759 and 1789, Price developed a narrative, or a "doctrine," as he referred to it, concerning "the progressive course of human improvement" toward a future period of improvement on earth—a utopian age of liberty, reason, virtue, peace, and happiness.[19] As noted above, in this narrative, the ideas of emancipation and improvement were inextricably bound together. Before zooming in on Price's story of emancipation, which is the primary focus of this article, it would be helpful to take a look at his broader doctrine of improvement. I will be looking at it from two perspectives: that of millennialism and that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's narrative of the progress of the human species from savagery to civilization.

Price explicitly identified the future period of improvement that he envisioned with the millennium.[20] Yet his doctrine of improvement is not easily reducible to millennialism, whether in terms of its content or in terms of its sources. In terms of content, Price's period of improvement exists in secular time and can be understood in secular terms as a utopian vision, a form of social dreaming about a radically different society.[21] While he presented it as the fulfillment of

[17]Price used the words "enlighten," "enlightened," and "illumination" in this sense. The word "enlightenment" was rarely used by eighteenth-century English speakers, but see James Rymer, *A Description of the Island of Nevis: With an Account of Its Diseases* (London, 1775), vi.

[18]Israel, *Revolution of the Mind*, 19–28, 155–63. For critiques of Israel's treatment of Price see Martin Fitzpatrick, "Enlightenment, Dissent, and Toleration," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 28 (2012), 42–72, at 50–51; Louise Hickman, "Mixing Politics with the Pulpit: Eternal Immutable Morality and Richard Price's Political Radicalism," in Douglas Hedley and David Leech, eds., *Revisioning Cambridge Platonism: Sources and Legacy* (Cham, 2019), 159–73; Evangelos Sakkas, "Joseph Priestley on Metaphysics and Politics: Jonathan Israel's 'Radical Enlightenment' Reconsidered," *History of European Ideas* 45/1 (2019), 104–16, at 112–14.

[19]Price, *Evidence*, quotes at 20, 51.

[20]Price, *Revolution*, 6–7; Price, *Evidence*, 1–11, 25.

[21]See the definition of utopianism in Lyman Tower Sargent, "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited," *Utopian Studies* 5/1 (1994), 1–37.

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biblical prophesies, he consistently translated such prophecies into worldly terms: the beast being cast into a lake of fire meant that "antichristian corruption and oppression will be abolished"; the thousand-year reign of Christ and the saints meant that reason, liberty, and virtue "shall for a long time become prevalent"; and so on.[22] Moreover, the reasons that he offered for expecting this future period included scriptural evidence, but he placed greater emphasis on historical and contemporary evidence for the probability of future improvement.[23] Furthermore, the means for the progressive improvement of humanity that he identified were primarily the practical efforts of the friends of freedom and the diffusion of the principles of liberty, even if he believed that the "invisible hand" of providence was secretely guiding these efforts.[24] Finally, contemporaries recognized that Price's doctrine of improvement was articulated in terms friendly to "a Christian Philosopher as to a Heathen Poet," to quote the American poet Joel Barlow, who relied on Price's work in support of his belief that "such a state of peace and happiness as is foretold in scripture and commonly called the millennial period, may be rationally expected to be introduced without a miracle."[25]

In terms of the sources of Price's doctrine of improvement, Fruchtman speculated that Price and Priestley adopted a politicized idea of the millennium formulated in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and transmitted to them through David Hartley's influential work *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* (1749).[26] But while Hartley's millannialism influenced Priestley, there is no evidence that it influenced Price.[27] More importantly, Hartley's and Price's millennial narratives are strikingly different: both predicted the downfall of civil and ecclesiastical powers, but Hartley argued that complete happiness would be possible only after "the Destruction of this World by Fire," and there is nothing in his work like the positive vision of earthly liberty and improvement that we find in Price.[28] Fruchtman's explanation is that Price combined Hartley's more traditional view of the millennium with a less orthodox "Jewish apocalyptic or messianic tradition that projects a future golden age of

[22]Price, *Evidence*, 8–9.

[23]Ibid., 6–25.

[24]Ibid., 25–9, 51–3. On the "invisible hand" of providence see Price, "On Providence," 16.

[25]Joel Barlow, *The Vision of Columbus* (Hartford, 1787), 242 n.

[26]Fruchtman, "Apocalyptic Politics," 11–20.

[27]On Hartley's influence on Priestley see Joseph Priestley, *Institutes of Natural and Revealed Religion*, 3 vols. (London, 1772), 1: xviii–xix, 3: 217; Priestley, *The Present State of Europe Compared with Ancient Prophecies* (London, 1794), esp. 35–40; Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore, 1975), chap. 6.

[28]David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations*, 2 vols. (Bath and London, 1749), 2: 380–81. There is also no compelling reason to assume that Price picked up his views on improvement from Priestley, as suggested in Thomas Cooper, "Of Dr. Priestley's Political Works and Opinions," in Joseph Priestley, *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley*, vol. 2 (Northumberland, 1806), 337–77, at 344–5. Price had already formulated his doctrine of improvement in 1759, before Priestley published anything on this topic and before the two first met, in 1765 or 1766. For Priestley's early statements on improvement see Joseph Priestley, *A Syllabus of a Course of Lectures on the Study of History* (Warrington, 1765), 18; Priestley, *An Essay on the Course of Liberal Education for Civil and Active Life* (London, 1765), 149–51, 160–63; Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government; and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty* (Dublin, 1768), 1–8.

bliss and happiness at the end of time."[29] But how such Jewish, early Christian, and medieval ideas were transmitted to Price remains unclear in Fruchtman's account, and more importantly, why he turned to these ideas remains to be explained.[30] To understand the particular shape of Price's narrative of emancipation and improvement we would need to look at some of the political contexts and functions of his work.

To bring into focus some of the distinctive characteristics of Price's doctrine of improvement, it would be helpful to contrast it with Rousseau's narrative of the progress of the human species in the *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755). Rousseau attributed progress in large part to perfectibility, "the faculty of perfecting itself which is the specific characteristic of the human species."[31] Far from seeing perfectibility as a guarantee of the realization of perfection, Rousseau described it as "the source of all man's miseries," paradoxically robbing humanity of its original happiness and setting it on a course of progressive corruption, inequality, and domination.[32] Price mentioned Rousseau's discussion of the "*natural improveableness* of the human race" or "*capacity of improvement* "—his translation into English of *perfectibilité*—in a footnote to his essay "Of Providence" (1767).[33] But Price's own views on improvement differed from Rousseau's in several ways.

First, Rousseau described perfectibility as the faculty that develops all of the other faculties when acted upon by external circumstances, not as an internal principle of development that propels individuals and the species toward perfection.[34] For Price, on the other hand, improvement was "everlasting progress" toward the perfection of God.[35] In the spirit of Neoplatonism, he argued that human beings can and should cultivate the desire "to become liker to the Deity, and advance continually nearer and nearer to complete perfection."[36] Improvement was not merely a capacity for him: it was an ethos, which drives individuals and the species to transcend their current limitations and pursue godlike perfection.

[29]Fruchtman, "Apocalyptic Politics," 38–45, quote at 39.

[30]In his review of Fruchtman's study, Tuveson commented, "just how the transformation of millennial expectations to belief in progress and republican idealism took place needs more detailed study"; see Ernest Tuveson, "Review of The Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley," *Church History* 53/4 (1984), 558.

[31]Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men" (1755), in Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge, 1997), 111–222, at 208.

[32]Ibid., 141.

[33]Price, *Evidence*, 20, original emphasis. On the idea of improvement in England see Paul Slack, *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2015).

[34]Rousseau, "Inequality," 141; Victor Gourevitch, "Introduction," in Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Political Writings*, ix–xxxi, at xix–xx.

[35]Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals* (London, 1758), 149–51; see Laboucheix, *Price*, 130–35.

[36]Price, *Review*, 390–96, quote at 392. See also Richard Price, *Sermons on Various Subjects* (London, 1816), 263–82; Louise Hickman, "Godliness and Godlikeness: Cambridge Platonism in Richard Price's Religious Rationalism," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 24 (2008), 1–23; Hickman, *Eighteenth-Century Dissent and Cambridge Platonism: Reconceiving the Philosophy of Religion* (New York, 2017), chap. 2.

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Second, compared to Rousseau, Price was less romantic about nature and more optimistic about civilization. He accepted that prior to "experience and instruction," human beings were "nearly the savages described by Mr. *Rousseau*"; that is, "creatures running naked and wild in the woods, without reflection, without society, and without language," but argued that such creatures simply failed to become "what they are capable of becoming by a due application of their powers, by the invention of the arts and sciences, and by the establishments of the best schemes of civil policy." The fact was, he argued, that most individuals in history had been living in "darkness and barbarism," and as a result, "Thousands of Boyles, Clarks and Newtons have probably been lost to the world, and lived and died in ignorance and meanness."[37] In contrast to Rousseau's "secularized version of the Augustinian story of man's fall," Price found it reasonable to expect that humanity will progressively improve, propelled by the light of reason, until it reaches a utopian future.[38] Mary Wollstonecraft, Price's friend and admirer, whose narrative of improvement was roughly similar to Price's, put the point as follows: "Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally … and I, that all will *be* right."[39]

Third, the narratives that Rousseau and Price constructed were both intended to encourage social and political change, but in different ways. Rousseau's Second Discourse was a subversive genealogy.[40] By showing "the genuine source" of human miseries to lie not in nature, but in "the blind route" of "pretended perfection," Rousseau subverted the legitimacy of established social and political inequalities.[41] Price took the illegitimacy of dominating political and religious hierarchies as his premise and inquired after the means for change. His understanding of social and political change laid an emphasis on two ideas that were absent from Rousseau's Second Discourse: activism and the transformative power of the principles of liberty.

In his account of activism, Price tried to resolve the apparent tension between his belief in the liberty of moral agents and his defense of the doctrine of special providence, the notion that god secretly guides the actions of particular individuals.[42] The most common means that providence employs for the improvement of humanity, he argued, are "the investigations and active exertions of enlightened

[37]Price, "On Providence," 150–51. This can be read to imply that social circumstances needed to change to offer appropriate conditions for human perfection. In her biography of Jane Franklin Mecom, Jill Lepore says that citing Price's "Boyles, Clarks and Newtons" paragraph in a letter to her brother, Benjamin Franklin, was "the most revolutionary thought Jane Franklin Mecom had ever put down in writing." Jill Lepore, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (New York, 2013), 217–18. See Benjamin Franklin and Jane Mecom, *The Letters of Benjamin Franklin and Jane Mecom*, ed. Carl van Doren (Princeton, 1950), 275.

[38]Price, "On Providence," 139. The quote is from Robin Douglass, *Rousseau and Hobbes: Nature, Free Will, and the Passions* (Oxford, 2015), 15; see also chap. 4.

[39]Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London, 1792), 22, original emphasis.

[40]Judith N. Shklar, "Subversive Genealogies," *Daedalus* 101/1 (1972), 129–54.

[41]Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "The Confessions of J.-J. Rousseau," in Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, ed. Christopher Kelly, Roger D. Masters, and Peter G. Stillman, trans. Christopher Kelly (Hanover and London, 1995), 1–550, at 326.

[42]On this tension see Price, "On Providence," 12–22, 94–100.

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and honest men … aimed directly at the melioration of the world." What this means is that individual action for the improvement of society is all-important, particularly the inquiry after truth and the attempt to instruct and reform others, and yet providence guides such activity toward a utopian future. Price repeatedly said that the knowledge of reformers that they are "cooperating with providence; that the hand of God has marked out [their] path," is a source of "encouragement," or politically mobilizing hope, in the struggle against slavish hierarchies and governments.[43]

The belief in the transformative power of the principles of liberty plays a central role in this account of social and political change. Liberty lies at the heart of Price's doctrine of improvement, as it arguably lies at the heart of Rousseau's tale of the progress of inequality and domination.[44] But in Price's work there is a clear mechanism of improvement: it is by the diffusion of "the principles of liberty" that the future period of improvement "is likely to be introduced." The very knowledge of the principles of liberty is supposed to undermine the authority of illegitimate religious and civil powers and to lead to an amendment in human affairs.[45] In what follows, I will be looking more closely at this narrative of emancipation. I will be reconstructing its emergence out of Price's engagement, in contexts that shifted over time, with the challenges of reform and revolution.

The contagion of utopia

As mentioned above, Price formulated his narrative of emancipation in its final form in the years 1784–9, in the aftermath of the American Revolution, but he had already laid down the essential foundations for it in the 1750s and 1760s, long before the first shots were fired at the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775. His published writings in the 1750s and 1760s situate this narrative in two political contexts: the struggle against the discrimination of Protestant Dissenters and debates about agrarian equality and population. I will be devoting particular attention to Price's engagement with the work of Robert Wallace on agrarian equality and population, which has been neglected by the scholarship on Price.[46] As I shall argue, Price borrowed from Wallace a scenario of contagion, according to which the visible example of ideal government could infect the minds of people and spread across the globe—a scenario that later informed his understanding of the possible role of America in a universal revolution of liberty.

The first appearance of the narrative of emancipation in Price's work was in a sermon that he preached on 29 November 1759, on the day of thanksgiving

[43]Price, *Evidence*, 26–9, 51–3, quotes at 28, 51–2. See also Richard Price, *Britain's Happiness, and the Proper Means of Improving It* (London, 1759), 23–4; Price, *Discourse*, 49–51.

[44]Frederick Neuhauser, "Rousseau's Critique of Economic Inequality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 41/3 (2013), 193–225.

[45]Price, *Britain's Happiness*, 23.

[46]Henri Laboucheix and Manuela Albertone discussed Price's egalitarian vision without exploring the influence of Wallace's work on this vision or on Price's narrative of emancipation and improvement. Laboucheix, *Price*, 135–7; Manuela Albertone, *National Identity and the Agrarian Republic: The Transatlantic Commerce of Ideas between America and France (1750–1830)* (London and New York, 2016), 219–23.

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declared by the king following a succession of victories in the Seven Years War.[47] The sermon, whose published title is *Britain's Happiness and the Proper Means of Improving It*, stands out among Price's political writings in its effusive expression of patriotic pride. Writing in the idiom of Britain as God's new Israel, and rejoicing at various manifestations of its "peculiar happiness," Price described his country as a "land where peace, plenty, knowledge, and liberty abound and flourish," and as a source of light unto the nations surrounding it. He laid particular emphasis on the achievements of religious liberty in Britain, where the "Principles of Liberty," he said, were generally understood to imply "that Christ is the only Law-giver of Christians, that there can be no such thing as human authority in religious matters." This religious freedom, he argued, had made possible advances in religious knowledge, due to which "Christianity has been cleared among us of a great deal of the shocking rubbish, which has been thrown upon it by Popery," and Britain had become "the bulwark of the Protestant interest in the world."[48]

Price's comments in this sermon highlight the extent to which his preoccupation with slavish hierarchies and governments emanated from his commitment to a rational and liberal Protestantism. In terms of Christian doctrine, Price was an Arian, who rejected his father's Calvinism, and particularly the doctrines of trinitarianism and predestination, preaching instead that every person could achieve salvation by exercising reason and free will in order to lead a moral life.[49] He defended the right of all believers, including Catholics and non-Christians, to practice their religion, and strongly opposed the use of power by civil and ecclesiastical institutions in order to impose religious doctrine. Papal power, for Price, was the prime example of the corruption of religion by institutional power. But to a lesser degree, this was also a problem in England, where the tests and oaths for Protestant Dissenters were "offences which dishonour our country," in his view.[50] Arguably, when he spoke in millennial language of "antichrist falling" as part of the emancipation of humanity, Price was thinking not only of the downfall of papal power, but more broadly of the downfall of all the hierarchies that deprived human beings of the freedom to lead a moral life by exercising their own reason and free will.[51]

This is some of the context underlying Price's utopian reflection, in the conclusion of his 1759 sermon, on "a time when Popish darkness and oppression shall be succeeded by universal Peace and Liberty." In this context, he laid out some of the basic components of his narrative of emancipation: the increasing improvement of humanity, the indications of an approaching general amendment in human affairs, the diffusion of the principle of freedom, and the millennial and utopian prospect of a future period of improvement on earth. Most striking is Price's clear articulation of the political import of these "views and hopes." They were intended to

[47]Rémy Duthille, "Dissent against the American War: The Politics of Richard Price's Sermons," in Laurence Lux-Sterritt and Gilles Teulié, eds., *War Sermons* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2009), 130–48, at 132–3.

[48]Price, *Britain's Happiness*, 5, 8–10, 22.

[49]Richard Price, *Sermons on the Christian Doctrine* (London, 1787); D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price* (Oxford, 1977), 4–9, 19–40.

[50]Price, *Britain's Happiness*, 7–11, 18–20; Price to Lieutenant-Colonel Sharman, 7 Aug. 1783, in *CRP*, 2: 188–92, at 190; Price, *Revolution*, 22–49.

[51]Price, *Evidence*, 25.

provide "a great encouragement to those who have espoused the principles of liberty … to adhere steddily [*sic*] to them under all difficulties, and to strive … to diffuse and propagate them thro' the world."[52]

Price returned to the narrative in 1767, in a long and striking footnote to his dissertation "On Providence," in which he elaborated on the grounds for the expectation of universal future improvement. The first part of this footnote fleshed out in greater detail the story of emancipation articulated in Price's 1759 sermon.[53] But its second part developed a novel scenario:

> I cannot think it necessary that the world should continue for ever divided, as it is now, into a multitude of independent states whose jarring interests are always producing war and devastation. A scheme of government may be imagined that shall, by annihilating property and reducing mankind to their natural equality, remove most of the causes of contention and wickedness. An account of such a scheme has been given by an ingenious writer in a book intitled, *Prospects of Mankind, Nature, and Providence*.—It is there observed, that if a government of this kind should be once established on any spot, the advantages of it would be so visible, and it would strengthen and extend itself so fast, that in time it would be very likely to become universal.[54]

Several points about this passage are worth highlighting. First, the scenario described here is one of "contagion," as Price later referred to it: an exemplary institutional model infects the minds of people and spreads across the globe.[55] Second, the source of inspiration for humanity is no longer Britain, which Price had come to see, by this point in time, as a country mired in corruption rather than a beacon of light.[56] Third, the ideal government imagined here is radically egalitarian, "annihilating property and reducing mankind to their natural equality." This is one of the important differences between the narratives of emancipation and of improvement developed by Price and by Priestley: the latter portrayed equality as impractical and undesirable.[57] Finally, the source of inspiration for the scenario described here is the work of Robert Wallace.

Wallace is one of the most interesting and least studied of the Scottish intellectuals who were committed to commonwealth principles.[58] He is sometimes remembered for his amicable exchange with David Hume on the populousness of ancient and modern nations, a topic that both considered to be of great significance because populousness was taken to be "a strong presumption in favour of the customs or

[52]Price, *Britain's Happiness*, 22–4.

[53]Price, "On Providence," 137–8 n.

[54]Ibid., 138 n.

[55]Price to Gabriel-Honoré de Riquetti, Comte de Mirabeau, 2 July 1789, in *CRP*, 3: 230.

[56]On the reasons for this change see Paul Frame, *Liberty's Apostle: Richard Price, His Life and Times* (Cardiff, 2015), chap. 6.

[57]Priestley, *Principles of Government*, 19–22.

[58]On Wallace see, in particular, Norah E. Smith, "The Literary Career and Achievement of Robert Wallace (1697–1771)" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, 1973); B. Barnett Cochran, "Wallace, Robert (1697–1771)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Sept. 2004), at https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28539.

policy of any government," as Wallace said.[59] Under the guise of examining the causes of the populousness of the Greek and Roman republics, Wallace argued in favor of agrarian government policies and against commerce and urbanization, while Hume sought to undermine enthusiasm for the ancient republics.

Wallace presented a more sophisticated argument in his lesser-known work *Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature, and Providence* (1761). On the one hand, he argued that human beings are capable of perfection, and that a perfect scheme of government, based on material and social equality, is consistent with human nature. Drawing on the utopian schemes of Plato, Thomas More, James Harrington, and David Hume, he proposed his own "model of a perfect government, not for a single Nation only, but for the whole Earth." Agreeing with Rousseau that many calamities and vices can be traced back to the establishment of private property, he based his "Utopian government" on equality, the abolishment of private property, and the comfortable labor of all for the subsistence of all.[60]

On the other hand, Wallace argued that attempts to implement such schemes in practice would be self-defeating. They would populate the earth beyond its limited capacity to support its inhabitants and result in a "miserable catastrophe." Perfect governments were thus doomed to fail *because* of their perfection. Utopia could be realized only in a future life, which lies beyond the course of human history.[61] Wallace's *Various Prospects* was, thus, double-edged: it laid out a radical vision of egalitarian utopia and offered a dystopian vision of its catastrophic failure, which counseled political moderation.[62]

Price ignored Wallace's dystopian scenario and focused on his utopian vision. It is hardly surprising that he embraced Wallace's agrarian utopia, because the two subscribed to similar agrarian views and drew a similar connection between commerce, urbanization and depopulation. In the late 1760s and early 1770s, Price was arguing that commerce was multiplying expensive tastes and needs, raising the price of the means of subsistence and impoverishing the lower classes. Rich farmers, he added, were engrossing agricultural land and forcing small farmers to become hired laborers or to emigrate to London. In the meantime, great cities such as London were turning into "the *graves* of mankind," because unhealthy living

[59]Robert Wallace, *A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Antient and Modern Times: In Which the Superior Populousness of Antiquity Is Maintained* (Edinburgh, 1753), 14 n; see also David Hume, "Of the Populousness of Antient Nations," in Hume, *Political Discourses* (Edinburgh, 1752), 155–261, at 155 n.

[60]Robert Wallace, *Various Prospects of Mankind, Nature, and Providence* (London, 1761), 23–111, quotes at 31, 95.

[61]Ibid., 112–25. The point of Wallace's utopian speculations was both political and theological: politically, they were meant to guide moderate patriotic reform, adapted to particular circumstances and provoking no "dangerous convulsions"; theologically, comparing potential perfection and actual imperfection was supposed to prove the existence of a future life in which the desire for perfection could finally be satisfied. Ibid., 124–6, 335–83.

[62]Wallace anticipated and helped inspire both sides of the later debate between William Godwin and Robert Malthus. Godwin cited Wallace in the course of his argument for the equal distribution of property; William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*, 2 vols. (London, 1793), 2: 459 n., 315. Malthus credited Wallace's population argument, which he believed himself to have considerably improved; Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as It Affects the Future Improvement of Society* (London, 1798), 8, 142–4.

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conditions were causing more deaths and fewer births. The picture that he drew was grim: England was being depopulated and the common people were being impoverished and enslaved, leading to a dystopian future in which "the whole kingdom will consist of only *gentry* and *beggars*, *grandees* and *slaves*."[63]

Price related this narrative of commercial corruption and depopulation to his most influential and politically explosive argument in the early 1770s: a critique of government policy regarding the national debt.[64] Citing Hume's argument that "either the nation must destroy public credit, or public credit will destroy the nation," Price warned against the policy of the government to draw money out of the sinking fund established for paying off the national debt, arguing that it was leading the kingdom into financial ruin. But unlike Hume, who associated debt with "popular madness and delusion," Price depicted government policy as an elite conspiracy intended to keep the common people burdened, dependent, and subdued. He argued that the national debt was threatening both liberty and population, the latter because the heavy taxes encouraged by the debt were making it difficult for the lower classes to procure the means of subsistence.[65]

Depopulation was, for Price, a proof in numbers for everything gone wrong in modern Britain: from luxury to urban living to the national debt. Wallace's utopian speculations offered two scenarios of improvement that could serve as a source of hope. Price ignored, at this point, the first scenario: the establishment of an equal government in a civilized country during "a grand revolution." But he endorsed the second scenario, according to which a "select society of rich Europeans of honest hearts and extensive views" establishes equal government in an uninhabited country; the government becomes powerful and extends itself "to the utmost verge of these uncultivated lands where it was originally settled"; and finally, this equal government goes on to serve as a source of inspiration for the rest of the world. According to Wallace,

> by its fair example, it may allure the neighbouring nations to copy after such an excellent model, till at last such governments shall overspread great tracts of the earth, and overcome whatever would oppose them. The advantages of such

[63]Richard Price, *Observations on the Expectations of Lives, the Increase of Mankind, the Influence of Great Towns on Population, and Particularly the State of London with Respect to Healthfulness and Number of Inhabitants* (London, 1769); Price, *Observations on Reversionary Payments; on Schemes for Providing Annuities to Widows, and for Persons in Old Age; on the Method of Calculating the Value of Assurances on Lives; and on the National Debt*, 1st edn (London: 1771), 167–221; Price, *Reversionary Payments*, 2nd edn (London: 1772), 345–99, quote at 372, original emphasis; Price, *Reversionary Payments*, 3rd edn (London, 1773), 379–94, quote at 393, original emphasis. Price was wrong in arguing that the population in London had fallen in the preceding decades. See D. O. Thomas, "Richard Price and the Population Controversy," *Price–Priestley Newsletter* 4 (1980), 43–62. On the debate about enclosure see S. J. Thompson, "Parliamentary Enclosure, Property, Population, and the Decline of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Historical Journal* 51/3 (2008), 621–42.

[64]Price, *Reversionary Payments*, 1st edn, 135–65; Richard Price, *An Appeal to the Public, On the Subject of the National Debt* (London, 1772).

[65]Richard Price, *Reversionary Payments*, 1st edn, 160–62; Price, *National Debt*, 44–7; David Hume, "Of Public Credit," in Hume, *Political Discourses* (Edinburgh, 1752), 123–41, quotes at 135, 141. On Hume and public credit see István Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2005), chap. 4.

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> a constitution may stir up the subjects of the most powerful monarchies to become zealous for such an equitable plan. Their monarchs and great men, may be obliged to give up their prerogatives, and yield to the general desires of the people.[66]

In writing of an equal government founded by a "select society of rich Europeans of honest hearts and extensive views," Wallace may have been alluding to Pennsylvania. In *De l'esprit des loix* (1748), Montesquieu described William Penn as an "honnête homme" who established a modern Sparta based on integrity and peace instead of bravery and war.[67] In citing Wallace's scenario of a contagious utopia, Price, too, is likely to have been thinking of America.[68] It was on his mind in those years as the virtuous antithesis to the corruption of the mother country, which he described as being "far advanced into that last and worst state of society, in which false refinement and luxury multiply wants, and debauch, enslave, and depopulate."[69] Drawing on the work of Ezra Stiles and Benjamin Franklin, Price believed that in the inland parts of North America, where the inhabitants were living a simple, agrarian life, population was increasing at an unparalleled rate, attesting to the vigor and happiness of society.[70] He described America as being in the happiest stage of society, in which "agriculture supplies plenty of the means of subsistence; the blessings of a natural and simple life are enjoyed; property is equally divided; the wants of men are few, and soon satisfied; and family are easily provided for."[71]

Yet Price was not ready, at that stage, to translate the image of an agrarian paradise in America and Wallace's scenario of contagion into the enthusiasm for the emancipation and improvement of humanity that animated his work in later years. The seeds of the narrative of the revolution of liberty were planted in his mind prior to the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War, but they came to fruition only in its aftermath.

The hope of the world

In the 1770s, Price gained international celebrity as a defender of the American Revolution. His work in these tumultuous years is full of internal tensions. One tension, which has been discussed in the scholarly literature, is between radicalism and moderation. In particular, there is a tension between Price's defense of the right of the American colonists to self-government and his support for the Earl of

[66]Wallace, *Prospects*, 67–9, quote at 69.

[67]Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. and trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge, 1989; first published 1748), 37.

[68]Price, "On Providence," 138 n.

[69]Price, *Reversionary Payments*, 3rd edn, 381.

[70]Price, *Expectations of Lives*, 34–6; Ezra Stiles, *A Discourse on the Christian Union* (Boston, 1761), 102–23; Benjamin Franklin, *The Interest of Great Britain Considered, with Regard to Her Colonies, and the Acquisitions of Canada and Guadaloupe. To Which Are Added, Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c.* (London, 1760), 23, 50–56.

[71]Price, *Reversionary Payments*, 3rd edn, 379–81.

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Shelburne's plan of conciliation between Britain and the colonies.[72] Another tension, which has not been thoroughly discussed in the literature, is between hope and despair.[73] Price struggled to fit the events of the American Revolution into his narrative of emancipation, wavering between hope and despair with political developments.

Price's view of the significance of the American Revolution for the future of Europe was initially dominated by two ideas: he saw the American colonies as an asylum for Protestant Dissenters in particular and for "the virtuous and oppressed among mankind" in general,[74] and he believed that while the new world was rising, the old world was decaying and hastening toward catastrophe.[75] The latter belief was reinforced by Price's reading of that monumental critique of European colonialism *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. The official author of the *History* was Abbé Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, and the author of many of its anti-imperialist arguments, as we now know, was Denis Diderot.[76] The second edition of the work, published in French in 1774, and translated into English in 1776, predicted a "great disruption" between "the progress of good in the new hemisphere, and the progress of evil in the old," a "fatal catastrophe, which is to divide one part of the globe from the other," with America rising to glory and Europe sinking into ruin.[77] The *History*'s warning that Britain would be corrupted and ruined by its colonialism in the new world served as the motto for Price's *Additional Observations on the Nature and Value of Civil Liberty* (1777).[78] In the body of the treatise, Price argued that the coercive measures of Great Britain "have, in all probability, hastened that disruption of the *new* from the *old* world, which will begin a new *aera* in the annals of mankind; and produce a revolution more important, perhaps, than any that has happened in human affairs."[79]

[72]John Faulkner, "Burke's First Encounter with Richard Price: The Chathamites and North America," in Ian Crowe, ed., *The Imaginative Whig: Reassessing the Life and Thought of Edmund Burke* (Columbia, MO and London, 2005), 93–126, at 110–17. Emma Macleod has made a persuasive case for understanding Price as a radical pro-American in Emma Macleod, *British Visions of America, 1775–1820: Republican Realities* (London and New York, 2016), 9–27; Macleod, "A Proper Manner of Carrying on Controversies: Richard Price and the American Revolution," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 82/2 (2019), 277–302. On Price's radicalism see also Anthony Page, "War, Public Debt and Richard Price's Rational Dissenting Radicalism," *Historical Research* 91/251 (2018), 98–115.

[73]Macleod rightly points out that Price's views were aligned with radical hopes that America would become a republic of liberty and play a significant role in world affairs; she has not addressed the tension and shift discussed in this section. Macleod, *British Visions*, 26–7.

[74]Price to Baron J. D. van der Cappellen, 25 Jan. 1779, in *CRP*, 2: 38; see also Price to Henry Marchant, 2 Nov. 1773, in *CRP*, 1: 164; Price to Charles Chauncy, 25 Feb. 1775, in *CRP*, 1: 189; Price to Arthur Lee, 18 Jan. 1779, in *CRP*, 2: 36; Price to Franklin, 18 Nov. 1782, in *CRP*, 2: 150; Price to Benjamin Rush, 1 Jan. 1783, in *CRP*, 2: 163; Price to Joseph Willard, 31 Oct. 1783, in *CRP*, 2: 202.

[75]Price to Henry Marchant, 2 Nov. 1773, in *CRP*, 1: 164; Price to Ezra Styles, 2 Nov. 1773, in *CRP*, 1: 166.

[76]Michèle Duchet, *Diderot et l'histoire de deux Indes; ou, l'écriture fragmentaire* (Paris, 1978).

[77]Guillaume-Thomas Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissemens & du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, 7 vols. (La Haye, 1774), 7: 186; Raynal, *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*, 4 vols. (London, 1776), 4: 390.

[78]Price, *Additional Observations*, title page.

[79]Ibid., 87–8.

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In the first years of the American Revolutionary War, Price adhered to this split vision of world events, growing increasingly more enthusiastic about the future of America and pessimistic about the future of Britain. In January 1778, he announced the rise of a "new aera in future annals, and a new opening in human affairs beginning, among descendants of *Englishmen*, in a new world;—A rising empire, extended over an immense continent, without *Bishops*,—without *Nobles*,—and without *Kings*."[80] At the same time, his melancholy prophecies about the fate of the mother country seemed to be vindicating themselves. France allied itself with the Americans and entered the war. Spain was expected to join the alliance. A war with the united powers of France, Spain, and America, he wrote in April 1778, "will complete the measure of our troubles, and may soon bring on that *catastrophe* which there has been all along reason to expect and dread."[81]

The fast sermons that Price delivered and published in 1779 and 1781 were bursting with expectations of impending doom. In February 1779, he told his congregation at Hackney that heaven was angry at the corruption and wickedness prevailing in Britain, that the British Empire was standing "on the brink of ruin," that "Never did so dark a cloud hang over this nation." To the righteous, he could offer primarily the hope of following the example of Lot and Noah and escaping to a place of safety across the Atlantic.[82] In February 1781, he impressed upon the members of his congregation "the imperfection of all earthly governments," including free governments, which either end in despotism or maintain their liberty at the cost of "dreadful convulsions." He advised them to retreat from the temporal world, "and amidst the devastations, slaughters and cruelties around you, look forward to a better state."[83] Price mentioned that the Scriptures "promise a more happy state of Christ's kingdom even in this world," but the prospects for utopia on earth seemed so distant, that he mentioned it only in passing, focusing on a state "infinitely more happy in the heavens."[84]

Beginning in March 1782, however, the clouds seemed to be scattering, initiating a change in Price's interpretation of the possible significance of the American Revolution for the future of Europe. Lord North's ministry fell, and Price's political patron, the Earl of Shelburne, came to power, first as Home Secretary, then as prime minister, filling the Dissenting minister with increasing enthusiasm for "the salvation of my country by a Peace," as well as hope for political and fiscal reform.[85] The Irish Constitution of 1782 and the ongoing campaign of the Irish Volunteers for parliamentary reform were pivotal in persuading Price that the

[80]Richard Price, *Two Tracts on Civil Liberty, the War with America, and the Debts and Finances of the Kingdom* (London, 1778), xv–xvi, original emphasis.

[81]Richard Price, *The General Introduction and Supplement to the Two Tracts on Civil Liberty*, 2nd edn (London, 1778), xxvi–xxvii.

[82]Richard Price, *A Sermon, Delivered to a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters at Hackney* (London, 1779), 1–17, 27–35, quotes at 17, 35.

[83]Richard Price, *A Discourse Addressed to a Congregation at Hackney* (London, 1781), 17–22, quotes at 18–19.

[84]Ibid., 15.

[85]Price to William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne (later 1st Marquess of Lansdowne), 20 Jan. 1783, in *CRP*, 2: 169; see also Price to Shelburne, 26 March 1782, in *CRP*, 2: 115–19; Price to Franklin, 20 May 1782, in *CRP*, 2: 123–5; Price to Franklin, 18 Nov. 1782, in *CRP*, 2: 149–50; Price to Christopher Wyvill, 12 Dec. 1782, in *CRP*, 2: 158–9, Price to Francis Baring, 14 Feb. 1783, in *CRP*, 2: 173.

American Revolution was a "Revolution in favour of the rights of mankind," and that a spirit of liberty was infecting the world.[86] In October 1783 he wrote to Henry Marchant in Rhode Island, "America has made a noble stand against tyranny, and exhibited a bright example to the world. The influence of this example has already done much good. It has emancipated one *European* country, and is likely soon to emancipate more."[87] In January 1784, in response to a letter from the Committee of Citizens of Edinburgh, he wrote that the "spirit of resistance to domination," which rose in America and soon reached Ireland, was now animating Scotland and diffusing itself in other countries:

> There seems, indeed, to be an important revolution approaching. The ideas of men are changing fast. Their minds are growing more enlightened; and a general conviction is like to take place, that "all legitimate government … is the dominion of men over *themselves*; and not in the dominion of communities over communities, or of any men over other men." When this happens, all slavish governments must fall, and a general reformation will take place in human affairs.[88]

As these lines demonstrate, by January 1784 Price had shifted entirely from darkly reflecting upon the miseries of this world and the consolations of the next one to expecting an approaching revolution of self-government. This was also the moment in which he returned to an important letter that he had received in March 1778 from Turgot.

Turgot's presentation of his Six Edicts before the Conseil du roi in January 1776 was almost concurrent with the publication of Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* in February 1776. Turgot later wrote to Price that he read the *Observations* "with avidity" when it was published, despite his many engagements at the time as Contrôleur général des finances.[89] In May 1776, he was dismissed from office, following the outcry against the Six Edicts. Price's *Additional Observations*, published in February 1777, expressed profound admiration for the enlightened spirit of Turgot's reforms, stating that his "name will be respected by posterity for a set of measures as new to the *political* world, as any late discoveries in the system of nature have been to the *philosophical* world." Price described the principles of the Edicts as being "more liberal than *France*, or any part of *Europe*, ever had in serious contemplation."[90]

It was Price's untactful attempt to account for Turgot's dismissal which had prompted the correspondence between them. Turgot was provoked by Price's suggestion, in the *Additional Observations*, that the fault for his dismissal lay partially in his failure to pay appropriate respect to the powerful or due regard to public opinion, an accusation made by some of his critics.[91] Price amended the text at

[86]Price to Lieutenant-Colonel Sharman, 7 Aug. 1783, in *CRP*, 2: 188–92, quote at 189.

[87]Price to Henry Marchant, 6 Oct. 1783, in *CRP*, 2: 199, original emphasis. The European country is Ireland.

[88]Rémy Duthille, "Thirteen Uncollected Letters of Richard Price," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 27 (2011), 83–142, at 105, original emphasis.

[89]Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, Baron d'Aulne to Price, 22 March 1778, in *CRP*, 2: 10.

[90]Price, *Additional Observations*, 151–2, original emphasis.

[91]Ibid., 151; Turgot to Price, 22 March 1778, in *CRP*, 2: 10–11.

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Turgot's request.[92] Having received the amended edition from Benjamin Franklin, Turgot wrote to Price, offering not only his thanks, but also his reflections on the colonial crisis and on the constitutions of the American states. Stung by what he saw as Price's implication, that the French were insufficiently enlightened to accept his reforms, he poured out criticism on the English and the Americans, provoking passionate debate when Price published the letter in 1784, after Turgot's death.[93] But Turgot's letter also contained prophetic words on the potential of the American Revolution to emancipate the world:

> They are the *hope* of the world. They may become a *model* to it. They *may* prove by fact that men can be free and yet tranquil; and that it is in their power to rescue themselves from the chains in which tyrants and knaves of all descriptions have presumed to bind them under the pretense of the public good. They may exhibit an example of *political* liberty, of *religious* liberty, of *commercial* liberty and of industry. The *Asylum* they open to the oppressed of all nations should console the earth. The ease with which the injured may escape from oppressive governments, will compel Princes to become just and cautious; and the rest of the world will gradually open their eyes upon the empty illusions with which they have been hitherto cheated by politicians.[94]

Turgot's letter was written in a spirit of anxiety over the fragility of the moment. To become a model to the world, he argued, America must shed the old European prejudices, dare to innovate, and establish its constitutions on the principles of liberty. "All enlightened men," he added, "ought to unite their lights to those of the *American* sages, and to assist them in the great work of legislation. This, sir, would be a work worthy of you."[95] Price was clearly affected by these words. In January 1779, he wrote to Arthur Lee that the "interest of mankind depends so much on the forms of Government established in America," that he may sometime take the liberty of publishing the observations of "a great man" on this topic, which were in his possession, along with "a few additional observations" of his own.[96] Price ended up expanding his "few additional observations" into the *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World*, the first copies of which were disseminated in America in October 1784, with Turgot's letter appended to it.

The ardor for liberty

Price's *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* restated his narrative of emancipation in a new, mature, revolutionary form. This narrative,

[92]Price to Shelburne, 21 April 1777, in *CRP*, 1: 256; Price, *Additional Observations*, in Price, *Two Tracts*, 1–216, at 151; Price, *Revolution*, 90.

[93]Turgot to Price, 22 March 1778, in *CRP*, 2: 9–19. For the critical response to Turgot's letter see, in particular, John Adams, *A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, 3 vols. (London, 1787–8).

[94]Turgot to Price, 22 March 1778, in *CRP*, 2: 17, original emphasis.

[95]Ibid.

[96]Price to Arthur Lee, 18 Jan. 1779, in *CRP*, 2: 36.

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which Price had continued to develop in the years leading up to the French Revolution, in dialogue with allies such as Mirabeau and Condorcet, informed his famous sermon before the London Revolution Society on 4 November 1789.

According to the revised narrative of emancipation, as articulated in the *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*, the world had been gradually improving, and light and knowledge had been gaining ground, leading into "the present age of increased light." Such was the nature of things that "this progress must continue," until humanity will reach "degrees of improvement which we cannot now even suspect to be possible." The pivotal event was the American Revolution, which was "the most important step in the progressive course of human improvement" next to the introduction of Christianity.[97]

Wallace's speculative scenario of contagion, of which Price had approved in the 1760s, now seemed to be realizing itself, with one modification: the contagious example was not that of a perfect government, but that of a revolution—a "revolution in favour of universal liberty … which opens a new prospect in human affairs, and begins a new aera in the history of mankind." Price was now hoping that the British, too, could "catch the flame of virtuous liberty which has saved their American Brethren." Yet America also seemed destined to develop the model of free government that would teach the world by example and become "the seat of liberty, science and virtue … from whence these sacred blessings will spread, till they become universal and the time arrives when kings and priests shall have no more power to oppress."[98] Price reflected on the prospects of egalitarianism in America, mentioning the utopian plans of Plato, More, and Wallace. Whether such plans are practical or not, he argued, "it is out of doubt that there is an equality in society which is essential to liberty." At the very least, the Americans should guard against hereditary honors and titles of nobility, the right of primogeniture, and foreign trade.[99]

The publication of the *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* and of Turgot's letter had extended Price's network of allies and correspondents in America and especially in France.[100] In September 1784, Mirabeau visited London and, upon his request, Benjamin Franklin introduced him to Price.[101] Mirabeau translated Turgot's letter into English and Price included the translation in the 1785 edition of the *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution*.[102] When Mirabeau published his *Considérations sur l'ordre de Cincinnatus* (1784), he added to it a French abstract of Price's work, as well as extensive critical reflections and notes on it.[103]

[97]Price, *Revolution*, 1–8, quotes at 4–6.

[98]Ibid., 2–3.

[99]Ibid., 69–80, quote at 71.

[100]The French influence on Price's work in these years and the reception of his ideas in France have not been thoroughly studied, but see the account in Albertone, *National Identity*, 219–23.

[101]Franklin to Price, 7 Sept. 1784, in *CRP*, 2: 226.

[102]Price to Jonathan Trumbull, 8 Oct. 1784, in *CRP*, 2: 232; Price to Benjamin Rush, 14 Oct. 1784, in *CRP*, 2: 234; Price to Ezra Stiles, 15 Oct. 1784, in *CRP*, 2: 236, Price, *Revolution*, 107–27.

[103]Gabriel-Honoré de Riquetti, Comte de Mirabeau, *Considérations sur l'ordre de Cincinnatus, ou imitation d'un pamphlet Anglo-Américain* (Londres, 1784), 221–385; published in English as Mirabeau, *Considerations on the Order of Cincinnatus* (London, 1785), 179–284. Some of the comments on Price

Mirabeau was sympathetic to Price's sentiments on the future course of human improvement, but more cautious than him. He, too, thought that the Americans had taken "a giant's stride towards the improvement of the human species," but he was anxious about the dangers of corruption that awaited the American republic: aristocratic distinctions, the seduction of power, the temptation of wealth and luxury, and the "fatal contagion" of credit and debt.[104] Interestingly, Mirabeau picked up on Price's brief reference to Wallace, and elaborated on the latter's work, dismissing his fears of overpopulation: "were the enlarged understanding and improved faculties of man, capable of forming a perfect government," he argued, "he would doubtless discover some innocent means of preventing the problematical evil of too crowded a population."[105]

Around the same time, Price formed a connection with Condorcet. The first recorded contact between them is in May 1785, when Price received a gift from Condorcet: a copy of his *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix* (1785). The gift must have been related to Price's publication of the letter from Turgot, Condorcet's mentor, and to the interest that Price and Condorcet shared in probability, political arithmetic, and improvement. Condorcet's *Essai* opened by endorsing Turgot's conviction that the truths of the moral and political sciences could acquire the certitude attained by the physical sciences, a conviction leading to "the consoling hope that the human species will necessarily progress toward happiness and perfection."[106] Condorcet elaborated on this theme in *Vie de M. Turgot* (1786), writing that Turgot "regarded an indefinite and ever-increasing *perfectibility* as one of the distinguishing qualities of the human species; and held its consequences as infallible." The doctrine of indefinite perfectibility, as Condorcet understood it, referred to far more than Rousseau's *capacity* of human beings to improve themselves; it implied the *indefinite scope of improvement*, always extending beyond the current horizon of knowledge, and it implied the *inevitable progress* of the human mind in enlightenment and in virtue.[107]

The Marquess of Lansdowne (formerly the Earl of Shelburne) was captivated by *Vie de M. Turgot* and exhorted Price to dedicate his whole time to inculcating Turgot's vision of establishing perpetual peace through universal principles of commerce, law, morality, and politics.[108] Arguably, this is what Price had done in his

were published separately as Mirabeau, *Reflections on the Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World* (Philadelphia, 1786).

[104]Mirabeau, *Considerations*, 1–79, 195–223, quotes at 204, 222–3.

[105]Ibid., 253–68, quote at 257.

[106]Marie-Jean-Antione-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, *Essai sur l'application de l'analyse à la probabilité des décisions rendues à la pluralité des voix* (Paris, 1785), i.

[107]Marie-Jean-Antione-Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis de Condorcet, *The Life of M. Turgot, Comptroller General of the Finances of France, in the Years 1774, 1775, and 1776* (London, 1787), 360–66, quote at 360–61, original emphasis. Originally published as *Vie de M. Turgot* (London, 1786). See also Condorcet, "Reception Speech at the French Academy (21 February 1782)," in *Condorcet: Selected Writings*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (Indianapolis, 1976), 24; Condorcet, "Influence of the American Revolution in Europe" (1786), in *Condorcet: Writings on the United States*, ed. Guillaume Ansart (Pennsylvania, 2012), 35–6; Condorcet, "The Sketch," 2, 125–47.

[108]William Petty, 1st Marquess of Lansdowne (formerly 2nd Earl of Shelburne) to Price, 22 Nov. 1786, in *CRP*, 3: 86–7.

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most elaborate statement of his narrative of emancipation and improvement, *The Evidence for a Future Period of Improvement in the State of Mankind, with the Means and Duty of Promoting It* (1787). Based on a sermon that he preached to the supporters of the New College for Dissenting ministers in Hackney on 25 April 1787, the *Evidence for a Future Period of Improvement* begins as a theological reflection on the future estalishment of Christ's kingdom on earth, offering traditional and scriptural grounds for this millennial expectation.[109] But the larger part of the essay lays out rational and empirical evidence for expecting a future utopia on earth and practical means of accelerating its arrival.[110]

Price explicitly gestured toward Condorcet's work in the part of his sermon that elaborated on the encouragement derived from the prospect of future improvement. In a footnote, he cited with approval Condorcet's call in *Vie de M. Turgot* not to despair of the fate of the human race, "count on the perfectibility with which nature has endowed us," and "console ourselves for not being the living witnesses of that happy period, by the pleasure of predicting and anticipating it, and perhaps by the more sweet satisfaction of having by a few moments accelerated the arrival of this too distant aera." Price had been expressing very similar sentiments since 1759; now he was joining his "helping hands to those of the friends of science and virtue" in America and in Europe, friends such as Condorcet.[111]

Price's sermon in New College was delivered at a time in which "a great fermentation seems to be taking place through Europe," as he wrote to Benjamin Franklin later that year. Commenting on the conflict between the Patriots and the Stadtholder in Holland, the events of the "small revolution" in Austrian Brabant, and the growing tensions in Paris, he hypothesized:

> In consequence of the attention created by the American war, and the dissemination of writing explaining the nature and end of civil government, the minds of men are becoming more enlightened, and the silly despots of the world are likely to be forced to respect human rights and to take care not to govern too much lest they should not govern at all.[112]

In March 1789, he wrote to John Adams that he trusted providence to turn everything for the best, just as it had when the American Revolutionary War had "given rise to that spirit of liberty which is now working thro' Europe, and that will probably gain for France a free constitution."[113] Later that year, in July 1789, he wrote to Mirabeau, "triumphant" over recent news about the progress of the French Revolution, and commented on his hope that the French Revolution would serve as a contagious example to the world:

> A revolution so important brought about in a period of time so short by the spirit and unanimity of a great Kingdom without violence or bloodshed, has

[109]Price, *Evidence*, 1–11.
[110]Ibid., 11–49.
[111]Ibid., 51–5; Condorcet, *Turgot*, 365–6.
[112]Price to Franklin, 26 Sept. 1787, *CRP*, 3: 149.
[113]Price to John Adams, 5 March 1789, in *CRP*, 3: 208.

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> scarcely a parallel in the Annals of the world. May the contagion of an example so striking extend itself to surrounding nations; and may its influence spread till it has overthrown every where the obstacles to human improvement and made the world free, virtuous and happy.[114]

This, then, was the spirit that animated Price's sermon before the London Revolution Society on 4 November 1789. Ostensibly, it was a sermon on the nature, foundation, and proper expressions of the duty to love one's country, but it can be read as Price's most elaborate reflection on a persistent theme of his work: the improvement of humanity through the efforts of enlightened lovers of their country and of the world. Toward the end of the sermon, Price returned to the hope that he shared with Condorcet: the prospect of future improvement. This is where his narrative of the revolution of liberty received its most memorable articulation. "I see the ardor for liberty catching and spreading; a general amendment beginning in human affairs," wrote Price, "the dominion of kings changed for the dominion of laws, and the dominion of priests giving way to the dominion of reason and conscience." Addressing the "friends of liberty, and writers in its defence," he added words of encouragement: "Behold, the light you have struck out, after setting *America* free, reflected to *France*, and there kindled into a blaze that lays despotism in ashes, and warms and illuminates *Europe*!"[115] Everything was coming together at that moment: the friends of liberty were joining their helping hands with the invisible hand of providence; the example set by America and France was enlightening the world, following a scenario that Price had imagined decades before; slavish hierarchies and governments were falling; the utopian period of improvement was right around the corner.

When Edmund Burke attacked Price's sermon in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Condorcet wrote in his manuscripts that Price was, in his country, "one of the leading and most zealous advocates of the notion that the human race is indefinitely perfectible, in a physical as well as moral sense," and added that all of his works "express the wish and the hope of seeing freedom, peace and virtue settle on the earth."[116] A few years later, he cast Price in a key role in his *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1795), which has been described as "the philosophical testament of the Enlightenment."[117] The role that he attributed to Price was that of delivering, alongside Turgot and Priestley, "the final blow to the already tottering structure of prejudice: the doctrine of the indefinite perfectibility of the human race."[118]

[114]Price to Mirabeau, 2 July 1789, in *CRP*, 3: 230.

[115]Price, *Discourse*, 48–51, quote at 50, original emphasis.

[116]Papiers de Condorcet, MS 863-31, 284, Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France (I am using the translation in David Williams, *Condorcet and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2004), 94 n. 2); Papiers de Condorcet, MS 860–61, 216, Bibliothèque de l'Institut de France (I am using the translation in Albertone, *National Identity*, 220 n. 94). In the first of these manuscripts, Condorcet showed himself to be well versed in Price's contributions to the social sciences.

[117]Keith M. Baker, "Condorcet," in François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (London and Cambridge, MA, 1989), 204–12, at 210.

[118]Condorcet, "The Sketch," 102.

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The rough similarity between Price's narrative of emancipation and improvement and Condorcet's narrative in the *Esquisse* is striking: both depicted the progressive improvement of humanity, driven by the light of knowledge, overcoming superstition and tyranny, and leading toward a future condition "when the sun will shine only on men who know no other master but their reason."[119] Clearly, there were differences between the two narratives. Perhaps most importantly, the progress of humanity was guided by providence in Price's version and by the general laws of nature in Condorcet's. More striking, however, than this difference is the indifference of both thinkers toward it, an indifference that challenges our late modern temptation to draw sharp lines of demarcation between religious and secular thought in this period. Price unhesitatingly incorporated Condorcet's account into his vision; Condorcet's critique of the historical role of Christianity never stopped him from endorsing Price's account. This is not merely because Price's providential narrative easily lent itself to being naturalized, or because Condorcet's naturalistic narrative easily lent itself to being theologized, though both seem to be true. It is because Price and Condorcet understood themselves to be allies in a joint endeavor to improve and emancipate humanity. In their reflections on this endeavor, the shared hope for a utopia on earth was powerful enough to dissolve the difference between nature and providence.

Conclusion

When Price published his *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* in 1776, some of his contemporaries were alarmed by his demand for empowering the majority of the people. Such empowerment, they thought, was bound to devolve into anarchy or result in the oppression of minorities by the majority.[120] Some of them accused Price of utopianism: "Upon the whole, the Doctor's republic is altogether Utopian or visionary, can never have a real existence," wrote one critic, while others referred to Price's "Utopian schemes of liberty."[121]

The key to understanding Price's confidence in the ability of individuals and communities to govern themselves lies in his faith that humanity was, indeed, destined to realize a utopia on earth. The path to that utopia was that of emancipation from slavish hierarchies and governments, an emancipation driven by the diffusion of the principles of liberty. The institutional framework of that utopia was to be republican: free governments that empower individuals to govern themselves in religious, civil, and political affairs. And the most important fruit of realizing the principles and the institutions of liberty was to be the ability of individuals to break free of their current limitations and make previously unimaginable strides in the pursuit of human perfection.

[119]Ibid., 130.

[120]See, for example, Adam Ferguson, *Remarks on a Pamphlet Lately Published by Dr. Price* (London, 1776), 2–17; Henry Goodricke, *Observations on Dr. Price's Theory and Principles of Civil Liberty and Government* (London and York, 1776), 98–128.

[121]*Experience Preferable to Theory* (London, 1776), 17; John Moir, *Obedience the Best Charter; or, Law the Only Sanction of Liberty* (London, 1776), 13; John Stevenson, *Letters in Answer to Dr. Price's Two Pamphlets on Civil Liberty, &c.* (London, 1778), 83.

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A topic that recurs in Price's formulations of the narrative of emancipation is that of the encouragement that can be derived from it. One way of reading his narrative is as a story about political hope. Some political theorists, drawing on Immanuel Kant, have recently argued that political hope is an essential psychological condition of political action, especially when faced with an unjust reality that calls for radical change.[122] In Price's view, the belief that activism, aided by providence, is bound to lead to a republican utopia was an indispensable source of hope for reformers and revolutionaries. Insofar as contemporary political theorists are interested in drawing on the radical heritage of republicanism for contemporary purposes, it is worth considering what, if anything, can take the place of cooperation with providence in instilling activists with politically mobilizing hope in the face of injustice and domination.[123]

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[122]Loren Goldman, "In Defense of Blinders: On Kant, Political Hope, and the Need for Practical Belief," *Political Theory* 40/4 (2012), 497–523; Jakob Huber, "Defying Democratic Despair: A Kantian Account of Hope in Politics," *European Journal of Political Theory*, published online 8 May 2019, at https://doi.org/10.1177/1474885119847308. For Kant on the millennial expectations of philosophy and the belief in a secret plan of nature, leading the human species toward future perfection on earth, as a necessary practical belief, see Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose" (1784), in *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. H. B. Nisbet and H. S. Reiss, 2nd edmn (Cambridge, 1991), 41–53, at 50–53.

[123]On radical republicanism see Bruno Leipold, Karma Nabulsi, and Stuart White, eds., *Radical Republicanism: Recovering the Tradition's Popular Heritage* (Oxford, 2020).

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