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Jane Chang April 15, 2016

The Search for God and Knowledge:
Rational Dissenters and the Transformation of English Radicalism in the Age of Revolution

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of History

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Abstract

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The French Revolution has often been identified as the pivotal point in European history for the transformation of radicalism characterized by modern democratic values. Although works such as the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* propounded the ideas of liberty and democracy, the emergence of British radicalism dated back earlier to the American Revolution. Given the extensive scholarship that primarily analyzes British radicalism from a political standpoint during these two revolutions, this thesis seeks to trace the development of British radicalism prior to 1789 through a small, underappreciated group: the Rational Dissenters. With their freedoms curtailed by the Test and Corporation Acts and subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles, the Rational Dissenters sought to relieve their status as second-class citizens. Thus they focused initial efforts on the basis of religion. However, Parliament's policies towards the colonial crisis facilitated the creation of a new-found identity for the Rational Dissenters—one that merged their theology and politics. By examining three specific Rational Dissenters (Joseph Priestley, John Jebb, and George Walker), this thesis explores how the notion of an absolute independent will and individual interpretation of scripture derived from heterodox theology influenced their scientific/mathematical and political interests. This intersection translated into dissenting political culture, which had its beginnings in the 1770s in light of petitions calling for the repeal of subscription and supporting the American colonists. By 1780, Priestley, Jebb and Walker solidified a political philosophy and fostered a political culture that greatly contributed to the movements for parliamentary reform and abolition. Rather than acting as a subsidiary force, the Rational Dissenters had already set a framework for the radicalism of the 1790s from 1768-1789 through their active presence in the public sphere, which ranged from fast sermons, through scientific endeavors, to political societies.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the Emory Department of History and the Undergraduate Committee for making this project possible through the Cuttino Fellowship and Scholarship, which allowed me to catch up with the major and conduct valuable research on my persons and societies of interest. A special danke to Dr. Astrid M. Eckert who strongly encouraged me to apply despite my having no set topic in mind. A big thanks to Ms. Becky Herring as well for giving me all the hugs and dropping your (not-so-subtle) hints to leave Chemistry. I did it though!

I would also like to extend my appreciation to the kind staff at the National Archives and Dr. William's Library in London and Sheffield City Archives in Sheffield. Without their help, I would probably have remained a newbie in using microfilm. To Dr. David Wykes, I appreciate the advice you suggested for my topic and your help in deciphering Priestley's "fancy chicken scratch."

I am lucky to also have been supported by a strong group of friends. Paul Nguyen and Vanisha Patel, I will be eternally grateful for being there during my toughest times and knocking some sense into me to pursue my passion. Vanisha, Bhudi Vapar, right? Tanvi Lal, I really appreciated you accompanying me to the coffee shops in the city and struggling together in the thesis life. On the bright side, at least we're coffee connoisseurs of Atlanta now. Suranajana Dey, you have been the greatest roommate one can ask for. Thanks for putting up with delirious, tired Jane and continually giving me chocolate for energy. We can finally have more wine nights after this.

I am thankful to my committee members for being extremely patient and kindly asking me about the progress whenever I encountered yall. Dr. James Melton, I am glad that I took your class on the Age of Religious Wars. It is because of it that I integrated a more religious aspect into my topic. Dr. Nick Block, thank you for not only helping me improve my Deutsch, but also agreeing to serve on my committee (despite your interests in different time periods/country). Ich bin sehr dankbar für Ihre Unterstützung.

Finally, Dr. Brian Vick. I cannot express my gratitude for the support and advice I have received from you since my junior year. Even when I first approached (and complained to) you about everything pre-med, you still encouraged me to persevere as you do now for history. Because of you, I made the shift not only from American to European history, but also that big jump from medicine to history. From writing all those recommendations, going through the Honors petition process to guiding me despite my blunder-ups, I am blessed to have had you as a kind and patient advisor. In the future, I hope to resemble the historian that you are: witty, open, and incredibly considerate. Vielen Dank.

Last but definitely not least, I would like to thank my family for being the strongest support system a daughter could ever ask for. Jasmine, thanks for listening to my pains of orgo and physics and being my partner in crime in everything food and video game-related. Omma and Appa, I am grateful for your continuous wonderful support even when I told you that medicine wasn't for me. I might not be the medical doctor, but I'll earn that PhD "doctor" for history. Appa, it looks like you'll have to wait just a bit longer for that Corvette.

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Introduction

"We are resolved to keep an established church, an established monarchy, an established aristocracy, and an established democracy, each in the degree it exists, and in no greater."[1] In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Edmund Burke pointed specifically at the role of the Dissenters, a group of Christians who did not conform to the tenets of the Church of England, as a radical political force. Burke described them as incessant grasshoppers who "attempt to hide their total want of consequence in bustle and noise, and puffing, and mutual quotation of each other."[2] The Dissenters, disgruntled with their status as second-class citizens, directed their efforts towards the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, which restricted Catholics and nonconformists from holding political office and entering universities. The Dissenters thereby fostered a radical movement that affected all facets of society, in light of their opposition to the government's policies in the colonial crisis. Indeed, the colonists' discontent with George III and Parliament found expression in the Dissenters' cries for "Civil and Religious Liberties" beyond simply repealing these restrictive Acts.[3]

The French Revolution, according to the French historian François Mignet, "began the era of new societies in Europe…[which] not only modified political power, but entirely changed the internal existence of the nation."[4] Although the French Revolution and its societal and political changes were *sui generis*, historians tend to label the revolution as the turning point for radicalism in Europe. Yet, the origin of modern British radicalism, often associated with the advent of the French Revolution and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, has been a subject of debate among historians. Prior to 1789, there were already signs of an emerging body of radical ideas

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[1] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: J. Dodsley, 1790), 135-6.
[2] Ibid., 126.
[3] Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), 16.
[4] François Mignet, *History of the French Revolution from 1789 to 1814* (London: Bell, 1919), 1.

propounded by a small subgroup of the Dissenters: the Rational Dissenters, which included figures such as Joseph Priestley, John Jebb and George Walker.

While historians have examined the emergence of radicalism during the conflict between Great Britain and the American colonies, the emphasis has focused more on prominent political figures: the popular John Wilkes symbolizing liberty (with growth of the "Wilkesite movement"), Thomas Paine as the catalyst for the American Revolution and the liberal Christopher Wyvill jumpstarting the movement for parliamentary reform. In conjunction with this political development, the role of religion in eighteenth-century English politics has also begun to undergo a renaissance, especially in regards to its importance to modern English radicalism.[5] Aside from a solely political approach, what were the other, less examined forces (above all, religious and cultural) and their impacts in English society prior to 1789? As such, this thesis will investigate the development of English political and intellectual culture and their influence on British radical thought beginning in the mid-eighteenth century through the Rational Dissenters. It will also explore the several movements and associations that contributed to this radicalism through their participation in political and scientific societies, coffee houses, and grassroots initiatives.

The historiography of the origins of modern British radicalism in the eighteenth century is extensive, exemplified by the works of E.P. Thompson, J.C.D. Clark and J.G.A. Pocock.[6] Thompson's study labels the start of the French Revolution as the origins of English radicalism and singles out Paine for jumpstarting working-class radicalism. Other historians such as Arthur

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[5] James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

[6] For more on each respective person's work, see E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working* Class (New York: Vintage Books, 1963); Thompson does refer to the Methodists, who were part of the "New" Dissent that emerged in the 1790s. J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688*-1832: *Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Régime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Sheps and Ian R. Christie, however, have recognized the legacy of the American Revolution for the growth of English radicalism. Although the latter primarily focuses on political liberals such as Wilkes and Wyvill, Sheps traces a stream of continuity in the intellectual shape and direction of radicalism between America and France through popular societies and (briefly) with the Dissenters.[7] Wil Verhoeven reiterates Shep's ideas and makes a strong case accrediting the significance of the American Revolution in the transformation of British radicalism, partly filling the historiographical gap revolving around the French Revolution debate. This "British Revolution" was inextricably linked with the French Revolution, *in addition* to the "lingering impact of the groundbreaking rebellion against British rule in the American colonies."[8]

In recent years, studies on the impact of religion during this period have obtained some momentum with revisionists arguing that religious heterodoxy, or anti-Trinitarianism, assumed a more radical character during the eighteenth century as the "chief matrix of ideological innovation."[9] Despite this acknowledgement of the role of religion in English politics, the connection between the radicalism of the Dissenters (Rational or orthodox) and that of the 1790s has not been fully addressed. The ideology of the Dissenters has been subsumed into intellectual history as a subsidiary force, acting as a supplement to the radical political movements at the time. However, the heterodox Dissenters, who numbered a minority among the general

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[7] Arthur Sheps, "The American Revolution and the Transformation of English Republicanism," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 2, no. 1 (1975): 4-7; I.R. Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

[8] Wil Verhoeven, *Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain, 1789-1802* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 3. Heterodox Dissent was typically connected with either Arianism or Socinianism whereas the orthodox Dissent signified trinitarianism and tended to have an adherence to Calvinistic formulae. See also G.M. Ditchfield, "How Narrow will the Limits of this Toleration Appear?' Dissenting Petitions to Parliament, 1772-1773," *Parliamentary History* 24, no. 1 (2005): 92.

[9] J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1688*-1832: *Religion, Ideology and Politics During the Ancien Régime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 368. See also J.G.A. Pocock, "The Definitions of Orthodoxy," in *The Margins of Orthodoxy: Heterdox Writing and Cultural Response, 1660-1750,* ed. by Roger D. Lund (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36-7.

dissenting community, were central in their contributions to British radicalism in relation to both the political and social ramifications of society before the French Revolution. This thesis seeks to establish this continuity by examining the relation between ideology, religious motivation and political action. For this study of Priestley, Jebb and Walker, I focus mainly on sermons, letters, petitions, and tracts on scientific and political topics and how they facilitated the growth of popular culture through the production and dissemination of such documents. Furthermore, the circles of these three Dissenters with other radicals of the time (secular and non-dissenters) will be integrated to better portray an increasing middle-class consciousness, i.e. skilled artisans, in the evolution of English radicalism. Such figures include writers like James Burgh, Benjamin Franklin, John Cartwright, and John Horne Tooke.

The burgeoning, new radicalism of the 1790s (whose foundations were laid by these Dissenters) had already been in existence in England before the outbreak of the French Revolution. As Wil Verhoeven notes, however, the radicalism characterized in the 1790s has not been addressed in respect to its indebtedness back to the earlier reform movements, especially those undertaken by the Dissenter community. This thesis will bridge the continuity between the American and French Revolutions through the Rational Dissenters, or more aptly dubbed the "Enlightened Dissenters."[10] According to Knud Haakonssen, "Enlightened" Dissent encompassed a broader group which sought to combine reason and faith in affirmation of the independent, individual will. It may be defined as the *modus vivendi* between High-Church Anglicanism, orthodox (or evangelical) Dissent, and Deism.[11] Heavily derived from the

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[10] Knud Haakonssen ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5. Haakonssen explains how the term "Rational Dissent" is often synonymous with Unitarians and prefers to use "Enlightened Dissent" as a more inclusive term that extended beyond just Socinianism or Arianism.

[11] Ibid. For a broader intellectual context of the religious differences, see Peter Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). The

philosophy of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), the Rational Dissenters' interpretation of human autonomy in all realms of society distinctly differed from the general dissenting community: that is, the government and Church should not interfere in matters of civil society and religion. Thus, it was not solely a matter of abstract economic theory for the Rational Dissenters—though in the case of Priestley and Walker, economics was integrated as a factor in their politics. The tolerance of diversity and unconstrained freedom of worship and thought broke away from doctrinal authority and had important political implications.[12] However, a few historians, such as Roy Porter, have attributed little to no significance of the Rational Dissenters to English political culture, dubbing them a "hothead minority"[13] with an isolated agenda unrepresentative of the radical movement of the time.

The intellectual culture of the Rational Dissenters fostered not only a connection between morals and public life (i.e. religious and civil/political liberties), but also reason via the sciences. In tracing the development and transformation of English radicalism from the American Revolution to the French Revolution, I examine three Enlightened Dissenter figures in a tripartite analysis of Joseph Priestley, John Jebb and George Walker. Priestley and Jebb, both Unitarians, maintained similar stances on the importance of the individual will and separate ecclesiastical polity. Likewise, Walker, nominally a Presbyterian minister, stressed individualized interpretation of scripture and believed in the capability of the laymen to do so.[14] Heavily influenced by the empirical and associationist theories of Francis Bacon and David Hartley

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issue on Deism also has important relevance to this paper. For a study on deists and the connection of their arguments about nature, politics and "theology," see Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth, *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, Politics, and Newtonian Public Science* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 1-13.

[12] John Seed, "Gentlemen Dissenters: The Social and Political Meanings of Rational Dissent in the 1770s and 1780s," *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 2 (1985): 316.

[13] Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 196.

[14] In one of his sermons, Walker describes his theology as a "tempered Arianism." See George Walker, *Sermons on Various Subjects* (London: J. Johnson, 1790), 1:227.

respectively, all three figures adopted a philosophy that reconciled religion and science by unifying the mechanism of the human mind through the hand of Providence and scientific inquiry.[15] In other words, the application of the scientific method to scripture allowed for a better understanding and progression of the world. While Priestley, Jebb and Walker played an integral role in the debates for civil and religious liberty (expanding their radical politics into the intellectual capability of women and the abolitionist movement), they diverged with respect to their radical political philosophies and methods. Walker, the Presbyterian minister and mathematician, serves as the intermediate between Priestley and Jebb, encompassing the theological and philosophical activism of the former while contributing substantially in the political public sphere like the latter. From 1768 to 1789, Walker steadily moved towards a more radical stance similar to Jebb and Cartwright. He actively participated in politics just as Jebb did, namely, in local government meetings and societies such as Society for Constitutional Information (SCI), but also incorporated the importance of civil and religious rights in his devotion to political reform. As a mathematician, Walker considered the "gradual unfolding and discovery of truth"[16] in the subject as an essential process for cultivating human thought and improving society.

The characteristics of the Dissenters' radical ideology spanned over a wide spectrum, which James E. Bradley has characterized by distinguishing between a "religion of resistance" or a "religion of revolution." As such, a few definitions must be laid out and clarified for understanding the evolution of radical ideology and the differences between Priestley and Jebb (as well as Walker), especially with the terms "radical," "radicalism," and "liberal." The terms

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[15] Anthony Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 10.

[16] George Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects: to which is prefixed a life of the author* (London: J. Johnson, 1809), lxi, lxv. Walker also notes the practical utilities of math, which included business and economics.

"radical" and "radically" were applied to political ideas in the eighteenth-century insofar as individuals sought to find the root of contemporary problems in the traditional—and oppressive—social and political institutions of the state.[17] To be sure, however, "radicalism" was a term that emerged in the nineteenth century. For the purposes of this thesis, Thomas Paine is used as the litmus test to determine how far the Dissenters' political views went. Indeed, Gary Kates and Jack Greene have offered working definitions for "liberalism" and "radicalism": the former espoused "a government based upon political freedom but an unequal electoral system" whereas the latter advocated a democratic system based on universal male suffrage and "commitment to an amelioration of the lower classes."[18] As we will see, a large number of Dissenters (including Priestley) aligned with "liberalism," and Jebb and his associated circle embraced English "radicalism." Walker is positioned at radicalism as well, but his political ideology did not fully develop until the start of the American Revolution.

Joseph Priestley, notoriously (yet punningly) dubbed as the "Priestley Politician,"[19] did not want to be primarily remembered for his political ideas; nevertheless, he was a central figure in developing and guiding the growth of English radicalism through the mid and late-eighteenth century. Priestley, like many of his Dissenting peers, was a follower of John Locke but he took the Lockean principle a step further. According to H.T. Dickinson, Priestley argued that the government had an unequivocal obligation to protect its citizens' natural rights, which by extension included the people's civil and religious liberties. In Priestley's interpretation, the people held sovereignty (i.e. the right to choose their representatives) in government, dissolve it

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[17] Ibid., 5-6.
[18] Gary Kates, "From Liberalism to Radicalism: Tom Paine's Rights of Man," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1989): 571; Jack P. Greene, "Paine, America, and the 'Modernization' of Political Consciousness," *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (1978): 74.
[19] Martin Fitzpatrick, "Joseph Priestley, Political Philosopher," in *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian,* ed. by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 113.

if the government did not protect their civil/political rights and create a new one in its place.[20] Although an expansive secondary literature exists on Priestley (whether it be his political or scientific contributions), there is the issue of a lack of cohesion given his extraordinary range of interests. Indeed, his science coincided with his moral and metaphysical principles towards a philosophy of political, spiritual and intellectual development.[21] Priestley believed in the ability of all individuals [women included] to improve oneself morally and socially through inductive reasoning and scripture—a radicalization of Locke's *tabula rasa*.

Although Priestley did believe that popular opinion served as a check against the state's infringement on natural rights, he incorporated political rights as secondary to civil and religious rights in contrast to radicals such as Paine or Jebb. Political liberty was more pertinent to freedom of thought and was one of many "possible spheres for progressive endeavor."[22] It was the civil realm that took priority in the well-being and progression of a state. Hence, as the first chapter elaborates on, Priestley's political ideology can be described as a form of "radical liberalism." The direction of this liberalism transitioned from one focused on politics during the American Revolution to theology and sciences by the 1780s.

Like Priestley, John Jebb's involvement in English radical politics connected his ideas back to religion, society and the sciences. Whereas Priestley, who outspokenly supported the Americans in the 1770s, steadily withdrew from the public sphere by the 1790s, Jebb maintained a consistent and active presence in politics until his death in 1786, especially with his activism in the SCI. Jebb's outlook on politics and society was also based upon a utilitarian moral and

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[20] H.T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1977), 197-99.
[21] John G. McEvoy, "Joseph Priestley, Scientists, Philosopher and Divine," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 128, no. 3 (1984): 193.
[22] Alan Tapper, "Priestley on Politics, Progress and Moral Theology," in *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian,* ed. by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 285.

natural rights-based philosophy like that of Priestley. However, Jebb upheld a more optimistic perspective on society—one that placed faith in the common man for the development of society. Only a small minority in the British radical community espoused this inclusion of the lower classes in politics, and unlike Priestley, Jebb exerted his energy in the political public sphere and less so in theological and civil matters. As one of the founders of the Society for Constitutional Information, he was resolute on educating all facets of society of their political rights and advocating for universal male suffrage, positioning him as a radical. Jebb considered political reform and the exercise of the independent will as necessary components towards progress, happiness and the spread of truth—of both nature and God.[23] However, he was more inclusive on the matter of political and civil rights than his secular and dissenter contemporaries (including Priestley and Richard Price) and argued that "the masses" were entitled to such rights as well: "[The] English House of Commons should be a representation of *persons*, not of *property*; of men, not of things."[24] This rationale constituted Jebb's drive towards the movement for parliamentary reform, the amelioration of the English citizen's status (irrespective of social rank) and—most notably—universal male suffrage.

The Presbyterian minister at the High Pavement Chapel in Nottingham, George Walker, offers an intriguing and complementary perspective not only to the emergence of a radicalism in England well before the French Revolution, but also its transformation through the 1770s and 1780s. Walker is an interesting figure to analyze alongside Jebb and Priestley as he more or less encompasses characteristics of both; with respect to the former, Walker directed his focus to politics once it became clear by the end of the 1770s that the House of Commons did not represent the interests of the people. Yet at the same time, he continued to devote himself to his

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[23] Page, 208.

[24] John Jebb, *The Works, Theological, Medical, Political, and Miscellaneous of John Jebb, M.D. F.R.S. With Memoirs of the Life of the Author* (London: T. Cadell, 1787), 2:500. My italics.

ecclesiastical duties like Priestley, consistently pushing for the repeal of the Test Acts and universal religious tolerance. He serves as a foil to the "liberal" Priestley and "radical" Jebb. Engaged more in politics like Jebb, Walker regarded political activity as an extension of his religious and moral principles. This was apparent as early as 1761, when he had already engaged in public affairs as a minister in Durham.

Walker fervently supported the colonists during the American Revolution and continually published sermons and political pamphlets dedicated to the progress and happiness of the people until his death in 1807.[25] Walker too was a member of the SCI. He aligned more with Jebb in that he began to perceive the political capability of the lower classes favorably beginning in the 1770s. Although the literature has not labeled Walker as an "Enlightened" Dissenter per se (though John Seed does mention him briefly in his essay on Rational Dissent), his stance on intellectual freedom and development proves otherwise. James Tayler, a succeeding minister at the High Pavement Chapel after Walker's death, noted Walker's "incessant occupation…on subjects of science or literature, in conjunction with the earnestness, with which he engaged in the discussion of any subject."[26] It will be interesting to further examine and compare Walker, who was fellow of the London Royal Society for his treatises on the sphere and conic sections, alongside Priestley and Jebb.

Before delving into the role of religion in English radicalism during this period, a brief background of the Dissenter community will help clarify their theology in a broader political context. Within the Dissenters, political and religious ideology went hand in hand; religion

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[25] John Seed, " 'A set of men powerful enough in many things': Rational Dissent and political opposition in England, 1770-1790," in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 163.

[26] James Tayler, *A Sermon, Containing a Sketch of the Character of the Late Reverend George Walker, F.R.S. and President of the Literary and Philosophical Society at Manchester, With Practical Reflections, Preached 3rd May, 1807, Before the Society of Protestant Dissenters, Assembling on the High Pavement, Nottingham* (London: E.B. Robinson, 1807): 21.

encompassed something broader than just doctrine and theology. Bradley, while noting doctrinal differences among the Dissenters (above all, between Trinitarians and heterodox ministers), contends that a majority of them shared a common political stance. For instance, the theology of Dissenters such as Caleb Evans and James Murray was more orthodox and traditional than that of Walker, which was marked by a more liberal interpretation of scripture.[27] It is the Dissenters' similar experiences of social alienation and common belief in a separated ecclesiastical polity in Britain that influenced their radical politics.[28] This idea of the right of congregations to "elect" their pastors gave way towards democratic tendencies, which emerged out of a philosophy that was oriented against hierarchical society and overlooked traditional authority.[29] The Dissenters' political discontent and subsequent radicalism stemmed from a commitment to an absolute individualism and self-government. Witnessing the American colonists' fight for their rights spurred the Dissenters to expand their concerted efforts further towards a rational and liberal religion that supported the individual conscience and respected the rights of private judgment.[30] As the Rational Dissenter Richard Price wrote in his *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World* (1784), mankind would be best served by this "religion that the powers of the world know little of, and which will always be best promoted by being left *free* and *open*."[31]

This study does not aim to completely dismiss the role of the French Revolution in shaping English radicalism. Rather, it aims to challenge the conventional view of revolutionary

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[27] Bradley, 137.
[28] James E. Bradley, "The Religious Origins of Radical Politics in England, Scotland, and Ireland, 1662-1800," in *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by James E. Bradley and Van Kley, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 195.
[29] Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism,* 4.
[30] Russell E. Richey, "The Origins of British Radicalism: The Changing Rational for Dissent," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7, no. 2 (1973-74): 191.
[31] Richard Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution, and the Means of Making It a Benefit to the World* (London: T. Cadell, 1784), 19. My italics.

France's decisive role by proposing a more integrative model that takes the political culture of the Rational Dissenters prior to 1789 into consideration. The first chapter sets up the framework for the thesis by illustrating the emergence of a political identity for the Rational Dissenters during the American Revolution. Their heterodox religious background and early phases of their political culture solidified a radical ideology that transmitted into the 1780s in divergent directions for Priestley, Jebb and Walker. Chapter 2 highlights this transformation by tracing each person's contribution to his preferred sector of society: this entailed religious and intellectual circles for Priestley in Birmingham whereas Jebb remained rooted in politics with the Society for Constitutional Information. Walker, experiencing the best of both worlds, exhibited radicalism like that of Jebb, but did not limit its spread to the political realm. It was also communicated in his sermons and philosophical discussions in Nottingham. Yet, it is still apparent how Priestley's and Jebb's protean backgrounds influenced and intersected with their radical opinions, whether that included parliamentary reform, calls for educational and religious equality, or abolition.

The intersection between the sciences, religion, and English politics will illuminate how the Rational Dissenters' emphasis on fostering the individual's autonomy corresponded to this belief in promoting the progress and happiness of the people. The Rational Dissenters referred back to John Locke's empiricism to emphasize how environmental circumstances shaped an individual. As a result, the connection between science and politics extended to calls for the betterment of society. This union would expand on the international scale in France and Italy with the growing movements regarding public health issues and the effects on society.[32] The fostering of the independent [political] will, namely the pursuit of truth for the good of mankind,

[32] W.H. Brock, "Enlightened Experimentalist," in *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian*, ed. by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 70-1.

was interlinked with religion and science for the Rational Dissenters. As Priestley states in his treatise on electricity, the expansion of the sciences could "animate us in our attempts to advance still further"[33] in the civil, religious and political realms of society. The core of the Rational Dissenters' philosophy, the absolute, unrestrained independent will, shaped the early phases of radical movements, which integrated the common people and women into the political and/or public realms. Over the course of the French Revolution, it became apparent how Priestley, Jebb and Walker left a legacy for not only the political philosophy and associations of the 1790s, but also Britain's societal and intellectual culture that even extended beyond into the nineteenth century.

[33] Quoted in W.H. Brock, "Enlightened Experimentalist," 53.

Chapter 1
Scrutiny of Religious and Political Liberties during the American Revolution: Development of Dissenter Radicalism (1768-1781)

Prior to the American colonial crisis of the 1770s, British radicalism had already been established with the platforms of the extra-parliamentary movements, which followed the old Commonwealth tradition (referring back to notions of virtue and liberty during the Glorious Revolution). This in turn fostered a political culture—called the Association movement—that increasingly voiced dissatisfaction with the government's policies and priorities beginning from the ascension of the new king George III in 1760, the entry of the dynamic John Wilkes into the political arena, and ultimately the conflict with the American colonies.[34] Historians have maintained that radical (or liberal) ideals were espoused by the more distinguished members of society i.e. the aristocratic or upper middle classes, placing more emphasis on the politics of prominent figures such as Christopher Wyvill and Wilkes. The "limited, cerebral and middle class radicalism [of the 1770s and 1780s]…was eclipsed by a popular and activist movement"[35] by the time of the French Revolution. Colin Bonwick distinguishes four types of English radicalism that experienced a strong revival over the course of the American Revolution: a utilitarianism-based radicalism associated with Jeremy Bentham, a working-class, "pure" natural rights theory spearheaded by Thomas Paine, the Wilkesite movement that marked a departure in the political conduct for the lower classes, and the aforementioned Commonwealth tradition.[36] This chapter seeks to examine the Dissenters' developing role in the political realm primarily through the religious and scientific backgrounds of Joseph Priestley, John Jebb, and George

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[34] H.T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in Eighteenth Century Britain* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 223.
[35] Arthur Sheps, "The American Revolution and the Transformation of English Republicanism," *Historical Reflections* 2, no. 1 (1975): 3.
[36] Colin Bonwick, introduction to *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), xiv.

Walker—each with his own "radicalism" varying to certain extents from the four types above. It will set the framework for all three figures' static or progressive trajectory in politics in context of petitions and early dissenting political culture during the American Revolution.

Liberal radicalism or radical liberalism?

The political identity of the Rational Dissenters can be attributed to their concern for ensuring religious liberties in the country. In their eyes, the government's policies regarding the American colonies disturbed the delicate balance of power established by the Revolution of 1688 between not only the people and Crown, but also Church and Crown.[37] As a result, this group remained consistent advocates for public liberty, especially for society's religious and political rights. Thus, one of Joseph Priestley's first political tracts, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (1768) dealt foremost with religious rights, which branched off from civil rights, as validation of one's political rights. The Rational Dissenters assumed a new "identity" prior to the American Revolution that shifted away from the general Dissenters' heavily religious-based ideology into one dependent on human rationality. In John Jebb's case, this can be attributed to his mentor, Edmund Law, who encouraged an empirical approach to theology (like that espoused by Francis Bacon). Making great strides in the natural sciences was essential in "com[ing] to a proportionally better understanding of His Word."[38] Furthermore, Jebb highly regarded David Hartley, the father of the associationist theory and doctrine of free will; influenced by Law's pedagogical methods and Hartley's *Observations on Man*, Jebb encouraged his students to

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[37] Dan Eshet, "Rereading Priestley: Science at the Intersection of Theology and Politics," *History of Science* 39, no. 2 (2001): 136.

[38] Edmund Law, *Considerations on the State of the World with Regard to the Theory of Religion, in Three Parts* (J. Bentham, 1745), 184.

"study the Scriptures with the same industry, and freedom from prejudices of every sort"[39] rather than relying on orthodox interpretations established by the Anglican Church. The facilitation of open interpretation of Scriptures remained significant to Jebb in the context of maintaining civil and religious liberties. His interests in reforming the Church coincided with his political interests, and he sought to transform the current system that impeded the "progress of the religion of the gospel," which "tends to the production of each public virtue, and the lasting establishment of those [revered] constitutional privileges."[40]

From Hartley's philosophy also stemmed Priestley's "egalitarian epistemology"[41] as the basis of his political foundations. Like John Jebb, he opposed the authority of the Anglican clergy, whom the Church decreed as the sole experts on the Scriptures: "we will acknowledge no *human authority* in matters of religion; but that we will judge for ourselves in a business which so nearly concerns us, and not suffer others to judge for us."[42] This explains why both Priestley and Jebb encouraged a broad interpretation of the Bible. With some knowledge of Arabic, Jebb had encouraged his students to "search the Koran"[43] to better understand and analyze scripture; however, in a series of unfortunate events, Jebb would lose the vacant position of Lecturer in Arabic to his cousin, Samuel Hallifax, due to the former's unorthodox theological beliefs and practices. In a similar vein, Priestley was in favor of "increasing the number of sects, rather than diminishing them" and "wished to see existing establishments reformed rather than dissolved."[44]

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[39] John Jebb, *A Short Account of Theological Lectures* (Cambridge: J. Archdeacon, 1770), 9.
[40] John Jebb, *The Works, Theological, Medical, Political, and Miscellaneous of John Jebb: With Memoirs of the Life of the Author* (London: T. Cadell, 1787), 3:243-44.
[41] Ibid., 137.
[42] Joseph Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (Birmingham: J. Johnson, 1782), 2:358.
[43] Jebb MSS IV, Dr. William's Library [DWL], quoted in Anthony Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 65.
[44] "Priestley as a pioneer on theological science," October 1894, MS 12.81 (7), DWL, 471.

Priestley, Jebb and George Walker framed their own political principles throughout the years of the American War of Independence. The combination of political works and sermons placed them at the forefront in English political culture. All three figures tied together motifs of theology and philosophy/science to elucidate on politics in their writings. Jebb and Priestley also referred to socio-economic circumstances of the British people as further clarification of their political motivation, a topic surveyed in Chapter 2. The former upheld a more inclusive view of government, where the equal and universal representation of man—and perhaps women—ensured protection of their political, civil and religious rights. Jebb's co-founding of the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) epitomized his stance on a more inclusive and modern society. Jebb's actions and writings in the SCI during the interim between the American and French Revolutions squarely position him as a radical. Walker too will be examined in consideration of his activism in the public sphere, including his presence in the SCI. Just as Priestley and Jebb emphasized the importance of education, Walker maintained similar sentiments, having served as a mathematics tutor at Warrington and as the Professor of Theology at the Unitarian Manchester College (now known as Harris Manchester College in Oxford) from 1772-1774 and 1798-1803 respectively. Walker's early engagement in public affairs at Nottingham, especially with his significant role of drafting and circulating petitions during the American Revolution, set the basis for his political radicalism, which would align somewhere near Jebb's by the 1780s.

In contrast, Priestley put the individuals of the middle class, who have "more enlarged minds, and are, in all respects, more truly independent,"[45] at the center of progress of mankind. He even acceded to the fact that political rights can be denied to the lower classes, placing

[45] Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government,* 14.

responsibility on the more prudent sectors of society. Most important to society were its civil and religious liberties; political liberties, in contrast, were an indicator of civil liberties. Therefore, Priestley's political philosophy places him on the liberal end of the radical-liberal spectrum of the Rational Dissenters. The union of science and morality that consistently appears in Priestley's writings complements his stance on religion and politics; scientific knowledge reinforces theism, which in turn motivated a greater understanding of worldly matters.[46] Edmund Burke too, having supported the American Revolution, was a "progressivist" in his own right. Interestingly, Burke's theory of progress opposed that of Priestley. In other words, it was progression of religion and morality that allowed advancement in the sciences: in Alan Tapper's words, Europe's emergence out from the "dark" medieval times and the taming of men (namely, the aristocracy and clergy) made possible the "great co-operative ventures of modern science, technology, commerce and industry."[47] Burke viewed the church and nobility as the foundations of English society and constitution and credited them for the progress. However, Priestley argued otherwise that progress depended upon a broader social group, one that took into consideration the civil liberties and intellectual capability of both men and women.

In addition to the unpopular notion of universal toleration, Priestley was one of very few who held women in esteem for their potential role in society's progress. Suggesting an unorthodox point at the time, Priestley argued that the "minds of women are capable of the same improvement, and the same furniture, as those of men."[48] Heeding Hartley's premise on the impact of environmental circumstances, Priestley condemned the prejudice regarding women's

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[46] Alan Tapper, "Priestley on Politics, Progress and Moral Theology," in *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian,* ed. by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 277.
[47] Ibid. 278.
[48] Joseph Priestley, *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, With Notes, by the Editor. Containing An Essay on the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty* (Hackney: G. Smallfield, 1831), 15:419.

apparent inferior intellect. Rather he encouraged women to become acquainted with John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and the subjects of logic, metaphysics and mathematics.[49] Priestley's innovative writings on improving education and his attempt to integrate women into the system coincide with his belief in a more rational and liberal society. One account of his teaching style recalled how he

> pour[ed] out…the great stories of his most capacious mind to a considerable number of *young persons of both sexes*, whom, with the familiarity and kindness of a friend, he encouraged to ask him questions, either during the lecture or after it, even if he advanced anything which wanted explanation, or struck him in a light different from his own. …Never did I hear from his lips…one illiberal sentiment or one harsh expression.[50]

Although it is uncertain whether Priestley supported women in the public sphere (not to the extent of Jebb), his stance on education placed him at the forefront of progressive educationists, which constituted a miniscule minority, that influenced Benthamite utilitarianism.[51]

In light of his wife's active role in the political realm, Jebb also echoed the sentiments of Priestley about women, if not more so. In his private notebook, Jebb wrote the following against the prejudiced treatment of women: "women are not dealt with justly by the laws of the land. All laws of inferiority should be repealed. *Compact* supposes *equality*."[52] Anthony Page suggests that Jebb entertained the notion of women obtaining political rights with the last sentence. Furthermore, his relationship with his wife, Ann Jebb, makes this point plausible. John and Ann both participated in the press culture of the late eighteenth century as intellectual equals in the cause for religious, educational and political reform. Indeed, John was said to have "consulted"

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[49] Ruth Watts, *Women in Science: A Social and Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 2007): 84.
[50] MS 12.81 (7), DWL, 472. My italics.
[51] Ibid., 84.
[52] Quoted in Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism*, 224, see footnote 47. My italics.

Ann's "opinion on every subject."[53] Together, the Jebbs cultivated a political culture by providing an open space for discussion. During their residence at Cambridge, Ann provided a hub for reformers through her "tea parties."[54] Even after their move to London, the Jebbs kept their doors open to friends and Rational Dissenters in the early 1780s.[55] Due to John's physician rounds, however, Ann was left to play host. During the period of the Feathers Tavern petition, Ann thoroughly engaged in the debate with Thomas Balguy over all ministers' subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles. The arguments in her letters to Balguy were quite impressive and were printed in the *London Chronicle* (under the pseudonym "Priscilla") with William Paley commenting that "the Lord hath sold *Sisera* into the hands of a woman!"[56] Concurring with her husband's thoughts on many pressing issues of the time, Ann Jebb and her mutually respectful relationship with John reflect the stance of Rational Dissent on women. No wonder then that Mary Wollstonecraft often interacted with figures like Priestley and Price and formulated *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).[57]

Background and Transformation of the Dissenter "Polity"

Religion had played an essential role in developing English radicalism and a political culture that extended to the poorer working classes well before the social and political crisis regarding church and state during the French Revolution. The various forms of religious dissent

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[53] Anthony Page, " 'A Great Politicianess': Ann Jebb, Rational Dissent and politics in late eighteenth-century Britain," *Women's History Review* 17, no.5 (2008): 743.
[54] Page, " 'A Great Politicianess': Ann Jebb, Rational Dissent and politics in late eighteenth-century Britain," 756.
[55] Ibid., 757. The Unitarian John Disney notes many times in his diary how there were many visits and calls to the Jebb house. D.O. Thomas, "John Disney's Diary, 1 January 1783 – 17 May 1784." *Enlightenment and Dissent,* no. 21 (2001): 42-127.
[56] Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism*, 117, see footnote 59.
[57] Ruth Watts, "Introduction: Rational Dissenting Women and the Travel of Ideas," *Enlightenment and Dissent*, no. 26 (2010): 26.

were the most conspicuous in the late eighteenth century that signaled the modernization of England, her colonies and eventually France. James E. Bradley and Dale K. Van Kley emphasize that this "vertical or transcendent" aspect of European society redirected itself to the "horizontal or secular human agency."[58] That is, the ecclesiastical polity of the Dissenters translated into the public realm of politics. Despite the drastic social changes resulting from the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Great Britain still linked political theory with religious institutions much like Catholic Europe.[59]

The prelude to the colonial crisis was characterized by the English Dissenters' attempts to petition for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts (1661 and 1672 respectively) and subscription of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Such legislation restricted political and education opportunities for Nonconformists and Catholics; the Dissenters were designated as second-class citizens and alienated from general society. It is worth noting that at the time of the American Revolution, religious dissent had changed substantially from the earlier eighteenth century. John Seed explains how the radicalism of the Dissenters evolved and paralleled that of the country as a whole with the burgeoning extra-parliamentary movements: their "social values, intellectual coordinates, [and] organizational form" did not exclusively focus on their own well-being but also political reform.[60] The increasingly friendly relationship of the Church of England with the government over the course of the American Revolution made the Rational Dissenters an important opposing force against anti-American and anti-dissenter discourse during the late eighteenth century. From the 1770s onwards, voting patterns have shown a strong correlation

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[58] Introduction to *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe,* ed. James E. Bradley and Dale K. Van Kley, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 37.
[59] James E. Bradley, "The Religious Origins of Radical Politics in England, Scotland, and Ireland, 1662-1800," in *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by James E. Bradley and Van Kley, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 187.
[60] John Seed, "Gentlemen Dissenters: The Social and Political Meanings of Rational Dissent in the 1770s and 1780s," *The Historical Journal* 28, no. 2 (1985): 300.

between Oppositional politics (i.e. favoring parliamentary reform) and the Dissenter community due to the ongoing American crisis.[61] Issues pertaining to ecclesiastical matters, such as the Feathers Tavern petition in 1771-1772, paved the way to the political, more radical Association movements.

Although the Dissenter community consisted of different sects (e.g. Presbyterians and Unitarians), a commonality existed among the diverse, and sometimes sharply opposing, groups in respect to their theological and political contexts: the idea of a separate ecclesiastical polity determined by the congregation.[62] Literally epitomizing the phrase *vox populi vox dei*, Dissenter leaders believed that sovereignty resided with the people in religious matters, where belief had political implications as well. The Presbyterian minister George Walker refers to "the lower ranks" as a "fruitful" source of virtue in "public worship" and points out that political virtue and wisdom are not exclusive to "the Great Ones of the Church" or public magistrates.[63] Other Dissenter figures also evoked similar sentiments, characterizing a challenge to the traditional hierarchy of English society that had religious, political and social implications.

That being said, though their principles were anti-aristocratic in nature, the Dissenters did not wish for a complete overthrow of social order like that mirroring the French Revolution. That is, the Dissenters did not desire a republic for England, calling for the equality of all men, yet they upheld republican principles. Specifically, the Rational Dissenters drew upon the example of ancient Rome as the epitome of classical republicanism with themes of virtue, morality and independence contributing to the good of the state. Throughout the late-eighteenth century,

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[61] John A. Phillips, *Electoral Behavior in Unreformed England: Plumpers, Splitters, and Straights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 286-305.
[62] Ibid., 301. See also Bradley, "The Religious Origins of Radical Politics in England, Scotland, and Ireland, 1662-1800," 189.
[63] George Walker, *A Sermon Preached to a Congregation of Protestants at Nottingham, February 27th, 1778; Being the Day Appointed for a General Fast* (London: J. Johnson, 1778), 23-4.

dissenting arguments defending natural rights and upholding middle-class values complemented their religious appeals to the development of moral and virtuous citizens. James E. Bradley notes that the core cause of the prejudice against the Dissenters was attributed to their theological principles, which transmitted into the civic and political realms. The political divisions present during the American Revolution were not solely grounded in social class but also with the differences between those within the Anglican Church and those outside it.[64] In his *Defense of Moderate Non-Conformity* (1703-5), Edmund Calamy Jr. explains that the Nonconformists' refusal for any religious or civil power to exercise authority over an individual's conscience differentiated them from their Anglican counterparts, setting a rough precedent for the ideology of Rational Dissent.[65]

The Rational Dissenters took this belief further in its argument for an essentially non-interfering government in religious and intellectual affairs. This distinct group, which was often equated with non-Trinitarians, experienced less freedom than the orthodox Dissenter as those denying the Trinity were excluded from the Toleration Act of 1689. Despite their small numbers, the Rational Dissenters shaped political thought in England as a sort of precursor to the writings of Thomas Paine and Jeremy Bentham. It was their belief in the right to free conscience and "interest in the scientific sphere of 'natural history,' from whose alliance with metaphysics and politics so many utopias were predicted and so much optimism generated."[66]

Quality vs. Quantity: Significance of Rational Dissent and Popular Politics during the American Revolution

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[64] Bradley, "The Religious Origins of Radical Politics in England, Scotland, and Ireland, 1662-1800," 193.
[65] Ibid., 195.
[66] Anthony Lincoln, *Some Political and Social Ideas of English Dissent: 1763-1800* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 32.

There have been a number of studies completed on the Rational Dissenters and their significance in shaping English public life during the late eighteenth century. They were active in critical movements occurring within the country: calling for parliamentary reform, campaigning against slavery and supporting the colonists' cause in the American War for Independence. Intent on restoring their natural English rights embodied in the ancient constitution, the Rational Dissenters argued for the preservation of their civil and political liberties: "government [is] the great instrument of progress of the human species,"[67] but only if the institution is conducive to the happiness of society and promotion of the public good. The foundations on which their political theory rested were ultimately on moral grounds, and the government directed the creation of a virtuous society.

The Rational Dissenters believed in the "natural goodness"[68] (or virtue, as they tend to use in their sermons) of human nature. They were the fervent advocates of the unrestrained practice of free will. This belief of absolute individualism differentiated the Rational Dissenters from the traditional dissenting community because of the former's association with a very *laissez-faire* characteristic, that is, calling for minimum government interference in civil affairs, which consequently affected their politics.[69] In addition to the economic model evoked by Adam Smith, the Rational Dissenters emphasized the individual's right to religious liberty, freedom in the public realm (e.g. free speech), and education. This relationship between the independent conscience and the aforementioned absolute individualism solidified during the initial stages of the American colonial crisis. Russell E. Richey offers thoughtful insight into the development of this relationship. Prior to the American Revolution, the Dissenters struggled with an insecure

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[67] Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government, and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty* (London: J. Johnson, 1771), 11.
[68] Knud Haakonssen ed., *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.
[69] Seed, "Gentlemen Dissenters," 316.

identity that was inherently negative in character, "haunted by its own fragility, threatened by historical and generational change, endlessly remaking boundaries and reaffirming continuities,"[70] especially in light of the English Civil War. The instability of the identity as a Dissenter prompted them to eagerly take up the cause for liberty in the late 1760s. However, instead of solely attributing liberty to divine authority, the Rational Dissenters predicated liberty on "human equality."[71]

Their religion was characterized by a determination to combine reason (through the sciences) and faith, which by extension encouraged independent thought and interpretations. They promoted universal toleration of all religions including Catholics, which was extremely unpopular at the time as evident by the Gordon Riots of 1780. In the words of Priestley, "whatever we be called, or call ourselves Christians, Papists, Protestants, Dissenters, Heretics, or even Deists (for all are equal here, all are actuated by the same spirit, and all engaged in the same cause) we stand in need of the same liberty of thinking, debating, and publishing.[72] Interestingly, the equality and independent will he emphasized paradoxically conflicted with each other in Priestley's mind, especially in regards to politics. Although he believed in the intellectual and civil equality of men and women, the same did not apply for political rights. Priestley aligns more with liberalism with his classification (and differentiation) of political and civil liberties. As discussed throughout this thesis, he emphasizes the right of all citizens to civil liberties; in contrast, political liberty "is that which he may, or may not acquire…to have a voice in public

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[70] John Seed, "History and Narrative Identity: Religious Dissent and the Politics of Memory in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 44, no. 1 (2005): 54-5. For more on the *laissez-faire* philosophy of this group, see John Seed, " 'A set of men powerful enough in many things': Rational Dissent and political opposition in England, 1770-1790," in *Enlightenment and Religion: Rational Dissent in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 158-9.

[71] Russell E. Richey, "The Origins of British Radicalism: The Changing Rationale for Dissent," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7, no.2 (1973-4), 187.

[72] Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government*, 94.

determinations, or…he may submit to be governed wholly by others."[73] Nevertheless, the notion of coexistence between the different denominations of religion evoked is reminiscent of the radical utilitarianism developed by Jeremy Bentham. Indeed, Bentham accredits Priestley and his *Essay on the First Principles of Government* for his dictum "the greatest happiness of the greatest number."[74]

While it is true that Rational Dissent experienced a decline by the end of the eighteenth century, they constituted the political strength of Dissenters overall, though they did not necessarily share the same goals. The connections to Rational Dissent included those at the national and local levels. The more well-known Rational Dissenters (e.g. Joseph Priestley, Theophilus Lindsey, and Richard Price) maintained correspondences with prominent politicians including the radical Member of Parliament Charles James Fox and the Earl of Shelburne, who served as Prime Minister during the final year of the American Revolution (1782-83). George Walker and John Jebb tended to concentrate at the local level, whether that constituted a town's literary society or city branch of the Society for Constitutional Information. Nevertheless, they also emerged on the national stage when it pertained to political reform. Priestley had traveled and served as Shelburne's librarian for a short time from 1773 to 1780 with some exposure to political affairs.[75] Likewise, both Lindsey and Price shared close relationships with Shelburne and exchanged undisclosed political information about the American Revolution. Shelburne kept Price updated on their "American Brethren," lamenting the injustices against the colonists and calling for Britain to "leave [power] in the hands of the People…[as is] the case in Portugal and

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[73] Ibid., 12.
[74] David L. Wykes, "Joseph Priestley, Minister and Teacher," in *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian,* ed. by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 35.
[75] Ibid., 145.

partially in the King of Prussia's dominions."[76] Price's relationship with Shelburne influenced him to write several political tracts as a propagandist in support of the American colonists. However, Dissenter political culture was not limited to political tracts and pamphlets (though historians tend to primarily focus on them). The ecclesiastical polity of the Dissenters eventually complemented the association and extra-parliamentary movements. Initially, such religious issues took priority in the Dissenters' concerns for change, but theology conveyed itself through political action, as discussed below.

The Feathers Tavern petition (1771-72) exemplifies an association of dissenting ministers and laymen who came together to sign a petition to repeal the subscription of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Priestley was peripherally involved with the petition, having signed the first one in 1772 and lent support for the second one.[77] Jebb invested more into the debates surrounding the petition, contributing eloquent rebuttals against claims that the Articles in no way infringed upon private judgment; writing to Parliament, he argued that the power of the clergy increased constantly while the civil rights of men were "annihilated or absorbed in an all-devouring power and patrimony of the church."[78] Although no concrete legislative changes resulted from the petition, there were notable impacts in the ideological and intellectual values of several participants including Lindsey and Jebb. The former went on to establish Essex Street Chapel, the first Unitarian church in England. Jebb continued to steer towards Socinianism with his reservations about the Trinity despite his education and lecturer position at Cambridge i.e. background as an Anglican.

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[76] Shelburne, *To the Reverend Dr. Price, Newington Green, London,* Letter, [no date], from Bodleian Library, Letters to Richard Price, MS Eng. Misc. C. 132, p. 46.
[77] Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightenment of Joseph Priestley: A Study of his Life and Word from 1733 to 1773* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 225.
[78] Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism*, 108. Quote found on p. 109, footnote 26.

The failure of the Feathers Tavern petition only further motivated Jebb with his efforts to repeal subscription in the midst of the American Revolution while steadily solidifying his interests in the political realm. Although the political question regarding the colonies constituted a major concern for the Rational Dissenters, the issue over the balance of power between the Crown and Church simultaneously occupied their minds. Both Jebb and his wife Ann engaged in a debate with Thomas Balguy, the Archdeacon of Winchester, who strongly supported both subscription and government policy against America: "In all ordinary cases, it is the duty of a churchman, as well as of a citizen, to submit quietly to *the powers that be*."[79] Despite his more immediate concern with the freedoms of religious minorities, Priestley also engaged with Balguy in his *Essay on the First Principles of Government* regarding Britain's confessional state and ecclesiastical order.[80] In light of Britain's attempts to establish an Anglican bishopric in the colonies (1771) and passing of the Quebec Act (1774), Dissenters like Priestley and Jebb viewed such initiatives as an infringement of the colonists' natural and religious rights. As a result, they argued in opposition to Anglican hegemony over political and religious affairs. With the increasing uncertainty of the situation in America, debates revolving around religion and liberty divided into polar sides. One side upheld the policies of Parliament, and the other argued for promotion of liberty and free inquiry by nullifying subscription. Jebb's religious and intellectual background contributed to a political radicalism, and political undertones became distinct in Jebb's sermons by the 1770s.

This recurring theme of the intertwinement of religion and politics only escalated over the course of the 1770s seen through the Rational Dissenters' leadership of the petitioning campaign; this was primarily seen with the failure to pass the bill for the relief of Protestant

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[79] Ibid., 116-19. Quote found on p. 118, see footnote 66.
[80] Eshet, 126.

Dissenters to subscription (a *raison d'etre* for heterodox Dissenters) in 1772 and 1773 and first military engagements of the American Revolution in 1775. While petitioning was not in itself a radical act, James Bradley emphasizes that considering the historical context of such petitions can depict the otherwise radical nature of popular opposition: a few examples included the Middlesex election affair of 1769 and the Association Movement of the early 1780s.[81] Priestley assumed a politically leading role in obtaining signatures for the repeal of subscription and served as the chairman of the committee of ministers in the West Riding of Yorkshire.[82] With the large number of signatures on the petitions, which numbered around 800, Parliament entertained a bill for exemption from subscription, which initially passed in the Commons both years. It even received the support of Edmund Burke in a speech given in the House of Commons in 1773; Burke was most intent on removing the disabilities directed towards the Dissenters but exercised caution in case nonconformity sought to undermine the Church of England.[83] Nevertheless, the relief bill lost in a large majority in the House of Lords.

Disappointed by the outcome of parliamentary procedure, Priestley argued that the influence of the Commons and its original autonomy from the people was compromised and attributed the bill's failure to Members of Parliament dependent on "court places and pensions," blinded by corruption.[84] Jebb also reiterated this notion of parliamentary corruption in an anonymous article in the *General Evening Post* in 1772, referring to Priestley's *Essay on the*

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[81] James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 323.
[82] G.M. Ditchfield, "How Narrow will the Limits of this Toleration Appear?' Dissenting Petitions to Parliament, 1772-1773," *Parliamentary History* 24, no. 1 (2005): 92.
[83] Burke opposed the laxity of discipline within the Church yet promoted "inviolable toleration" with reservations. For a brief background on Burke's early relationship with religion and nonconformity, see Richard Bourke, *Empire & Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton: New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2015), 5-6.
[84] Jack Fruchtman, Jr., "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, no. 4 (1983): 47-8.

First Principles of Government.[85] According to G.M. Ditchfield, the process and aftermath of these petitions helped the Dissenters realize a newly found identity based on politics and religion. As early as 1769, Priestley had recognized some form of self-identity in his *Free Address to Protestant Dissenters* with his use of the term "Rational Dissenters" as advocates for the "cause of truth and liberty."[86] Following failure of the bill, Thomas Belsham noted how Priestley distinguished the Rational Dissenters from their orthodox and evangelical counterparts, especially the more Calvinistic Methodists who had petitioned against the Dissenter relief bill in 1773.[87]

By 1775, news of the Battles of Lexington and Concord and King George III's declaration of the colonies in a state of rebellion generated divisions within the country in the form of loyal addresses in support for government policy, which in turn elicited petitions urging conciliation. During this setting of revolution, the radical nature of these petitions corresponded with how the people petitioning were "necessarily involved not only in exercising independent judgment against government policy, but actually attempting to obstruct that policy."[88] Walker and the city of Nottingham serve as the case study for reinforcing this idea. On October 1775, an address favoring coercion against the colonies was circulated throughout Nottingham. To counter the address, the local government unanimously approved of sending a petition "in behalf of our American Brethren"[89] to Parliament. Having settled into the city in just the previous year, Walker took the lead in drafting and circulating a petition in favor of conciliation and peace,

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[85] Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism,* 128. "'Every person who is acquainted with the first principles of government' knows that 'the legislature of this kingdom…is accountable for their trust to the general body of the nation.'"
[86] Joseph Priestley, *A Free Address to Protestant Dissenters, as Such* (London, G. Pearch, 1769), 57.
[87] Ditchfield, 95.
[88] Bradley, *Religion, Revolution, and English Radicalism, 326.*
[89] Ibid., quoted in 356.

giving "that form and body to the expression of the popular voice."[90] The petition referred not only to a political rationale (namely, the rights of the American colonists), but also social and economic interests of the town—factors often overlooked in the shaping of Dissenting politics.[91] Many of the town's inhabitants, including the sheriffs and mayor, signed the petition and took a liberal and pro-American stance under the guidance of Walker: Thomas Rawson, an agent for the Earl of Sandwich, described the town in 1777 as "without any exception the most disloyal in the kingdom, owing in a great measure to the whole corporation (the present mayor excepted) being Dissenters."[92]

Roots of Dissenter Political Culture: the Marriage of Science and Politics

As mentioned in the introduction, the Rational Dissenters played a significant part in developing British political culture dating back to the 1760s. Before there was Thomas Paine, the bastion for human rights, another individual laid the precedents for John Jebb, George Walker and Joseph Priestley: the Dissenter schoolmaster and radical, James Burgh. Before the distribution of Paine's influential *Common Sense* (1776), Burgh had already formulated a radical ideology that even preceded the ideas iterated in Paine's *Right of Man* (1791); in his *magnum opus*, *Political Disquisitions,* Burgh called for reforms that included a national system for poor relief (a measure Priestley remained hesitant about).[93] Politics, in Burgh's eyes, was "only

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[90] George Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects: to which is prefixed a life of the author* (London: J. Johnson, 1809), lxxxvi.
[91] Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism,* 357. See Chapter 2 for more on the intersection of socio-economic status and Dissenting politics.
[92] Quoted in Sir Lewis Namier and John Brooke, *The House of Commons: 1754-1790* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), 355.
[93] Carla H. Hay, "The Making of a Radical: The Case of James Burgh," *Journal of British Studies* 18, no. 2 (1979): 97.

common sense applied to matters of public concern."[94] Burgh's political and philosophical opinions greatly influenced Jebb and Priestley. His particular thoughts on the intellectual equality of men and women, proposals for the expansion of education, and free trade are reiterated in many of Priestley's writings. Most notably, however, it was Burgh's radical principles that served as the framework for Jebb's own political philosophy.[95] While the ideas espoused by John Wilkes and Burgh had their roots in early Whig thought, the political and social institutions that these Rational Dissenters led—or at least participated in—constituted a defining feature of British political culture in the late eighteenth century.[96]

Prior to the 1780s, political culture in England may be characterized by the lively discussions in societies, clubs and coffee house meetings. Such institutions were not new to the era, yet they were bustling places for both men and women in the late eighteenth-century to engage in political and philosophical matters. One of the first clubs that merged both political and scientific interests was the Club of Honest Whigs, presided over by Benjamin Franklin through the mid-1760s and 1770s. Coinciding with Enlightenment culture, these Honest Whigs, who consisted of mainly dissenting ministers, held their meetings at a coffee shop in London.[97] Although primarily a scientific and philosophical club, the Club maintained political [liberal] undertones, especially in regards to the American Revolution. In addition to sharing common interests in parliamentary reform and religious tolerance, Franklin and the members of the Club

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[94] James Burgh, "Remarks Historical and Political Collected from Books and Observations. Humbly Presented to the King's Most Excellent Majesty," British Library, King's MS 433. Quoted in Hay, 100.
[95] Ibid., 91.
[96] For more information on the general growth of English political culture (namely, the emergence of extraparliamentary politics) between the 1760s and 1790s, see James V.H. Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33-39.
[97] Verner W. Crane, "The Club of Honest Whigs: Friends of Science and Liberty," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1966): 210, 218-9. Rational Dissenters such as Priestly, Richard Price, and Abraham Rees also numbered among the general dissenting members of the club. James Burgh also actively participated in the club.

enjoyed a mutual exchange of influence between one another in support of the colonists through correspondences as the former constantly assured his dissenting colleagues in England about the status of the Americans: "Tell our dear good friend, Dr. Price, who sometimes has his doubts and despondencies about our firmness, that America is determined and unanimous."[98] The Unitarian minister Theophilus Lindsey interacted with the Club in 1775, having "dined yesterday…with Drs. Price, Franklin, Priestley, and Mr. Quincy: no bad company you will say. We began and ended with the Americans."[99] The interdisciplinary nature of the Club of Honest Whigs may be attributed to the growing coffeehouse culture as a "central hub of innovation of British society."[100] Such gatherings had surged in popularity by the start of the eighteenth century. As the historian Tom Standage explains, coffee was [and still is] the "very antithesis of alcohol,"[101] keeping the individual focused and alert towards scientific or political discussion. Introduced in the seventeenth century, coffee fostered literacy and sociability in British society and opened venues for open discussion to visitors like Franklin and members of the lower classes.

As the American merchant Josiah Quincy Jr. described it, the meetings held at the London Coffeehouse every Wednesday housed a club of "Friends to *Liberty* and *Science*."[102] The historiography regarding the Club of Honest Whigs and its dissenting members has adequately addressed the liberal and scientific interests that dominated the club's dinners and sessions. However, historians have addressed each aspect separately, tending to exclusively focus on the

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98 Benjamin Franklin, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin: with Notes and a Life of the Author by Jared Sparks* (Boston: Hilliard, Gray, 1840): 160. See also Andrew Hamilton, *Trade and Empire in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 55.

99 Lindsey correspondences, MSS, in Dr. William's Library, London, quoted in Crane 222. Lindsey was eager for news on the First Continental Congress (1774).

100 Steven Johnson, *The Invention of Air: A Story of Science, Faith, Revolution, and the Birth of America* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 53. For more on the history coffeehouse culture in Britain, see also Melton, 240-47.

101 Tom Standage, *A History of the World in Six Glasses* (New York: Walker & Co., 2005), 135.

102 Josiah Quincy, *Memoir of the Life of Josiah Quincy, Junior of Massachusetts Bay, 1744-1775* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1875), 239. My italics.

club's scientific accomplishments or political philosophies.[103] Most recently, Steven Johnson has written two books that credit the Club of Honest Whigs with significance during the eighteenth century: *The Invention of Air: A Story of Science, Faith, Revolution, and the Birth of America* (2008) and *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation* (2010). While he does address the political culture of the coffeehouse and scientific breakthroughs of Priestley, Johnson depicts each aspect as two disconnected, distinct spheres. Dan Eshet emphasizes that Priestley's scientific research has been largely ignored in its political and religious contexts.[104] Here I emphasize the symbiosis between the Rational Dissenters' scientific and political interests rather than seeing them as being mutually exclusive. Priestley's and Price's scientific endeavors exemplify this intersection between liberty and human progress.

The Club of Honest Whigs was considered the rough equivalent to the Royal Society Club (the dining club branch of the Royal Society itself) but ostensibly without the political aspect. As Benjamin Franklin mentions in a correspondence back to an American friend, "Here the Royal Society is of all parties, but party is entirely out of the question in all our proceedings."[105] However, it is worth noting that Priestley complained in 1790 to Sir Joseph Banks, the incumbent President at the time, of a "party spirit" and factionalism within the Royal Society following the rejection of Thomas Cooper into the Society, whom Priestley had recommended.[106] By then, Priestley began to remove himself from the circle of the Royal Society, condemning its members "for reject[ing] any candidate whose political principles they

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[103] An insightful article by Verner Crane exemplifies a work that examines the Honest Whigs as both a political and philosophical club. However, the first half of the article focuses on the club's scientific endeavors and shifts to the political scene in the second half. See Crane, "The Club of Honest Whigs: Friends of Science and Liberty."

[104] Eshet, 127-8.

[105] Franklin, 455.

[106] For more on Priestley's contrasting thoughts on the Club of Honest Whigs and Royal Society, see Jan Golinski, *Science as Public Culture: Chemistry and Enlightenment in Britain, 1760-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 68-70.

do not approve of."[107] He would eventually become isolated from the members by 1791; his radical opinions on religion and welcoming attitude towards French Revolution did not help in this regard. Indeed, the Royal Society never offered their condolences to Priestley after the Birmingham Riots, his emigration to America or his death.[108]

The Royal Society ranked among the largest and most prestigious philosophical clubs in British society during the eighteenth century rivaled intellectually only by two other contemporary societies: the aforementioned Club of Honest Whigs and the Lunar Society in Birmingham. The Honest Whigs and Lunar Society included Rational Dissenters among their membership and exerted conspicuous influence on politics through the 1770s and 1780s.[109] The political character of the Honest Whigs aligned with the liberalism (excepting Burgh) characteristic of Priestley, who at the request of Franklin wrote his politically oriented *Address to the Protestant Dissenters of all Denominations, on the Approaching Election of Members of Parliament* (1774).[110] This address called together Dissenters to unite against the infringement of natural rights for the British and fellow citizens across the Atlantic and to rally for religious tolerance. The conversations revolving around the American Revolution at the meetings gravitated towards support of the colonists. Moreover, the connection with Franklin facilitated the mutual exchange of political publications and letters between Americans and the Honest Whigs. For instance, Richard Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty and the Justice and Policy of the War in America* (1776) garnered popularity in both America and Britain rivaling that of Thomas Paine's catalytic *Common Sense,* published just a month before Price's

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[107] Joseph Priestley, *Experiments on the Generation of Air from Water; to which are prefixed, Experiments Relating to the Decomposition of Dephlogisticated and Inflammable Air* (London: J. Johnson, 1793), vii.
[108] Schofield, 302, see footnote 20.
[109] Crane, 212.
[110] Ibid., 231.

pamphlet.[111] Price's rhetoric paralleled that of Paine with the common themes of enslavement and the right to self-government. However, the former defined a broader concept of liberty that emphasized the "Human Authority in religion" and "private judgment" and attributed the most blame to Parliament for the oppressive treatment of the colonies—as opposed to the "royal brute of Great Britain," according to Paine.[112] In addition to a religious contention, Price refers back to the notion of the independent will that Rational Dissenters so valued. Although Price used the concept here in a religious and political context, the Honest Whigs prioritized free enquiry in the sciences as a challenge to established authority, namely the government and Church of England. This stance had implications in the social, economic and public spheres as exemplified through Priestley's and Price's tracts on science and mathematics respectively.[113]

Priestley's career as a scientist had its humble beginnings with the Club of Honest Whigs, where Franklin first introduced him to electrostatics. Encouraged by the witty electrician to try his hand at science and supported by other researchers and supplies, Priestley completed his *History and Present State of Electricity, with Original Experiments* (1767), which was received extremely well by the scientific community.[114] However, the complexity behind electrostatics made *The History* non-conducive to the general public and spurred Priestley to write his scientific observations and thoughts in a more transparent and accessible manner. To achieve this, Priestley taught himself perspective drawing to illustrate the equipment and methods as a

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[111] Charles F. Heartman, *The Cradle of the United States, 1765-1789* (New Jersey: Perth Amboy, 1922), 88. "Next to Paine's Common Sense the most often reprinted book of its time."
[112] Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1776), 1, 9-10, 16.
[113] Seed, " 'A set of men powerful enough in many things,' "158-9.
[114] W.H. Brock, "Enlightened Experimentalist," in *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian*, ed. by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 54-5.

visual aid.[115] In concurrence with the doctrines of Rational Dissent, he wanted to depict the sciences into a religious narrative complementing human progress.

The themes of openness and collaboration emerge with Priestley's experiences as a scientist, reflecting the Rational Dissenters' commitment to free interpretation and education. Instead of leaving the study of science exclusively to the gentry and Anglican scholars, Priestley along with Jebb and Walker encouraged the diffusion of interest and experimentation not only in the sciences but also in politics and religion. Ironically enough, it is this open circulation and collaboration of ideas that could have aided Priestley financially, especially during his residence at Birmingham in the 1780s. During his stay at Leeds from 1767-1773, his observations of the nearby brewery and its production of "fixed" and "mephitic" airs (i.e. carbon dioxide and nitrogen) kindled his interest in the properties of air. His experiments with carbon dioxide eventually resulted in his invention of carbonated or "soda" water, which he happened to stumble upon in a dinner with the Duke of Northumberland in 1772.[116] It would be Johann Jacob Schweppe from Germany who, referring back to Priestley's methods, created a commercial success with an industry that continues to produce carbonated water enjoyed in the gin and tonic we drink today. The thought of "withholding information for personal gain" was "unimaginable" for Priestley's circle, and his scientific tracts and letters discussing his experimental results only confirm this.[117]

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[115] Priestley included several illustrations of his various apparatuses in his book *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air* (1774-1786). "Joseph Priestley and the Discovery of Oxygen," *American Chemical Society,* accessed 11 February 2016, http://www.acs.org/content/acs/en/education/whatischemistry/landmarks/josephpriestleyoxygen.html.

[116] Brock, 57.

[117] Johnson, 52. Priestley made meticulous notes on the methods and results based off the myriad experiments conducted; see Joseph Priestley, *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air*. Joseph Priestley, *Letter from Joseph Priestley* [to Edmund Burke], Birmingham, 11 Dec. 1782, Sheffield City Archives WWM/BK P/1/1748; Priestley goes into great detail on his experimental

Both historians of science and chemists recognize Priestley for his pneumatic studies leading to the discovery of "dephlogisticated air" or oxygen, a paradigm that Priestley strongly adhered to despite the theory's repudiation by the findings of the French chemist Antoine Lavoisier, who named the gas and characterized its properties. Priestley's fervent opposition against Lavoisier's combustion-based chemistry was rooted in his theological and political philosophies: "The rapid progress of knowledge…will, I doubt not, be the means, under God, …of putting an end to all undue and usurped authority in the business of *religion*, as well as of *science*."[118] Emphasizing experimentation and observation, Priestley opposed the theoretically dense and analytical-based approach that the French scientists adopted; its "algebraic jargon"[119] made the subject more difficult for the general population to grasp—Priestley never did enjoy mathematics as a schoolboy anyway. The natural sciences played an important role in society because they fostered open discussion in the public sphere. To explain this expansion of knowledge, several scholars have applied Jürgen Habermas' model of the "public sphere" to Enlightenment science as a means to mediate the relationship between society and state.[120] Rather than simply concurring with the dictums of the Church, Priestley urged both men and women to collaborate and draw their own scientific conclusions through experimentation.

Scientific knowledge also served as an agent for social and moral progress exemplified through the public health movements that were inspired by Priestley's discoveries on different gases including oxygen, carbon dioxide and nitrous oxide (an anesthetic colloquially known as "laughing gas"). For instance, Priestley presented his process of carbonating water to the College

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results in creating carbon dioxide, where he interestingly makes a sensible hypothesis for photosynthesis.

[118] Joseph Priestley, *Experiments and Observations on Different Kinds of Air*, 3rd edition, (London: J. Johnson, 1781), xiv.

[119] P.M. Jones, "The Life and Times of Dr. Joseph Priestley," in *Joseph Priestley and Birmingham*, ed. by Malcolm Dick (Studley: Brewin Books, 2005), 20.

[120] Brock, 66.

of Physicians, which then proceeded to [incorrectly] prescribe it as a cure for scurvy for Captain James Cook's second voyage (1772). Aside from this misguided treatment, physicians referred to Priestley's works on chemistry to diagnose and develop remedies to epidemics, notably fever and scurvy. John Pringle, the pioneer of modern military medicine, identified air via contagion as the cause of gaol fevers (or typhus).[121] Likewise, the question over scurvy was more a matter of demonstrating general protocol for sanitary conditions on the ships. Admittedly, Pringle did recommend "wort" to combat the disease because of the presence of "fixed air."[122]

By the 1780s, Priestley's political arguments against the Anglican Church's authority on theology and the sciences took shape based on the combination of his Unitarian and materialistic foundations—the latter influenced by David Harley and John Locke's works of sensation and experience. Priestley's fellow Rational Dissenters, Jebb and Walker, too maintained their political philosophies on the basis of religion and scientific/mathematical knowledge. Unlike Priestley who sought to transition out of the political realm during the 1780s (with limited success), Jebb and Walker actively participated in politics, as examined further below. Priestley mainly continued to pursue his scientific endeavors with his fellow "lunarticks" and theological writings in Birmingham. However, for the time being, Richard Price provides another example of the intersection of human progress and political initiative.

Aside from his sermons and political writings, Price pursued mathematical and statistical studies. For Price, the theory of probability and statistics occupied his mind in the 1760s and 1770s and earned him membership in the Royal Society in 1765 for his submission of Thomas

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[121] Christopher Lawrence, "Priestley in Tahiti: The Medical Interests of a Dissenting Chemist," in *Science, Medicine and Dissent: Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)*, ed. by R.G.W. Anderson and Christopher Lawrence (London: Wellcome Trust/Science Museum, 1987), 6.

[122] Ibid., 7-8. Wort refers to the fermentation of malt in the production of beer. On an interesting note, Cook was awarded the Copley medal by the Royal Society for the "success" of using malt, which actually contains no amount of vitamin C. Luckily, his crew managed to consume vegetables such as sauerkraut and scurvy grass.

Bayes' *An Essay towards Solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chances* (the same Bayes immortalized in the theorem of probability). Interestingly, it was Price who elaborated and made substantial corrections to the original essay, whereupon Sharon McGrayne raises the question of why the theorem is not called the Bayes-Price theorem.[123] Nevertheless, Price's work on probability theory pushed him to become "increasingly involve[d] in insurance, demography, and financial and political reform."[124] As a result, he took his contributions to the field of mathematics and applied them for making improvements in society, giving birth to the early social sciences. Such proposals included the state's national debt, population statistics and old age annuities. Furthermore, concerns over the well-being of British civilians, especially the poor, in the 1780s instigated the rudimentary system of public health. Priestley and Jebb, with chemistry and physician backgrounds respectively, diagnosed the destitute conditions and environments of British civilians—rather than the impoverished people themselves—as causes of mortality.[125]

Price's *Essay on the Population of England* (1780) and the counterargument from the Rev. John Howlett set one of the foundations for Thomas Malthus' theory on population growth.[126] According to Price, the British population had declined since 1688 due to the country's massive investments in three recent wars, increase in public taxes and debts and urban agglomeration; this prompted a response from Howlett, who argued that improvements in

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123 Martyn Hooper, "Richard Price, Bayes' Theorem, and God," *Significance* 10, no. 1: 36, 39.
124 D.O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Work of Richard Price* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 128.
125 Lawrence, 5-6. See also Page, 163.
126 Joseph A. Schumpeter, *History of Economic Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 254.

agriculture actually led to an increase of population.[127] Price also set a precedent for the insurance industry to better accommodate the poor. Indeed, he advised the Prime Minister William Pitt (1783-1801) to combat the country's astronomical debt after the American Revolution and to institute the Society for Equitable Assurances—the predecessor to the extant Equitable Life Assurance Society.[128] As reiterated throughout this thesis, theology served as the backbone for the Rational Dissenters' scientific and political motivations, and it is no different here as he explains in his paper to the Royal Society:

> [Mr. De Moivre's] solution he has applied to a very important purpose, and thereby shewn that those are much mistaken who have insinuated that the Doctrine of Chances in mathematics is of trivial consequence, and cannot have a place in any serious enquiry. The purpose I mean is, to shew what reason we have for believing that there are in the constitution of things fixt laws according to which events happen, and that, therefore, the frame of the world must be the effect of the wisdom and power of an intelligent cause; and thus to confirm the argument taken from the final causes for the existence of the Deity.[129]

Like Priestley, Jebb, and Walker, Price believed that knowledge (in this instance, probability) offered explanations for confirming the existence of God and understanding the Scriptures.

Although Jebb and Walker did not directly participate in the Club of Honest Whigs, each independently made strides in his respective ideology. While Anthony Page has reasonably argued that Jebb most likely attended a few meetings with the Honest Whigs, it is apparent that he maintained connections with a few of its members, such as Richard Price and Theophilus Lindsey, and was at least familiar with Burgh and Priestley in the early 1770s.[130] With the failure of the Feathers Tavern Petition and growing discontent over the education system at Cambridge,

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[127] Kenneth Smith, *The Malthusian Controversy* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1951), 25-7. See also William Peterson, *Malthus: Founder of Modern Demography* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 136.
[128] Hooper, 37.
[129] Thomas Bayes and Richard Price, *An Essay Towards Solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chances*, *Philosophical Transactions* 53, (1763): 373-4.
[130] Anthony Page, *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 171-2.

Jebb left the Anglican Church and embraced Unitarian principles. His application of the empirical method to the "study of Revelation"[131] earned him praise from Lindsey; his becoming a doctor a few years prior to 1780 epitomized this combination of rational religion and science and served as a framework for his political activities from 1780 until his untimely death in 1786. Likewise, Walker corresponded with Price and Priestley regarding his treatises on conic sections and spheres between 1772 and 1780 while also engaging himself in local and national politics at the same time in Nottingham. Walker's focus on political and theological matters characterized his residence at Nottingham (1774-1798), where he wrote politically-inclined sermons, presided over a literary club, and assumed a "leading and conspicuous part"[132] in municipal meetings. As elaborated on in Chapter 2, Jebb and Walker contributed greatly to Dissenter political culture through their explicit political activities or sermons.

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131 Samuel Henley, *The Distinct Claims of Government and Religion* (Cambridge, 1772). Quoted in Page, 66.
132 Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects: to which is prefixed a life of the author*, xxxiv.

Chapter 2
Societies and Social Networks:
A "holy alliance" between science, politics, and religion (1776-1789)

The events of the American Revolution played a particular role in the development of the Rational Dissenters' identity, which initially focused on a religious facet (repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and subscription to the Thirty-Nine Articles) but expanded onto a more social and political plane. The core beliefs of the Rational Dissenters were embodied in their religious teachings, which translated into political and social action. As discussed in Chapter 1, Rational Dissent broke away from the puritan tradition of discipline and asceticism and instead adopted a "utilitarian approach to life."[133] It aimed at the reformation of a corrupt government and the amelioration of society through its virtuous and moral citizens.

On this basis, the mid-1770s and 1780s were a burgeoning period for academies and different kinds of societies—scientific, philosophical, literary and political—all sustained by the Rational Dissenters. Indeed, John Jebb and George Walker steadily diverted their attention from theology to the political and social arenas; Jebb's constant presence in the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) and Walker's prominent activism at the local government level in Nottingham highlight this shift. In contrast, with his move to Birmingham in 1780, Joseph Priestley kept his hands full with his religious and scientific endeavors in conjunction with his cohorts in the Lunar Society. Despite his claims of disinterest in politics, however, Priestley's liberalism still manifested itself in his writings during his residence at Birmingham.[134] Nor was the Lunar Society focused solely on science, and Priestley served as the nucleus for the Lunar Society in its involvement in political matters. This chapter will continue examining the

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[133] Seed, "Gentlemen Dissenters," 321-22.

[134] John Towill Rutt, *Life and Correspondence of Joseph Priestley* (London: R. Hunter, 1831), 2:15-6. "The subject that interests you so much I seldom think of, though you oblige me exceedingly by informing me how things go on."

relationship between religion, politics and the sciences in light of each individual's peculiar focus (whether overtly political or not) as these evolved in the years after the American War, and with scrutiny of the role of associational life in this context. It will elaborate on Jebb's, Walker's and Priestley's position on the radical-liberal spectrum amidst their public activities during the 1780s. Furthermore, the chapter discusses British political culture in-depth; the public activities that all three individuals partook in strengthened the foundations for cultural institutions (e.g. coffee shops, salons, social networks, societies) that would continue into the French Revolution up through the Congress of Vienna.

While scholarship on Rational Dissent in eighteenth-century England has tended to primarily focus on its political implications, a social analysis behind their radicalism/liberalism is necessary for a better understanding of English radicalism in general. Historians such as James E. Bradley and John Seed have emphasized a need to connect social and religious philosophies with the political motivations of the Rational Dissenters. These ministers fostered the "experience and 'common sense' of a prosperous bourgeoisie" that preceded even that of the French Revolution.[135]

Dissenter discourse and British public opinion

The topic of British public opinion during the American Revolution was characterized by clashes of divided and conflicting opinions over issues, both old and new, ranging from taxation and representation to questions of universal toleration and parliamentary reform. The historiography of this topic has emphasized English political opinion during the 1770s onwards

[135] Seed, 324.

as a reflection of one's social, economic and religious status.[136] Never is this clearer than in the case of religion. J.G.A. Pocock and J.C.D. Clark have even characterized the American Revolution as a seventeenth-century religious war based on the debates revolving around the crisis: taking "place in a sectarian, congregational and increasingly unitarian chair of polities, the revolution was part of a rebellion against tolerant but exclusive establishments in Church and state."[137] So far, this thesis has examined the intersection of religion with politics and science with respect to Dissenting petitions in 1772 and 1773. There is room, however, for further research in the multifaceted role of religion in shaping public opinion, specifically in regards to socio-economic status as James E. Bradley emphasizes.

Sympathy for the American colonists was derived from a profound unity of radical ideology and self-interest, namely those of the Dissenters, merchants and artisans. As a proponent of *laissez-faire*, Priestley believed that the ideal state resulted from a "prevailing spirit of commerce, aided by Christianity and true philosophy, [which] cannot fail to effect in time."[138] Likewise, Jebb regarded free commerce as a critical component to a prosperous and independent state. Both Priestley and Price considered bankruptcy as the worst outcome for Britain over the course of the American Revolution.

> The worst than can happen to us is a *national bankruptcy*; and indeed, in such magnitude as that of ours, the thing is so unprecedented, that it seems to be out of the power of the human faculties to calculate the operation and effect of it. But be it what it may, the scene of confusion will be lessened, and things will sooner revert to a settled and happy state, by the exercise of *wisdom, moderation, and industry*. If men were perfectly virtuous, and had a perfect command of their

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136 See Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

137 J.G.A. Pocock,"Conservative Enlightenment and Democratic Revolutions: The American and French Cases in British Perspective," *Government and Opposition* 24, no. 1 (1989): 97.

138 Joseph Priestley, *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley,"* 22: 240.

> passions, no revolution of this kind could have any very calamitous, or very lasting effects.[139]

Here again, an economic aspect ("national bankruptcy") is integrated alongside religious overtones ("wisdom, moderation, and industry").

On a local level, radical discourse in the public press appealed to a wide audience, not solely limited to the Dissenters but also including the poorer working class. Rather than being solely based on either a religious or socio-economic element, the political behavior of the heterodox and orthodox Dissenters was contingent on both. Newspapers and election propaganda tended to combine the religious agenda of the Dissenters and the rights of the poor man and incited apprehension by referencing legislation such as the Quebec Act (1774) or threat of enslavement respectively.[140] A case study of Bristol in the 1770s conducted by Elizabeth Baigent and Bradley offers evidence of this correlation between religion and socio-economic status. The data (see **Table 1**) reveals a complex correlation between religion, political behavior, and economic status. According to the data below, the wealthier groups dominated the addressers (those supporting government policy) in comparison to the petitioners (those supporting the American colonists), that is, 65% vs. 49% respectively. Likewise, the petitioners consisted of primarily the poorer classes when compared against the addressers (51% vs. 35%). Similar studies for the cities of Manchester and London gave similar results.[141] This pattern also applied to the Dissenter community in Bristol; the modest earnings of groups such as the Baptists and

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[139] Priestley, *On the subject of war,* 18-19. My italics. See also Richard Price, *A Discourse Addressed to a Congregation at Hackney, on February 21, 1781, Being the Day Appointed for a Public Fast* (London: T. Cadell, 1781), 25. "Our glory departed…without colonies—without allies—some of the best branches of our trade lost—a monstrous [economic] burden weighting us down…"

[140] Elizabeth Baigent and James E. Bradley, "The Social Sources of Late Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism: Bristol in the 1770s and 1780s," *The English Historical Review* 124, no. 510 (2009): 1080.

[141] Peter Marshall, *Manchester and the American Revolution,* (John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 1980). For statistics on London, see John Sainsbury, *Disaffected Patriots: London Supporters of Revolutionary America, 1769-1782* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

Quakers signed petitions whereas the wealthier Presbyterian families were inclined to sign addresses.

Table 4: The Wealth of Addressers and Petitioners

	Addressers			Petitioners			All ratepayers	
	Number	Per cent	Per cent of known values	Number	Per cent	Per cent of known values	Number	Per cent
Poor	23	2.55	6.09	24	2.46	8.39	732	10.9
Moderately poor	108	11.99	28.57	120	12.3	41.96	3,080	45.9
Moderately rich	170	18.87	44.97	104	10.66	36.36	2,235	33.3
Rich	77	8.55	20.37	38	3.89	13.29	664	9.9
Unknown	523	58.05		690	70.7			
All	901	100	100	976	100	100	6,711	100

[142] **Table 1:** There is a distinct voting difference in terms of wealth for those in opposition to the American colonists (the addressers) vs. those supporting conciliation (the petitioners). Tests indicated that the differences in wealth between petitioners and addressers are statistically significant.

In their sermons and political writings, Dissenters such as Priestley and Caleb Evans linked socio-economic reasons into British popular politics in their justifications for American support. As examined in this study, the integration of a socio-economic basis in addition to religion and science was "important in the development of public consciousness and the spread of a more radical approach to the problems of the day."[143]

"Shall I yet go out to battle against the children of Benjamin my brother, or shall I cease?"[144] Role of Sermons in Dissenter Political Culture

It is well established that media such as pamphlets and newspapers played a major role in the public sphere concentrating on the American Revolution. However, what has been overlooked, as Henry Ippel argues, is the significance of sermons, particularly those delivered at Thanksgiving (Fast Sermons). While the eighteenth century highlighted a steady growth in

[142] Ibid., 1104.
[143] James E. Bradley, "The British Public and the American Revolution: Ideology, Interest and Opinion," in *Britain and the American Revolution*, ed. by H.T. Dickinson (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), 153.
[144] Judges 20:28 (King James Version).

literacy in Britain, statistics show that literacy was approximately 60% and 40% for men and women respectively in the mid-eighteenth century.[145] Members of the lower, working class had even higher rates of illiteracy. Sermons provided the British public another outlet for information with their capability to be both delivered orally and published in newspapers (as was often the case for George Walker, Jebb and Priestley). Sermons were valuable not only for their spiritual qualities but also because "political controversies were aired, contemporary events discussed and political theories propounded."[146] Granted, sermons imbued with political sentiments were not a new phenomenon in the eighteenth century. Rather, it dated back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the Age of Religious Wars—notably in events such as the defeat of the Spanish Armada (1588) and Glorious Revolution (1688). What distinguished these sermons during the American Revolution was their entry into highly controversial political issues, and indeed such sermons did not go unnoticed by contemporary Britons as evident through diary entries and correspondences.[147] Parliament declared fast days to muster support for the government against the colonists. Many Dissenters used the opportunity to do just the opposite, expressing their grievances and criticizing the government.[148] In general, printed sermons, being public documents, were treated as such: exchanges of comments or rebuttals were common between the reader and minister similarly to the responses of pamphlets and tracts. Such sermons

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[145] Susanne Kord, *Women Peasant Poets in Eighteenth-century England, Scotland, and Germany: Milkmaids on Parnassus* (Rochester: Camden House, 2003), 39. Also see Carey McIntosh, *The Evolution of English Prose, 1700-1800: Style, Politeness, and Print Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 24.

[146] Henry Ippel, "British Sermons and the American Revolution," *Journal of Religious History* 12, no. 2 (1982): 191.

[147] Ibid., 195-6.

[148] Rémy Outhille, "Dissent against the American War: The Politics of Richard Price's Sermons," in *War Sermons,* ed. by Gilles Teulie and Laurence Lux-Sterritt, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 131.

and responses were published in the press, such as *The Monthly Review,* the *Critical Review,* the *London Magazine,* and the *Gentlemen's Magazine*.[149]

The sermon was a powerful and peculiar form of communication that gave an individual free rein to transfer and connect one's political opinions in a religious or civil context. The Presbyterian minister George Walker serves as a principal example of a Dissenter whose religious background and writings motivated his political thoughts into action. Even before the colonial crisis, Walker's sermons had played an important role in influencing the public sphere, as highlighted in the 1761 election in Durham, "on which occasion his services had attracted particular notice, and were deemed very instrumental to the election of the successful candidate."[150] At this point of time, Walker was solidifying his own philosophy on religious and civil liberty. He assumed a leadership role in voicing the concerns of the public from the bottom up, that is, from the local level to the "extended interests of the community at large."[151] After serving two years (1772-1774) as a tutor at Warrington Academy (where Priestley too had taught previously), Walker settled in Nottingham as minister of the High Pavement congregation. The 1770s onwards constituted a distinct period for him especially with his involvement in political organizations and associations, serving as an active member in the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) and as chairman of the associated Dissenters of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, and Yorkshire.[152] Over the eight-year period that Parliament declared a day of fasting (1776-1784) regarding the American War of Independence, Walker wrote and preached three fast sermons in 1776, 1778 and 1784. With the progression of each sermon, Walker increasingly

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[149] Henry Ippel, "Blow the Trumpet, Sanctify the Fast," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1980): 50.
[150] George Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects: to which is prefixed a life of the author* (London: J. Johnson, 1809), xxxii.
[151] Ibid., xxxiv.
[152] James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism: Nonconformity in Eighteenth-Century Politics and Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 132.

laments the devolution of Britain over the perversion of "her political, commercial, humane, as well as religious and moral character"[153] and calls for reconciliation with the American colonists and for the preservation of English liberties. Furthermore, he accredits religion as the basis for both political liberty and human progress by its endowment of rational capabilities to humans. More specifically, Christianity fosters an environment conducive to the growth of knowledge e.g. the sciences and mathematics that ultimately contribute to liberty and humanity. For the mathematicians of the Rational Dissenters such as Price and Walker, the concepts behind mathematics (abstractions and theorems) modeled the intellectual process of finding the truth through investigation and empirical reasoning/experimentation.

Although the proclamation of fast days by the Crown during the American Revolution elicited the expected, supportive responses from much of the Anglican clergy, these days were recognized as "politico-religious red letter days of Dissent,"[154] notably on November 5th, which was the commemoration of William III's arrival in England in the Revolution of 1688. Statistics of extant fast sermons number 156 between 1778-1784, out of which approximately a fifth, or 31 sermons, were written by dissenting ministers.[155] While it is unlikely that all 31 sermons were geared favorably towards the colonists, sermons offered leeway for ministers to express grievances and opinions. The themes of theology, politics, and intellectual development that were inherent in Walker's fast sermons recur throughout Dissenters' regular sermons from the American Revolution up to the French Revolution—epitomized in Price's *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (1789). Although there are no records of Priestley having written a fast

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153 Walker, *A Sermon Preached to a Congregation of Protestants at Nottingham, February 27th, 1778,* 12.

154 Henry Ippel, "Blow the Trumpet, Sanctify the Fast," 44.

155 Ippel, "British Sermons and the American Revolution," 192. It is also worth noting that some sermons were so political, contemporary readers and reviewers mistakenly labeled them as political tracts or pamphlets sometimes.

sermon prior to the French Revolution, he nevertheless wrote a number of sermons heavily imbued with political sentiments and aligned with the American principles on representation and natural rights.

Priestley's manifold writings ranged on a wide spectrum from his scientific tracts to his political publications; he serves as a versatile example in highlighting the synthesis of several disciplines collectively into his sermons. Priestley's unpublished *Sermon on War* (undated) skillfully encompasses topics of religion, morality, and philosophy to stress his political stance, especially on the American War of Independence. Whereas the majority of Anglican clergy and a select few Dissenters denounced the ungratefulness of the colonists, Priestley argued that the notion of "being benefited by their subjugations, or of keeping them connected with us by force, is too chimerical to be entertained by any man of understanding."[156] He continues on to argue that harmony between religion, science and morality is essential for the happiness of mankind and improvement of society. This sermon repeatedly refers back to David Hartley's associationist theory and doctrine of necessity, using language about developing the "moral sense" and cultivating the self: "The time…is coming, when the great mass of all nations will have the understanding to see, & the *spirit to answer*, their real interest...which *experience* (*long & dear bought experience*) must, in the end, teach them are certainly ruinous to them."[157] Despite the destructive and crippling economic effects of the American war, Priestley explains that the war effected by God can be construed positively, that is, as a progressive opportunity for both the colonists and British politically and morally.

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[156] Joseph Priestley, Sermon, *On the subject of war*, Dr. William's Library, MS 12.68.4., 8-9.
[157] Ibid., 9. My italics. For more on Priestley's metaphysical and philosophical/religious though, see also James Dybikowski, "Joseph Priestley, Metaphysician and Philosopher of Religion, " in *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian,* ed. by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91, 98.

In three sermons published in early 1770s, Priestley structured his sermons around the themes of virtue, liberty and class. Indeed, those who have "valued themselves on account of their birth, station, title, fortune, understanding, and many other qualities which have no real connection with true honour"[158] were contemptible and detrimental towards the personal liberties, virtue, and happiness of a country's citizens. The aristocratic system fostered corruption, and such figures profited off the progressive will of the public good. Generally speaking, individuals who had solid foundations in religion and private judgment contributed the most to society. It was the industrious middle working classes (e.g. scientists and merchants) that guided progress.[159] Price too reiterated such sentiments in his *Observations on Civil Liberty* (1776) and fast sermons in 1779 and 1781; in his 1779 sermon, he criticized government officials for exceeding their civic and political authority and called upon his congregation to admire and support the American colonists' struggle for their rights.[160] Unlike Price, Jebb, and possibly even Walker, who all affirmed the idea of popular sovereignty (to varying extents), Priestley believed civil liberties to be of utmost importance over political liberties. As Martin Fitzpatrick puts it, it was not "essential [to Priestley] that everyone should participate in the political process, nor that participation was a key constituent of liberty."[161] Priestley's political philosophy and its emphasis on civil liberties distances him from his contemporaries of Rational Dissent and aptly labels him as a "liberal" on the spectrum of political thought as described in the previous chapter.

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158 Joseph Priestley, *Virtue, The Path to Honour,* Harris Manchester College, MS. Priestly 1, Sermons and Prayers I, no. 27, para. 6.
159 Tapper, 278.
160 Richard Price, *A Sermon Delivered to a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters at Hackney, On the 10th of February last, Being the Day appointed for a General Fast* (London: T. Cadell, 1779), 16-24. "With respect to the character of those righteous men [Americans], who are likely to save a country…love their country and are zealous for its rights" (18).
161 Martin Fitzpatrick, "Joseph Priestley, Political Philosopher," in *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian,* ed. by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123.

Despite this, Priestley still voiced his opinions on more radical issues, such as universal toleration (including Roman Catholics), and continued to lend his support in movements for political and parliamentary reform that shaped English radicalism well into the nineteenth century.

The religious and political characteristics of sermons during the 1770s signify their importance in the development of the Dissenters' political identity and political culture. The likes of Walker's and Priestley's sermons highlight the two important points: the first showing how these Dissenters linked theology with science and rationality to convey their political opinions to the congregation and the second attributing to sermons during the American Revolution a crucial component of British political culture alongside pamphlet wars. The controversy surrounding the sermons of figures such as John Wesley and Price made their way into the House of Commons, with the latter's 1779 fast sermon noted for being discussed "in all companies."[162] Another striking feature of the Dissenters' sermons noted by James Bradley is a strong positive congruity between dissenting ministers and the laity. Even the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who visited Nottingham to deliver a guest sermon in 1788, commented how the "congregation [of the High Pavement chapel] was liberal-minded and reformists and no doubt well prepared by George Walker's political sermons."[163] Admittedly, with the exception of Walker, it is difficult to assess to what extent these sermons were attended or read, but the responses between the public and ministers indicated that this "sermon war" over the colonial crisis and the monarchy's handling of the situation played a substantial role in molding British opinion.

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[162] Ippel, "Blow the Trumpet, Sanctify the Fast," 49.

[163] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume 1, Lectures, 1795: On Politics and Religion*, ed. by Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1971), 347.

Precedents to the Society of Constitutional Information (1780s): John Wilkes and the Association Movement

The outspoken (and rakish) John Wilkes and subsequent "Wilkes and Liberty" movement not only instigated the calls for parliamentary reform and free public press that would be inherited by the Rational Dissenters, but also paved the path for the Association movement of the 1780s. The period between 1779 and 1789 was a relatively modest decade with the conclusion of the American Revolution and the founding (and early death) of the Yorkshire Association. However, the legacy left by the Rational Dissenters during this decade traces the progression of British radicalism. The dedication of Jebb, Walker and Priestley helped establish that transition of radicalism between the American and French Revolutions.

Discontented by the government's handling of the American crisis and corruption in the government, the former cleric Christopher Wyvill envisioned a group of "associations" throughout the English counties to petition Parliament for economic and parliamentary reforms, or "to restore and secure to the people the freedom and independence of Parliament."[164] Such measures included a more inclusive representation of the populace, annual parliaments instead of seven-year parliaments, elimination of rotten boroughs, and other goals.[165] Founded in York in December 1779, the "Yorkshire Association" was comprised of both respectable country men and clergy, which came as an unpleasant surprise to the archbishop of York.[166] Although Russell McCormmach and I.R. Christie note that the goals of the Yorkshire Association were radical at the time, Wyvill outlined a rather moderate reform program when compared to John Jebb. With his active presence in the Society for Constitutional Information, Jebb steered towards a more

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[164] Christopher Wyvill, *Political Papers Chiefly Respecting the Attempt of the County of York and other Considerable Districts* (York: J. Johnson, 1794-1804), 1:59.
[165] Steven Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 221-22.
[166] Russell McCommach, *Weighing the World: The Reverend John Michell of Thornhill* (New York: Springer, 2012): 163.

radical direction come 1780. By then, three distinct types of Associations predominated: George Gordon's anti-Catholic Protestant Association, Wyvill's moderate County Associations, and John Cartwright and Jebb's more radical SCI. While the emphasis and target audience of these associations were the people writ large, each had its own specific set of goals. The SCI targeted political education to the British population and mobilization of public opinion through petitioning. The themes of dissenter political culture and development of political philosophies in their social contexts are encountered again here through debates revolving around parliamentary reform, abolition and education.

A Tale of Two Men: The Politics of John Jebb and George Walker

John Jebb and George Walker share a number of similarities in their political affiliations and activism in the political realm. Both Jebb and Walker's position lies at the leftmost or radical end of the radical-conservative spectrum. For Jebb, his religious and social background molded his political ideology, which ultimately culminated in his dedication to the Society for Constitutional Information. Along with Jebb, Walker's political activities that paralleled Enlightenment principles throughout the 1780s assume importance in the present context. Again, the pattern of the entwinement of religion and science—or mathematics in Walker's case—appears here. With Jebb, this pattern directly transmuted itself into a radical political platform calling for universal male suffrage and parliamentary reform. Walker, also a member of the SCI, turned to the public sphere, where he devoted much energy towards education, religious toleration, and the early abolition movement; he received commendation from prominent statesmen of the time including the radical Charles James Fox and Edmund Burke (at the time Fox's fellow Whig).

Before Jebb's preoccupation with the SCI during the 1780s, his experiences as an Anglican lecturer (not particularly *bona fide*) at Cambridge and practicing physician contributed towards his drive for political and social reform. Frustrated by Cambridge's indifference towards his educational reforms and fickle career circumstances, Jebb accompanied Theophilus Lindsey and resigned from the Church and by extension from the university. Afterwards, he began his medical studies in 1776, and it is this attribute of Jebb that elucidates his rational and dissenting principles. Although Roy Porter argues against the notion of a "medical revolution" in eighteenth-century England, he does note a more secularized view on the cause of illnesses on the basis of Enlightenment principles and a more integrated role of laymen in medicine.[167] On the whole, medical practice underwent little to no change as physicians had still diagnosed patients with Galen's theory of humorism. Though Jebb too relied on Galenic traditions, he was interested in new approaches in medicine and institutional reform.[168]

Upholding the doctrines of Rational Dissent, Jebb linked improvements in healthcare alongside moral health and the independent will. His approach to medicine followed that of Dr. William Cullen, a prominent surgeon at the University of Edinburgh. Rather than analyzing health in terms of the four humors, Cullen believed human physiology was "produced by *environmental stimuli*…[and] *sensations.*"[169] As in religion, Jebb developed a sort of hybrid of Hartleyan methods and Galenic tradition that applied empiricism in the diagnosis of illnesses. Through this innovative system, he believed that construing the human body points to how "the

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[167] Roy Porter, "Was There a Medical Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England?" *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 5, no. 1 (1982): 49-51.
[168] Anthony Page. *John Jebb and the Enlightenment Origins of British Radicalism* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 154.
[169] Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity from Antiquity to the Present* (London: HarperCollins, 1997): 260.

whole system of revealed religion adapted to the nature and circumstances of man."[170] In the introduction to his *Select Cases of the Disorder Commonly Termed the Paralysis of the Lower Extremities* (1782), Jebb explains that medicine allowed practitioners to "gratify the activity of our minds, and enable us to form deductions for ourselves."[171] Similar to Priestley, Jebb also saw public health in a new light—one that "should not be blamed on the poor themselves, but rather on the policy of those who governed."[172] This progression from the individual and community to the government marked a profound development in both medical and Rational Dissent history. The political implications of medicine facilitated Jebbs's viewpoints in a radical nature, oriented to improve the poor's circumstances through parliamentary and social reform.

While his colleagues had been concerned about his switch to medicine and politics, Jebb assured them that his approach in medicine reflected his religious beliefs as he had turned down a ministerial position offered by his close friend Lindsey at the newly established Essex Street Chapel.[173] It is true that unlike Priestley, Jebb halted further writings on religion and Unitarianism (to the dismay of Lindsey) by 1780. The only clear religious activity he engaged in during the 1780s was his contributions to the Society of Promoting Knowledge of the Scriptures. Jebb, who sketched out the objectives of the society, encouraged British laymen to employ the scientific method to perceive the relationship between nature and God. Instead of relying on the established conclusions of the Anglican Church, which he dubs the "synthetic method," Jebb advocated for the "analytical method" on the basis of one's private and individualistic

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[170] John Jebb, *The Works, Theological, Medical, Political, and Miscellaneous of John Jebb: With Memoirs of the Life of the Author* (London: T. Cadell, 1787), 1:133.
[171] John Jebb, *Select Cases of the Disorder Commonly Termed the Paralysis of the Lower Extremities* (London: J. Stockdale, 1782), 2.
[172] Page, 163.
[173] Thomas Belsham, *Memoirs of the Late Reverend Theophilus Lindsey, M.A.*, (London: R. Hunter, 1820): 49. See asterisk.

judgment.[174] Though the society stagnated due to a lack of original essays, it eventually transmogrified into the Unitarian Society in 1791.[175] Nevertheless, he remained resolved to stay true to his Unitarian tenets as he notes in his private notebook:

> To guard continually against deflecting from the proper line and duties of my prosession [sic] through attention to ornamental branches of knowledge; yet, in all points, *to act in perfect consistency with my former conduct*, not abating in my zeal for the *cause of civil or religious liberty*; nor sacrificing my principles…considering the transitory scene I am engaged in.[176]

His integration of Hartley's doctrines of association and free will to better understand the human condition supports his commitment to ameliorate society both inside and outside politics. Indeed, had he been granted a position at a hospital, Jebb intended to deliver courses for students and clergymen to familiarize themselves with the essentials of medicine to those rural areas where "valuable professional assistance [was] very sparingly scattered."[177] His calls for universal religious toleration, expansion of education, free interpretation, and moral progress allowed Jebb to establish that connection between his "rational [scientific] piety"[178] and politics through the culture of societies.

By 1780, the unsuccessful policies of the North administration in the American Revolution polarized British politics and fostered the bustling activity of the Yorkshire Association led by Christopher Wyvill. When the Association met in December of 1779 to organize a letter to Parliament for moderate parliamentary reforms, Jebb had completed his radical *Address to the Freeholders of Middlesex.* The historian Herbert Butterfield described it as the most extreme and comprehensive statement of the doctrine and program of the Association

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[174] Jebb, *The Works, Theological, Medical, Political, and Miscellaneous of John Jebb,* 2:242-3.
[175] Page, 66.
[176] Jebb, *The Works, Theological, Medical, Political, and Miscellaneous of John Jebb,* 1:137. My italics.
[177] Page, 159.
[178] Ibid., 157.

during the time.[179] The *Address* incorporated ideas proposed in James Burgh's *Political Disquisitions,* specifically the organization of a "Great Association." It attacked a contentious claim brought up in Edmund Burke's *Speech to the Electors of Bristol* (1774), where he argued that Members of Parliament were not "bound blindly and implicitly" to the opinions of their constituents.[180] Adopting a republican stance, Jebb stressed the need for a more inclusive public sphere, especially for the lower classes in political affairs. Just as Jebb believed that understanding the Scriptures should not be exclusive to the clergy, he also applied this notion to politics; political matters should be "clear-distinct-and-comprehensive in its nature—expressed in terms, adapted to the understandings of all orders of men."[181] Representatives who have betrayed the people's trust justify the right of the people to revise the constitution and alter the current form of government under extreme conditions.[182]

The increasingly radical agenda of Jebb and his circle (John Cartwright, Brand Hollis, the anti-slavery activist Granville Sharp) concerned Wyvill and the radical Whig statesman Charles James Fox. As the Association continued to meet into the following year, the ideas espoused by the likes of Jebb and Cartwright in the *Report of the Sub-committee of Westminster* (1780) put Fox, a "man of the people," in an awkward position as the points iterated in the *Report* foreshadowed the "programs of the corresponding societies of the French Revolution, the doctrine of [William] Cobbett and [Henry] Hunt radicals, or the Chartist points."[183] The absence

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[179] Herbert Butterfield, *George III, Lord North and the People, 1779-1780* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1949), 191.
[180] Edmund Burke, *Speech to the Electors of Bristol* in *The Political Tracts and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Esq. Member of Parliament for the City of Bristol* (Dublin: William Wilson, 1777), 352-3. "You chuse a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of *parliament*."
[181] John Jebb, *An Address to the Freeholders of Middlesex* (London: T. Cadell, 1779), 18.
[182] Ibid., 9-10.
[183] Eugene C. Black, *The Association: British Extraparliamentary Political Organization, 1769-1793* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 60.

of any fruitful changes regarding Parliament or situation in America spurred the founding of the SCI the same year. Having formed an intimate friendship at the Association meetings, Jebb and Cartwright (also known as the "father of the Society") established the SCI with goals outlined in Jebb's *Address to the Freeholders of Middlesex*: universal suffrage, parliamentary reform, and political education constituted the central dogma of the society.[184] Cartwright thought highly of his co-founder as "the friend of my bosom, the pattern of my conduct" who proceeded in life by the "dictates of Christian charity and political wisdom."[185] The beginnings of the SCI were characterized as a rocky start, yet the society was sustained by Jebb's constant attendance, chairing and active participation.[186] Jebb coordinated with other reformers such as the radical Price and liberal Wyvill to build ties with the press and similar societies across Great Britain, a practice that was continued by the London Corresponding Society during the French Revolution.

The activities of the SCI in the 1780s has often been either overlooked or underestimated by historians, who primarily examine it in the post-1789 period. The secondary literature on dissenting history disregards the important connection between the SCI and Dissenters. To take one example, John Seed refers to the SCI briefly and instead discusses the Dissenters' involvement with the Protestant Association in his book *Dissenting Histories: Religious Division and the Politics of Memory*. This relative lack of attention is most likely attributable to its being overshadowed in strength and popularity by the later London Corresponding Society (LCS). However, a number of historians, such as Anthony Page and Mark Philp, argue otherwise that

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[184] *An Address to the Public from the Society for Constitutional Information* (London: Society for Constitutional Information, 1780), 1-2.

[185] John Cartwright, *The Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright* (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 1:165-7.

[186] *Resolutions and Orders of the Society for Constitutional Information* (minute books), TS 11/1133, The National Archives, London, UK. The minute books indicate that Jebb was present at the society's meetings approximately 90% of the time and contributed to almost every meeting, whether that be adding publications into the Books of the Society, constantly nominating members for membership, maintaining communication with other branches throughout the kingdom, etc.

the commitments of the Rational Dissenters during the 1780s, such as Jebb's activism in the SCI, provided the impetus for English radicalism leading up to the French Revolution. The society achieved some success in the long term, as evident by the creation of the LCS.[187] Thomas Hardy, greatly influenced by the publications by the SCI, founded the LCS under the mentorship of John Horne Tooke, who obtained the reins of the former following Jebb's death in 1786.

Although Walker was a member of the Society of Constitutional Information, he resorted to a different medium for his moderately radical reforms—though to be sure, the objectives of the SCI complemented his political platform in the 1780s and 1790s. Just like his two contemporaries Jebb and Priestley, Walker, discontented with the failures and immense expenditures over the course of the American Revolution, took interest in political affairs during his residence at Nottingham. Sometime during the 1770s, Walker became acquainted with Cartwright (primarily for business) and thus was introduced to the latter's radical philosophy. Walker aligned closely with Cartwright's political ideals, propagating reconciliation and support for the colonists. "Cartwright's dissenting protégé"[188] and the "Father of Reform" shared the opinion that the British militia "is not intended to spread the dominion or to vindicate in war the honour of the crown, but it is to preserve our laws and liberties"; this rhetoric is reflected in George Walker's sermon *The Duty and Character of a National Soldier* (1779), a radical work that criticized the Crown and Parliament for distortion and corruption of the constitution and invoked popular participation.[189]

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[187] Page, 189.

[188] Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 160.

[189] Cartwright, 1: 54-5. Walker emphasizes to his congregation that they "are the Soldiers of the People, more than of the Crown." George Walker, *On the Duty and Character a National Soldier* in *Sermons on Various Subjects* (London: J. Johnson, 1790), Vol. 2, 430. Bradley calls the sermon as being borderline seditious. See also Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism,* 133.

Walker actively served as head representative in county meetings and as chairman of the Associated Dissenters of Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, and Yorkshire.[190] The combination of "open and avowed contempt for religion" and "the prostitution of public character" accounted for the decline of Britain.[191] Furthermore, though not explicitly labeled as a "Rational Dissenter" by the academic community, Walker's writing reflects a similar (if not the same) philosophy on the sciences and free will to that of Jebb and Priestley. In his essay *On the Beautiful in the Human Form, Etc.*, Walker merges the ideas of John Locke and David Hartley regarding the "influence which climate, occupation, manners, and even the cultivation of mind"[192] have on individual thought. Walker's peculiar background translated in the Dissenter political culture as he balanced his positions as a minister and political leader as highlighted by his conduct in local and national government affairs and literary clubs.

Walker, who was "intimately acquainted"[193] with Priestley, well respected by Richard Price and amicable with Benjamin Franklin, placed a large emphasis on education for the general population—men as well as women. Having spent thirty years in the field of education, Walker supported the general and political education of British civilians. Walker's pedagogy followed that of Jebb and Priestley, especially how he inspired in his pupils the "most liberal and generous statements" and "an understanding not circumscribed within the boundaries of their own immediate pursuits…which confessedly requires the most utmost stretch of the human intellect."[194] He and a few other Dissenting members had collaborated with Anglican members in

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[190] George Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects: to which is prefixed a life of the author* (London: J. Johnson, 1809), clviii.
[191] Walker, xc-xci.
[192] George Walker, *On the Beautiful in the Human Form, Etc* in *Essays on Various Subjects: to which is prefixed a life of the author* (London: J. Johnson, 1809), 5-6.
[193] Paul A. Elliot, *Enlightenment, Modernity and Science: Geographies of Scientific Culture and Improvement in Georgian England* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 206.
[194] Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects,* lxxv.

Nottingham to establish the Blue Coat School, but were ultimately barred from enrolling in the school due to the growing hostile religious and political atmosphere in the 1780s. With hopes to build a charity school open to children of every religious denomination, Walker spearheaded the plans for the construction of a "day school" in 1788 that retained an attendance of 80 boys and 90 girls; additionally, he opened a Sunday school in his chapel with 236 boys and 240 girls taught by an almost equal ratio of male-to-female teachers.[195]

As the numbers indicate above, there were an unusually high number of female students attending in both schools and in particular in the charity school. As is the case for Priestley, Walker believed and highly regarded the rational capabilities of women, but he also credited them for shaping contemporary society. In a direct rebuttal to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750) and *Emile, or On Education* (1762), to a limited extent Walker praises women for shaping the "manners of the masculine sex" and "their vindication to the equal dignity and privileges of human nature."[196] Arguing against Rousseau's idea of science corrupting human morals, he not only contends the positive correlation between learning and the amelioration of society, but also inserts women into the narrative; ironically though, he still commends women for being the calm, honest and benevolent sex, using language subtly referring to the domestic sphere.

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[195] William Howie Wylie, *Old and New Nottingham* (Nottingham: Job Bradshaw, 1853), 120. Male and female teachers numbered at 41 and 33 respectively. See also, Benjamin Carpenter, *Some Account of the Original Introduction of Presbyterianism in Nottingham and the Neighbourhood: With a Brief History of the Society of Protestant Dissenters assembling of the High Pavement in that Town* (Nottingham: Shaw and Sons, 1862), 165.

[196] George Walker, "A Defence of Learning and the Arts, Against Some Charges of Rousseau," in *Essays on Various Subjects: to which is prefixed a life of the author* (London: J. Johnson, 1809), 91-2. "[Man] is happier in the participation of power and influence with the female..." As expected with his religious background, Walker continues to refer back to Christianity as the driving force for his arguments—and even apologizes for it at one point.

Alongside his being a proponent for universal education, Walker was extremely active in attending and organizing literary societies throughout his lifetime. With his friend, the Unitarian radical scholar Gilbert Wakefield, Walker founded a literary club whose members consisted of "men of cultivated understandings, and of great moral worth"[197] in Nottingham. They were also members of a book society in the White Lion tavern.[198] As a result of their presence of such societies and clubs, Walker and Wakefield enjoyed discussions on a variety of academic topics: science, mathematics, pedagogy, and industry. Walker and Wakefield's literary society fostered interconnections among members coming from different disciplines, including medicine, religion, and mathematics. Furthermore, the society itself helped sustain the city as an intellectual center similar to Manchester philosophers, Scottish universities, dissenting academies (including one headed by the Dissenter Anna Barbauld) and metropolitan writers; it was actually through Walker's interest in the cotton industry that he formed a business yet intimate bond with Cartwright.[199]

The sharing of scientific and philosophical ideas within the Nottingham society allowed it to generate an active public, liberal stance on local and national levels led by Walker during the 1780s up through the outbreak of the French Revolution. The progression of Walker's political philosophy can be described as one initially preferring the higher ranks of society but steadily assuming a stance more similar to Jebb than Priestley, which integrated the lower classes into the political discourse. Walker's uncle, Thomas Walker (also a nonconformist minister), described his earlier sermons as being "too elaborate for the lower sort of people."[200] This was a development that emerged over the course of the American Revolution. By the end of the war

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197 Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects,* cciii.
198 Elliot, 207.
199 Ibid., 207-8. See also Malcolm I. Thomis, *Old Nottingham* (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1968), 95.
200 Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects,* xxx.

(1783), his writings and sermons had already expressed confidence in the people regardless of class; Walker looked favorably on the virtue and potential of the lower class in a way reminiscent of the classical republican tradition of his fellow Rational Dissenters Jebb and Priestley. However, suspicion and distrust described his opinions in the late 1780s towards the wealthy and aristocratic classes, especially in light of the need for parliamentary reform, urban improvements and repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Walker not only fostered intellectual independent thought, but also "came to champion the political independence of the lower ranks."[201]

Walker's charisma and skill in writing and delivering speeches was recognized on the local and national political scenes during the 1780s. His proposals for the elimination of rotten boroughs, annual parliaments and extensions for suffrage became themes in the numerous provincial meetings of Nottinghamshire. The most important of these meetings was the one assembled at Mansfeld in 1782, where Walker attained the compliment of rivaling Cicero by George Savile, the liberal Member of Parliament for Yorkshire; it highlighted his shift to a more radical stance on the radical-liberal spectrum. At this meeting, Walker argued that it was human nature to provide "said bulwark against the continually operating advantages of a crown…in the spirit, the freedom, *the equal rights of the people*."[202] Reminiscent of Priestley's utilitarianism, Walker too emphasized the importance of the common good and raised points about the right to free press and religious liberty. A sustainable government relied on respecting the popular opinion, not one that asserted "an unconstitutional influence over the house of commons."[203]

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[201] Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism*, 176.
[202] Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects,* cxxv-vi. Above all, Walker explains how "the power of the state devolved to the monarch and nobles" and wanted to persuade his audience that the very embodiment of an Englishman was "this great principle, that legislation, either in person or by representation, is the *equal, the common right of all*." My italics.
[203] Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects,* cxxxv.

Walker dismissed the notion of the upper classes alone being able to grasp political wisdom and instead placed faith in the political ability of "those humbler walks of life."[204] All that was required was a knowledge of their political rights in accordance with the beliefs of Jebb and the SCI. It comes as no surprise then that the Society published and distributed a few works written by Walker, such as his speech delivered at the Nottingham county meeting at Mansfeld in 1780. In contrast to his slightly less eloquent counterpart Priestley (who suffered from a permanent stutter), the language and energy inherent in Walker's petitions and speeches earned him praise from Edmund Burke, who once declared in Parliament that "he would rather have been the author of it than of all his works."[205]

By logical extension of his political philosophy and religious background, Walker also thoroughly engaged in attempts to achieve Dissenter relief from the Test and Corporation Acts in the late 1780s. As Chairman of the Associated Dissenters of Nottinghamshire, he penned a letter that was subsequently circulated across the nation after the motion for the repeal of "the badges of their inferiority" failed spectacularly in 1787 by a 176 to 98 vote.[206] The letter, which stressed the necessity for a unified front of Dissenters against the acts, facilitated the formation of "a plan of union"[207] proposed by the main dissenting committee of Birmingham under the direction of Priestley. Likewise, Walker drew up a resolution (unanimously approved by many counties in the midland district) claiming the restoration of the rights of nonconformists in 1789. It is from this resolution that he continued on to compose his famous *Dissenter's Plea* (1790) that clearly outlined and defended the arguments for religious liberty.

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[204] Walker, *Sermon, 1778,* 13.
[205] Ibid., lxxxvi.
[206] Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773 to 1804* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 268.
[207] Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects,* clvii

Despite having similar objectives for political and social reform, Jebb and Walker pursued two distinctive routes for achieving such ends during the 1780s. One focused solely on the political realm while heeding his own personal experiences and background. Jebb's concentrated activities within the SCI were a "matter of the converted preaching" to the lower classes to create "precious...proselytes" aware of their natural rights.[208] In contrast, the other engaged in a more interdisciplinary approach of enacting change in the country through sermons, politics at grassroots level and educational opportunities.

Additionally, Walker, Jebb and the SCI (namely, the Birmingham branch) were one of the earlier advocates for the abolition of the slave trade. Abolition formed an essential part of the Rational Dissenters' political philosophy that "linked the Wilkesite agitation of the 1760s with the radicalism of the 1790s."[209] According to J.R. Oldfield, dissenting societies such as Walker's literary club and Priestley's Lunar Society of Birmingham helped "fix abolition within a broader Enlightenment culture that, in turn, was recognisably 'modern.'"[210] As elaborated below, aside from the Quakers who played a major role in the anti-slavery movement in the late-eighteenth century, the Rational Dissenters were also prominent for the abolition of the slave trade.

"The Spirit of the Lord hath sent me to preach deliverance to the captives [and] to set at liberty them that are bruised"[211]: The Abolition Movement and Rational Dissenters

As the bulk of this chapter has examined the political culture of clubs and societies in the construction of the Rational Dissenters' liberal or radical ideology, this final section seeks to explore the motivations and actions of John Jebb, George Walker and Joseph Priestley in the

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[208] Peter Borsay, *The Eighteenth-Century Town: A Reader in English Urban History, 1688-1820,* (New York: Longman, 1990), 301.
[209] J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion against the Slave Trade, 1787-1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 131.
[210] Oldfield, 128.
[211] Luke 4:18 (King James Version).

abolition movement in the late eighteenth century. The importance of societies will reemerge here to emphasize the intersection between politics and religion. The Society for Constitutional Information and Lunar Society of Birmingham will be the main subjects of interest. As David Turley notes, understanding the "social canvas" of the English abolitionist in context of his or her religious-intellectual traditions elucidates the progress of radicalism; the international nature of the slavery issue paralleled domestic movements for political reforms.[212] These abolitionists sought to eliminate the institution by garnering support abroad (with the Americans in the Dissenters' case) and invoking moral and economic arguments just as British statesmen would do after the Napoleonic Wars.[213] Historiography of the anti-slavery movement in eighteenth-century Britain has primarily covered the Quakers as the driving force for the abolition of the slave trade. However, the Rational Dissenters, who have been understudied in this regard, also played a prominent role in abolition movement. Their commitment to scientific enquiry, religious and moral principles and natural rights complemented their opposition to the slave trade. This section will use Jebb, Walker, and Priestley as case studies to probe the correlation between the debates over slavery and those for parliamentary reform and trace the progression of radicalism in Britain.

The overlap of the SCI in matters of parliamentary reform and abolition is exemplified through all three figures in various degrees. Despite having similar opinions on the subject, Jebb and Walker actually prove to be opposites in terms of their participation in the abolitionist cause. While Jebb did indeed hold abolitionist sentiments dating back to the 1770s, he did not become as directly involved in the movement compared to Walker and Priestley. Nevertheless, he did

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[212] David Turley, *The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780-1860* (London: Routledge, 1991), 108.
[213] Ibid. For more information on the continuation of the British abolition movement into the Congress of Vienna, see Brian E. Vick, *The Congress of Vienna: Power and Politics after Napoleon* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 195-212.

entertain a motion in the SCI to support the Quakers' petition for the abolition of the slave trade in 1783 and print Thomas Day's essay on the abolition of the slave trade, *A Fragment of an Original Letter on the Slavery of Negroes* (1776).[214] Additionally, one must also consider that his death in 1786 stopped any possibility of engaging further—especially since the movement took off for the Rational Dissenters and SCI in the late 1780s.

Walker was active at the political levels as well with his management of the Nottingham petition for the abolition of the slave trade in 1788 and worked to garner support across town.[215] By the time of French Revolution, Walker and many of the dissenting community shifted their focus to the abolition movement due to the failure of the 1790 repeal of the Test Acts and increasingly hostile environment against radical rhetoric. Needless to say, this did not mean that he neglected the cause for parliamentary reform. Walker had subscribed to receive a copy of Olaudah Equiano's autobiography and advocated for his freedom in 1791: "we take the liberty also to recommend the said Gustavus Vassa [Equiano] to the protection and assistance of the friends of humanity."[216] In the following year, Equiano wrote a letter thanking Walker for his family's hospitality in Nottingham during the former's travels to London (and even extended an invitation to his wedding).[217] While Jebb and Walker were politically active in the anti-slavery movement, Priestley, in contrast, addressed the issue in a religious/moral and social light.

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214 "Liberty has an asylum on that continent [America]. The abominable slave trade will, I trust, be abolished." Jebb, *The Works, Theological, Medical, Political, and Miscellaneous of John Jebb,* 1:94-5. See also Page, 226.

215 Oldfield, 102.

216 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (London, 1794), xi. Priestley was also a subscriber to Equiano, who published his appreciation for his Birmingham supporters and their "Acts of Kindness and Hospitality" in the *Birmingham Gazette* in 1791. See Malcolm Dick, "Joseph Priestley, the Lunar Society and Anti-Slavery," in *Joseph Priestley and Birmingham* ed. by Malcolm Dick (Studley: Brewin Books, 2005), 74.

217 Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 346-7.

Priestley's move to Birmingham in 1780 initiated an intentional stage of "political wilderness" for him, opting to focus on his scientific experiments and theology. That is not to say, however, that he completely left the political sphere, as evident through his efforts for abolition of the slave trade and his continued campaign for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. Although it is well established that Priestley denounced slavery as an evil impediment to the natural liberties of society, the secondary literature is sparse in delving further into Priestley's efforts and arguments.[218] Granted, Priestley's only published work on the subject is his *Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade* (1788). However, throughout his correspondences and other writings, he clearly shows his denunciation of the institution: when he either figuratively refers to a degraded state of servitude, particularly in respect to the colonists and Dissenters' natural rights, or assesses the detrimental effects of slavery in Ancient Rome.[219] Referring to the employment of slaves in America, Priestley acknowledges "both the injustice and the ill-policy of this system" and the necessity to "put an end to this abominable traffic."[220] Considering the Rational Dissenters' emphasis on the unrestrained intellectual will in all dimensions, it logically explains why Priestley and his fellow Dissenters opposed the institution—it was both a physical, social and intellectual impediment to liberty, even more egregious than the Test and Corporation Acts.

The historian Malcolm Dick has provided some analysis of Priestley's stance on the slave trade in context with the Lunar Society. The limited sources on Priestley's abolition efforts may

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[218] Robert Schofield's most recent biography of Priestley (2010) has a short section on the general abolition movement in Birmingham during the 1780s and a brief mention of Priestley's sermon on the slave trade. Similarly, the book edited by Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes (2008) only makes note of Priestley as a member in the Birmingham committee for abolition.

[219] Priestley's *Lectures on History and General Policy*, published in 1788, was based on a set of lectures delivered at Warrington Academy as a tutor between 1761 and 1767. Joseph Priestley, *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley,* 24: 452-3.

[220] Ibid., 403-4.

be attributed to him being overshadowed by his peers in the Lunar Society, especially when one considers prominent abolitionists such as Thomas Day, Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood. Day was an abolitionist famous for his "The Dying Negro" poem (1773) and *Letter on the Slavery of the Negroes*. At the onset of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, he recognized the paradox inherent in the Declaration: "If there be an object truly ridiculous in nature, it is an American patriot, signing resolutions of independency with the one hand, and with the other brandishing a whip over his affrighted slaves."[221] Darwin provided humanitarian-based arguments against slavery through poetry, and Wedgwood designed the famous medallion depicting the slave on his knees with the caption, "Am I not a man and a brother?" However, as discussed in the previous paragraph, Priestley had already contributed to the anti-slavery culture before his 1788 sermon.

A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade essentially embodies the transduction of Priestley's rational and political arguments into the abolition cause. The sermon attacked slavery and the slave trade on the basis of both humanitarian and economic reasons. Invoking a theological and humanitarian philosophy, Priestley's case focused on the psychological and physical toll on slaves.[222] The paradox of masters severely punishing their slaves attempting to recover their liberties contradicts the very character of the English. Female slaves and the "shocking indecencies" directed against them are not neglected; such treatment of women and the destruction of the family caused not only the slaves' morality to become distorted but also that of the masters. Again, the motifs of the corruption of morals and idea of intellectual and cultural equality remerge throughout the sermon. All people regardless of race, belief and gender

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[221] Quoted in David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 77.
[222] See Dick, 69-70.

had equal intellectual capabilities and a role in developing civilization.[223] He urges the British people to "consider all mankind as brethren, equally the subjects of God's moral government."[224] These humanitarian contentions constituted the strongest parts of this sermon. Though secondary compared to his social reasons, still important were his [rather optimistic] economic arguments. Based on Adam Smith's views on the advantages of using free labor as opposed to slave labor, Priestley argues that freed Africans could produce goods within the country as supply increases (thus lowering prices) on account of the efficiency of freed workers over slaves; he uses the Quakers as a successful example of the latter point.[225] Regardless of how naïve Priestley's economic reasonings were, overall the sermon integrated two different rationales for abolishing the slave trade whereas his "lunartick" friends tended to primarily focus on the humanitarian aspect.

Despite the historians' notion that the 1780s represented a minor and declining period of radicalism for the Rational Dissenters, this chapter has shown otherwise, as Priestley, Jebb and Walker played an essential role in the development of British political culture. From their support for the American colonists, persistent attempts to petition for the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, to the abolition movement, the Rational Dissenters were active in propagating their causes through numerous media: sermons, petitions, participation in literary and philosophical societies, and networks with other radicals. Their commitments to scientific

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[223] Ibid., 73. "Some Europeans…pronounce [slaves] to be a species of men greatly inferior to themselves…Those who see Negroes in their native country, or in circumstances of better treatment among ourselves, are satisfied that they are by no means inferior to Europeans in point of understanding." Joseph Priestley, *A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade, Delivered to a Society of Protestant Dissenters, at the New Meeting in Birmingham* (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1788), 20.

[224] Priestley, *A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade,* 15. This emphasis on "one humanity" continually appears as a theme in the sermon, calling to relieve the distresses of Europeans, Asians, Americans, and "not only for Christians, but for Jews, Mahometans, and Infidels." Ibid., 1-2.

[225] Priestley, *A Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade,* 25-30.

enquiry, religious and moral principles and natural rights complemented their opposition to the slave trade. The intellectual, religious and even economic sides of the pressing issues of the time were most embodied in Priestley, whereas Jebb represented the more political and scientific side with his involvement in the SCI and experience as a physician. Walker encompassed certain characteristics of the previous two, whether it was his politically-inclined sermons or active role in petitioning at the grassroots levels. Regardless, it is clear that the Rational Dissenters set the framework for the radicalism associated with the French Revolution.

Epilogue and Conclusion

The storming of the Bastille in 1789 marked the beginning of the French Revolution, and Rational Dissenters such as George Walker and Joseph Priestley welcomed it with open arms; they viewed French cries for "Liberté, égalité, fraternité" as an extension of the American Revolution. Just as Thomas Paine had suggested in the previous decade, Richard Price wrote to John Adams in 1789 that the "[American] war gave rise to that spirit of liberty which is now working thro' Europe" and proceeded to publish his sermon *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* (1789) in support of the French.[226] In rebuttal to Price's interpretations of the 1688 Revolution, Edmund Burke argued that the goals of the two revolutions were radically different. The American Revolution had been a revolution of expedience where the colonists were fighting against an unnatural state of affairs; in contrast, the French Revolution disrupted the natural state of order with the dissolution of the two foundations of government, the church and aristocracy. Priestley lamented how "an avowed friend of the American Revolution should be an enemy to that of the French."[227] Burke had maintained amicable relations with Priestley before the French Revolution, supporting the latter's scientific experiments and repeal of subscription. As an advocate for universal toleration, Burke remained firm in his opposition against the sacramental test but by 1790 saw the Dissenters' intent for repeal as one striving to disestablish the Church of England.

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[226] Paine had written in *Common Sense* (1776) how "The Cause of America is, in great measure, the cause of all mankind." Richard Price, *The Correspondence of Richard Price,* ed. by W. Bernard Peach (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 3: 208.

[227] Joseph Priestley, "Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, Occasioned by his Reflections on the Revolution in France, &c," in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, With Notes, by the Editor. Containing An Essay on the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty* (Hackney: G. Smallfield, 1831), 22:147.

A Dissenter's Plea for Moral, Social and Political Change (1789-1794)

Joseph Priestley and George Walker were the same in that they sympathized with the early stages of the French Revolutions, that is, right before the start of the Terror (1793). They continued their respective efforts on topics of religion, science or politics. Despite John Jebb's death in 1786, his legacy in sustaining the Society for Constitutional Information had major implications into the 1790s. The Sheffield, Manchester and Norwich branches of the SCI flourished between 1791 and 1792 not only because of the leadership of John Horne Tooke, but also the networks and foundations created by Jebb.[228] The final attempt for the repeal of the Test and Toleration Acts of the century in 1790 preoccupied Walker and Priestley. Walker had just completed his *Dissenters' Plea,* which Charles James Fox and Gilbert Wakefield pronounced "the best pamphlet published"[229] on behalf of the Dissenters, and wrote an address to Priestley affirming the support of the Nottinghamshire Dissenters the same year.

In Birmingham, the Dissenters organized a committee to push for the repeal of the Test Acts. Although Priestley did not participate in the committee, he did write a sermon on November 5, 1785, the anniversary of Gunpowder Plot of 1605, to bolster support for repeal. Whether intentional or not, political undertones are apparent throughout this sermon not only affirming the rights of all oppressed religious minorities, but also that of "the poor negroes...and just claims of [the French] to the rights of a *free and equal government.*"[230] It is this sermon that

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[228] In the proceedings of the Sheffield SCI, the leaders exert much effort to maintain communication with adjacent branches of the SCI (Rotherham, Derby, Hammington, London, etc.) and similar societies (Society of the Friends of the People, Society of the United Irishmen of Belfast). Resolutions of the Society for Constructional Information at Sheffield, 14 March 1792, Sheffield City Archives MD 251. See also Abstract of the proceedings of the Association for Constitutional Information, 27 Feb. 1792, Sheffield City Archives WWM/F/44/8.

[229] George Walker, *Essays on Various Subjects: to which is prefixed a life of the author* (London: J. Johnson, 1809), clxix.

[230] Joseph Priestley, *The Conduct to be observed by Dissenters in order to procure the Repeal of the Corporation and Test Acts* (Birmingham: J. Thompson, 1789), 15.

would earn Priestley yet another nickname ("Gunpowder Joe") subsequently utilized in numerous caricatures and speeches about him.[231] Priestley's agitation for the repeal combined with his radical theological tracts, commitment to parliamentary reform and support for the French Revolution set an uneasy atmosphere in the city of Birmingham between 1790 and 1791. Further, his attempts to establish and recruit members of the Lunar Society into the Warwickshire Constitutional Society, which would have promoted universal suffrage (a measure Priestley did not support), only added fuel to the fire.[232] So much for avoiding politics. Thus, the stage for the Birmingham Riots was set.

The destined year of 1791 was one of turbulence and sadness for Priestley. A dinner, hosted by a group of nonconformists, commemorated the second year of the French Revolution in July. Priestley had intended to attend the dinner but decided otherwise at the urging by his friends not to go. Rioters harassed the diners even long after the dinner ended; filled with high emotions, the mob first struck New Meeting House and Old Meeting House.[233] Though Priestley and his family fled on the first news of the riots, Priestley's house and laboratory were not spared in the attacks. Shouts of "Church and King" echoed throughout Birmingham, and

> Not content with inflicting injuries such as these, after they had hung up his effigy in the most ignominious manner, and burnt it to ashes, the mob went several miles in pursuit of him, and there can be little doubt that if he had not escaped, by

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231 Martin Fitzpatrick, "Priestley Caricatured" in *Motion Toward Perfection: The Achievement of Joseph Priestley*, ed. by A. Truman Schwartz and John G. McEvoy (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1990), 163, 165, 178.

232 Maureen McNeil, *Under the Banner of Science: Erasmus Darwin and His Age* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), 81. Priestley had invited James Watt and Matthew Boulton to join the Warwickshire SCI to which the former declined to join for fear of "stirring up effervescence." Watt's letter was written six days before the Birmingham Riots. See "The Papers of James Watt and his Family formerly held at Doldowlod House," *Adam Matthew Publications*, Accessed 18 March 2016, http://www.ampltd.co.uk/digital_guides/ind-rev-series-3-parts-1-to-3/Detailed-Listing-Part-1.aspx.

233 Robert E. Schofield, *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley: A Study of His Life and Work from 1773 to 1804* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 284.

> walking in disguise from Kidderminster to Worcester, they would have brought him to a cruel end.[234]

Driven away from home, Priestley settled in Clapton, just a few miles from London. Fortunately, interactions with a group of friendly persons offered solace to him, including the publisher Joseph Johnson, Theophilus Lindsey, and Mary Wollstonecraft; he had the occasion to meet with John Horne Tooke, who by then had assumed leadership of the SCI, at the Tuffins Coffeehouse.[235]

Even in the midst of settling at Clapton, where he resided until his emigration to America in 1794, Priestley addressed the residents of Birmingham in a letter in the *Morning Chronicle*. In the letter, he explains that the destruction of his laboratory and scientific manuscripts, "the results of laborious study of many years," caused "a greater blow" to him above all else; in spite of this, Priestley held no animosities towards them ("we return you blessings for curses").[236] Even after losing everything, Priestley never lost sight of his dedication to the "advancement of science, for the benefit of [his] country and of mankind."[237] Indeed, Priestley continued to correspond and collaborate with his friends in the Lunar Society from Clapton—though to be sure, he greatly missed their company and refused to engage with the Royal Society on account of its members' hostilities against his political and theological stances. Priestley also wrote to Antoine Lavoisier during this time to update him on the resumption of his experiments on gases, yet again expressing his opposition to French chemistry.[238] Holding fast to the phlogiston theory, Priestley adhered to the doctrine up until his death in 1804. In his new home in rustic

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[234] "Review of 'The Riots at Birmingham, July 1791,'" Birmingham: Arthur Bache Matthews, from the *Unitarian Herald*, 17 July 1863, Dr. William's Library [DWL], MS 12.68(1), para. 2.
[235] Schofield, 294.
[236] Joseph Priestley, *Dr. Priestley's Letter to the Inhabitants of Birmingham* (London: J. Johnson, 1791), 4-6.
[237] Ibid., 5.
[238] Schofield, 301-2.

Northumberland, Pennsylvania, he was able to conduct experiments in his less advanced lab: he conveys his excitement in a letter in 1795 how the experiments "promise well…and seem to be almost decisive against the [much?] essential principle of the French system."[239]

The prelude to war with France was a period of concern for both Priestley and Walker. With the cooperation of a number of Derby philosophers and members of the SCI, Walker helped send a small delegation to the National Assembly to express their solidarity with French goals of liberty in 1792.[240] The prospect of impending war prompted Walker to write up a petition for maintaining peace, which obtained around 3000 signatures and was presented to Parliament in 1793.[241] The same petition calling for peace with France, however, introduced another, equally important topic: universal male suffrage. Peace with France was in the best interests of the Nottingham industry and general country as "the constitution of these kingdoms [had] passed into the grossest abuses…whereby the confidence of the people in their supposed representatives [was] lessened if not destroyed."[242] Edmund Burke and William Pitt responded to the question of universal suffrage with indignation. Burke went as far as to label the petition as seditious and demanded punishment for the ones responsible for it; even Charles James Fox admitted that he did not concur with the proposal.[243]

In Priestley's case, it became clear that he too was slowly losing faith in the French revolutionaries by 1793. Priestley admonished them for the violation of civil rights due to their degradation of religion in his *Letters addressed to the Philosophers and Politicians of France* dated on January 21, 1793, the day of King Louis XVI's execution. After King George III

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239 Joseph Priestley to [unknown], 27 October 1795, Northumberland, DWL, MS 24.86.
240 Paul A. Elliot, *Enlightenment, Modernity and Science: Geographies of Scientific Culture and Improvement in Georgian England* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 210.
241 Walker, clxxxliii.
242 *Jordan's Parliamentary Journal, For the Year MDCCXCIII. Being an Accurate and Impartial History of the Debates and Proceedings of Both Houses of Parliament* (London: J.S. Jordan, 1793), 3:159.
243 Malcolm I. Thomis, *Old Nottingham* (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1968), 218-9.

proclaimed a general fast day following the country's declaration of war in February, Priestley wrote up a fast sermon with mixed feelings for the war. Being "ready to join our brethren…in contrition and prayer," Priestley describes that despite the war's political nature, its ultimate purpose is to "be *instructive*, with respect to matters both of a civil and of an ecclesiastical nature."[244] Ruth H. Bloch explains Priestley's new thoughts of the revolution as a transition from "francophilic millennialism" before 1793 to a "gloomier premillennialist view."[245]

Such pessimistic feelings over the fate of the French Revolution (and the general world) were escalated in another fast-day sermon, *The Present State of Europe compared with the Ancient Prophecies,* in the following year. Referring to the books of Daniel and Revelation as the main sources of his sermon, Priestley urges all to prepare for the Final Judgment as "this great event of the late revolution in France appears to me, and many others, to be not improbably the accomplishment of the following part of the Revelation."[246] This millenarian language would reemerge in Priestley's *Letter to the Inhabitants of Northumberland* (1800), which elicited the Federalists who misinterpreted the language in the *Letter* as being supportive of the French politically. Priestley was spared from persecution under the Alien and Sedition Acts (1798)

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[244] Joseph Priestley, *A Sermon Preached at the Gravel-Put Meeting, in Hackney, April 19, 1793, Being the Day appointed for a General Fast,* in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, With Notes, by the Editor. Containing An Essay on the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty* (Hackney: G. Smallfield, 1831), 15:494, 511-12.
[245] Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic Millennial Themes in American Thought: 1756-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 209-10.
[246] Joseph Priestley, *The Present State of Europe compared with ancient Prophecies; A Sermon, Preached at the Gravel-Pit Meeting, in Hackney, February 28, 1794, Being the Day Appointed for a General Fast,* in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley, With Notes, by the Editor. Containing An Essay on the First Principles of Government and on the Nature of Political, Civil, and Religious Liberty* (Hackney: G. Smallfield, 1831), 15: 547-8, 552. "Let us attend to the admonition of my text, to 'repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

under the defense of John Adams, a Federalist himself who admired Priestley and described him as a "comet in the system."[247]

The changing nature of the French Revolution during the Terror disillusioned many Dissenters who had initially supported it. Priestley and Walker remained sympathetic to the ideas first espoused in the earlier stages of the revolution. By the time Britain declared war on France in February 1793, however, Walker had already retreated back to domestic affairs and primarily directed his focus on parliamentary reform and social improvement. After 1793, the residents of Nottingham still discussed the subject of parliamentary reform (though to a lesser extent due to Pitt's "reign of terror"), and one of Walker's last public acts was sending a letter to Parliament against the passing of the Seditious Meeting Act of 1795.[248] With the arrest of several Dissenters and their allies charged for suspicion of treason between 1790 and 1794, Priestley decided to emigrate to America in 1794 albeit with great reluctance (primarily over concerns about the future of his sons). He could not have picked a more inopportune time to settle in America, especially in light of the intense debate over the Jay Treaty (1794) and growing polarization between the Federalists and Anti-Federalists.[249]

While his main priority was to foster Unitarianism and continue his experiments, Priestley managed to get himself caught up in politics despite his promise to "[make] it a rule to take no part whatever in the politics of a country in which I am a stranger, and in which I only

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[247] Sheldon Spear, *Pennsylvania Histories: Two Hundred Years of Personalities and Events, 1750-1950* (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2015), 79. It is interesting to note that Adams had signed the Alien and Sedition Acts into law.

[248] Walker, clxxxv, cxciv-cxcviii. In the letter, he describes the legislation as "unwise, oppressive and malignant" and one conceived in tyranny.

[249] Wil Verhoeven, *Americomania and the French Revolution Debate in Britain, 1789-1802* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 287.

wish to live undisturbed as such."[250] While Priestley had tried to limit his interests to religion and chemistry, he became entangled in American politics with his opinions on matters such as the French Revolution; he retained some hope for the French cause for theological reasons, namely the beginning of the Second Coming of Christ. In contrast, Walker continued his agitation in politics until his move to Manchester (1798), where he was kept busy with his academic and ministerial duties.[251] The intersection between politics, religion and science was aptly described by Priestley in the last scientific paper written before his exile to America: "the friends of philosophy in this country *must* separate on the ground of *religion* and *politics.*"[252] The scientists who were also "friends of *liberty*" may have been oppressed and constituted a small minority, but they kept the best interests of society to heart. It is no wonder why Priestley formed an intimate bond with Thomas Jefferson, one of the more versatile figures among the American Founding Fathers.

The Rational Dissenters' Legacy for British Radicalism

The central questions regarding the British radicalism in the late eighteenth-century have revolved around common themes in this thesis: the intertwining of rational religion, empirical and independent judgment, and political action. This radicalism of the 1790s associated with the democratic movements based on the natural rights of all men has been construed as a product of the French Revolution. Yet what this thesis has shown is the contribution of a small group of

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[250] To John Adams from Joseph Priestley, 13 November 1794, *Founders Online*, National Archives, last updated 30 Dec. 2015, http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-1584.
[251] As president of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society, Walker proved to be an important influence in the development of Georgian English provincial science. His approach to the sciences, which was inspired by rational theology, translated into the need for the betterment of social institutions. For more on Walker and his role in the sciences after 1793, see Elliot, 210-212.
[252] Joseph Priestley, *Experiments on the Generation of Air from Water; to which are prefixed, Experiments Relating to the Decomposition of Dephlogisticated and Inflammable Air* (London: J. Johnson, 1793), viii.

accomplished, theological intellectuals to the ideology and movements of the 1790s. In so far as the Rational Dissenters are considered in the development of British radicalism, their role has been depicted as trivial or miniscule. While historians have well documented their participation in the County Associations and repeal for subscription and the Test and Corporation Acts, most have discounted the influence they exerted between the period of the American and French Revolutions. As the historian Mark Philp explicates, the ideology of Rational Dissent may not have been the only source for the radicalism of the 1790s, but it was a major one nevertheless.[253]

Previous scholarship has focused on the dissemination of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* or activities of the working class-based London Corresponding Society in light of the radicalism of the 1790s. However, the radicalism associated with the French Revolution was not solely based on Lockean rights, but also depended on the classical republican idea of virtue/morality and "duties of private judgment and public discussion"[254] in political society. Paine was not the "theoretical mastermind"[255] of this radicalism. Rather, it was the Rational Dissenters such as Joseph Priestley, John Jebb, George Walker, James Burgh and Richard Price who established a framework for Britain and her political culture between 1768-1789 through their political works and sermons.

Priestley, or the "honest heretic"[256] in reference to his no-holds-barred demeanor, developed a liberal premise for political and civil liberties during the American Revolution, which then converged in his theological and scientific interests. His two radical counterparts,

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253 Mark Philp, "Rational Religion and Political Radicalism in the 1790s," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 4 (1985): 39.
254 Ibid.
255 Günther Lottes, "Radicalism, revolution and political culture: an Anglo-French comparison," in *The French Revolution and British Politics*, ed. by Mark Philp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 84.
256 In a letter to Benjamin Vaughn, Franklin refers to Priestley as such endearingly. Benjamin Franklin, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin: With Notes and a Life of the Author by Jared Sparks* (Boston: Whittemore, Niles, and Hall, 1856), 365.

Jebb and Walker, also numbered among those in support of the republican arguments utilized by the American colonists. Over the course of the 1770s and 1780s, they cemented a political philosophy that would be further expounded on in the 1790s across Europe. Jebb, who was responsible for the co-founding and sustenance of the Society for Constitutional Information, argued for universal suffrage and came closest to the idea of popular sovereignty. Believing in the conjunction of the people with Crown and nobility, Jebb stood out as an anachronistic and paradoxical figure, "combining his adherence to the ancient constitution with a demand for universal suffrage built on a trenchant criticism of all political privilege."[257] Walker, politically speaking, adhered more to Jebb's line of thought but followed Priestley in their emphasis on religious and philosophical matters. As a proponent of universal suffrage, religious tolerance and expansion of the sciences, Walker and his legacy endured longer than many of his dissenting contemporaries even after his death in 1807; in a letter to Lord Holland regarding Nottingham in 1811, John Cartwright lamented how "since the loss of that excellent man, George Walker, Nottingham seems with him to have lost somewhat of its decision of character, and that a leader authoritative from wisdom, virtue and energy, is wanting."[258]

The emergence of dissenting radicalism (or liberalism for Priestley) coincided with the creation of a new Dissenter identity that followed a trajectory from solely religious issues prior to 1768 to the political and intellectual circles during the American Revolution. As John Seed has observed, the emergence of Rational Dissent "was a restructuring of the dissenting tradition in response to changing experiences and problems," which had political implications at the onset

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[257] Lottes, 82-3.
[258] John Cartwright, *The Life and Correspondence of Major Cartwright* (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 2:19.

of the colonial crisis.[259] The 1770s allowed the Rational Dissenters to formulate their own political and social identity and transferred into the 1780s. Following the failure of Parliament to pass the bill for the relief of subscription in 1772 and 1773, the Rational Dissenters entered the political scene as an oppositional force by pointing out the distortion of representation within government, specifically in the House of Commons. Their petitioning for relief highlighted the "heralds of an age of greater religious freedom."[260] At the same time, it also signified the Rational Dissenters' involvement with movements for parliamentary reform.

For Priestley, his thoughts on political and civil rights remained relatively static throughout his life, assuming a liberal character due to his admiration for the middle class; these manifested themselves in his *Essay on the First Principles of Government* and *Free Address to Protestant Dissenters* (1768). Priestley subsumed political rights to religious and civil liberties unlike Jebb and Walker, who prioritized them both equally. Although he tried to stay out of politics upon moving to Birmingham, his radicalizing theology, adamant adherence to phlogiston theory, and condemnation of the slave trade reflected the consistency of his political principles throughout his lifetime.

On the other hand, Jebb and Walker's political philosophies progressed in similar directions, that is, of a more radical and "democratic" nature. Jebb's growing discontent with the clergy and Cambridge education system fostered his radical sentiments earlier in the decade, only to be further compounded by the influence of James Burgh and his wife Ann. In accordance with American urges for a new Parliament that would "save the violated rights of the whole empire," Jebb collaborated with John Cartwright towards parliamentary reform in 1780 as the American war exacerbated the political and economic status of Britain. Jebb's Unitarian

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[259] John Seed, "Gentlemen Dissenters," 325.
[260] G.M. Ditchfield, "How Narrow will the Limits of this Toleration Appear?' Dissenting Petitions to Parliament, 1772-1773," *Parliamentary History* 24, no. 1 (2005): 105-6.

background guided his political principles in the late stages of his life; motivated by the ideas of classical republicanism, Jebb translated his religious motivations into political action in the SCI and pursued education (both political and non-political) and social reform for the populace. Furthermore, his experience as a physician only complemented his agenda for social change, which could be achieved through parliamentary reform.

In a similar vein, Walker also emphasized the importance of education for all sectors of society. Walker followed an unconventional pattern as he initially preferred the gentry and ultimately placed his faith in the people, especially the lower classes. Like Jebb, Walker advocated for universal suffrage—though it was not explicit until 1793 in a petition he composed. Walker, who maintained an active presence in his church and government, primarily worked at the grassroots level. It is in Nottingham and later in Manchester where he fostered a political culture that integrated religious and scientific interests.

In addition to their contribution to radical ideology before 1789, the Rational Dissenters also developed another significant facet of British society: its political culture. Dissenting political culture encompassed a wide spectrum of disciplines that did not limit itself to politics. The networks of secondary characters in history (women as well) and the dimensions of religion and science in particular played a crucial role in the development of British culture during the late eighteenth century. A number of Dissenters frequented the salons or homes of radical female figures, such as Catherine Macaulay, Ann Jebb and Mary Wollstonecraft. Furthermore, Rational Dissent played a dominant role in the publications industry with connections to newspapers and prominent publishers such as Joseph Johnson.

The religious element in British political culture has been examined through dissenting Fast Sermons and briefly with Priestley's later controversial Unitarian works. In either case, both

instigated a sort of religious pamphlet or "sermon war" imbued with political undertones. Priestley's and Walker's sermons integrated economic arguments and themes of classical republicanism, e.g. virtue and luxury, to convey their political opinions: this included support for the American colonies or abolition. For instance, Priestley voices his opposition to the slave trade in his one and only work on the topic, the *Sermon on the Subject of the Slave Trade,* on the basis of humanitarianism, economics and intellectual liberty. Walker's sermons expanded on a range of topics. So influential were Walker's sermons that many of them were collected and published in two volumes in 1790. Independent, free interpretation and religion were crucial for the well-being of the country and its citizens. In regards to politics and science/mathematics, the relationship between the two was not "one-way," as Isaac Kramnick dubs it. Instead, it shared a mutualistic relationship: science contributes to the betterment of humankind, and in exchange, politics would encourage ventures into the sciences for the benefit of society (just like how it works today in the scientific field with grants and funding). The progressive ideas of science and encouragement of private judgment inspired campaigns for political, social and religious reform.[261]

The early, burgeoning stages of political culture for the Rational Dissenters began during the American Revolution with the popularity of coffeehouses and salons. These outlets for discussion created a large web of networks that fostered lasting relationships between Dissenters and radical figures regardless of sex. The scientific and liberal Club of Honest Whigs served as the precedent for the future paths of Priestley, Jebb and Walker. Though discussions over religion were avoided, the Club helped connect scientific methods (free interpretation and experimentation) with politics and theology. Priestley pursued his passion for science with the

[261] Elliot, 209.

Lunar Society of Birmingham and continued to express his opposition to Antoine Lavoisier's "dogmatic and dictatorial" approach to chemistry, which restricted both the public availability of knowledge and independent decision-making capabilities of the people.[262]

At the other end of the spectrum, Jebb and Walker played an active role in the political sphere, whether this entailed the SCI or provincial meetings. Since its inception, the SCI circulated radical ideas throughout the country under the leadership of Jebb and Cartwright. While also a member of the Society, Walker directed most, if not all, of his energy into political and religious activities: engaging in the local assemblies of Nottinghamshire and serving as minister for Nottingham High Pavement congregation as well as the Chairman of the Associated Dissenters of Nottingham. Additionally, as "a mathematician of singular accomplishment,"[263] he oversaw the maintenance of literary and philosophical societies in both Nottingham and Manchester. Essentially embodying certain attributes of Priestley and Jebb, Walker proved to be a significant radicalizing force at the local and national levels.

Before the French Revolution, the Rational Dissenters had set a radical movement in place not only in terms of their theology, but also in politics and science/mathematics. In the early stages of the American Revolution and prior, this small sub-group of Dissent directed much of its energy towards the repeal of subscription and the Test and Corporation Acts. Opposed to Parliament's policies towards the American colonies, the Rational Dissenters steadily expanded their focus from religious and civil rights to a broader popular, political culture—one that propounded the good of the general populace through independent reasoning. By examining the contributions of three specific individuals (Priestley, Jebb and Walker) between 1768 and 1789,

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[262] Brock, 77. See also Michael F. Conlin, "Joseph Priestley's American Defense of Phlogiston Reconsidered," *Ambix* 43, no. 3 (1996): 129-30.

[263] Walker, ccxiii. His intimate friend, Gilbert Wakefield, regarded him for possessing "the greatest variety of knowledge with the most masculine understanding of any man I ever knew."

one can trace the progression of English radicalism through their legacy on various movements that continued into the French Revolution up until the end of the Napoleonic Wars.

The triangular relationship between theology, politics and the sciences characterizing the philosophy of Priestley, Jebb and Walker launched and impacted facets of society at the local and national levels. On matters of natural philosophy, all three figures sought to combat an elitist-based science, or to "deflate the role of genius and preconceived theory,"[264] and make it more egalitarian; the advancement of a more accessible, comprehensive science in combination with political reform was the cornerstone for human progress. This belief of the Rational Dissenters paved the way for improvements in public health. Priestley and Walker's role in developing British intellectual culture through philosophical societies emphasized social improvement inspired by Enlightenment sciences and rational religion. Likewise, embodying the classic humanitarian, Jebb placed more responsibility on the government for the citizens' welfare and encouraged laymen to learn basic medical skills. Nor should the international scale of such movements be disregarded. In Tuscany, Italy, for instance, Priestley's pneumatic theory inspired campaigns to revolutionize Tuscany's economy and health by increasing agricultural output and "purifying" the *mal aria* (bad air) in the Tuscan Maremma.[265] In consideration of Priestley, Jebb and Walker's stances for an open and equal pursuit for knowledge, the question of women was also a significant topic that distinguished them from many of their liberal and radical contemporaries. All three individuals encouraged females to obtain an education as intellectual

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[264] John G. McEvoy, "Electricity, Knowledge, and the Nature of Progress in Priestley's Thought," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 12, no. 1 (1979), 17.

[265] Simon Schaffer, "Priestley and the Politics of Spirit," in *Science, Medicine and Dissent: Joseph Priestley (1733-1804)*, ed. by R.G.W. Anderson and Christopher Lawrence (London: Wellcome Trust/Science Museum, 1987), 50. Though the project to "purify" the marshes of the Maremma failed (more successful on the agricultural side), the atmosphere became an important site for both scientific research and political policy in the late eighteenth century in Italy. Britain would follow suit during the Industrial Revolution.

equals to their male counterparts. Jebb pushed the agenda for women's rights the furthest with his relationship to Ann Jebb and her active presence in the public sphere. Nevertheless, it is clear for the Rational Dissenters that they assumed a radical position regarding women at the time, looking beyond notions of the female sex simply being the private, domesticated subordinate.

As proponents of the independent and individual will, Priestley, Jebb, and Walker incorporated their religious and intellectual interests into politics during the 1780s: Jebb and Walker more explicitly in political societies or local government meetings than Priestley, who expressed his opinions in his religious tracts. Jebb's commitment to the SCI contributed to the growth of a more radical and inclusive political culture, which became adopted by the London Corresponding Society founded by Thomas Hardy in 1792. Additionally, Mark Philp does note that Hardy's radical aspirations were inspired by both the SCI pamphlets and Rational Dissenter Richard Price's writings, referring back to the Lockean rights and emphasis on the "individual's liberty of conscience."[266] Walker's participation in the provincial and local meetings of Nottinghamshire served as the equivalent for this British radicalism that reemerged in the democratic movements of Europe in the nineteenth century. Even after Walker's death, Nottingham remained prominent in its support for parliamentary reform and measures to relieve religious minorities in the 1820s and 1830s and was thus labeled as being a "foremost advocate of liberal measures."[267] For all three figures, the issue of the slave trade also occupied their political activities as they opposed such a paradoxical and repugnant institution. Traditionally, religion was seen as a driving force for the abolition movement, namely in the case of the Quakers. However, the Rational Dissenters, understudied in this regard, drew upon their heterodox backgrounds to argue for abolition on several contentions, including economics and

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[266] Philp, 39.

[267] Malcolm I. Thomis, *Politics and Society in Nottingham: 1785-1835* (Oxford: Holywell Press, 1969), 128.

the detrimental social and moral effects on society. Although Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, British statesmen in the Congress of Vienna inherited the arguments put forth by Priestley, Jebb and Walker in efforts to eliminate slavery.

As this thesis has sought to demonstrate, the radicalism characterized by the 1790s is greatly indebted to the Rational Dissenters. Previous studies on the Rational Dissenters have either noted their [minor] presence at the political level or unconventional, liberal religious beliefs. Through Priestley, Jebb and Walker, however, one can trace the complex path of radicalism beginning from the American Revolution as they solidified their political and cultural identities based on their heterodox theology and scientific endeavors. The Rational Dissenters laid the foundations for a radical political culture that intensified on the outbreak of the French Revolution and continued into the nineteenth century. An inverse relationship can describe the transformation of Rational Dissent after 1789: as radicalism strengthened over the course of the French Revolution, Rational Dissent weakened.[268] By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Rational Dissent characterized by Priestley, Jebb, and Walker had redefined itself as the "New Dissenters": this entailed a new group of the likes of the Methodists, William Godwin and William Hazlitt. This thesis has not only explained the Rational Dissenters' political motivations on the basis of religion and science, which are often discussed in disjunction, but also how they translated into a political culture that reflected their radicalism.

[268] Philp, 43.

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