

17.037/17.038. American Political Thought
Spring 2004

Reading Questions for Week 4. Revolutionary America

Thomas Paine

How did government originate? What, in Paine's view, is the purpose of government?

What are the main arguments in Paine's attack of the British monarchy and hereditary succession?

Paine's arguments are based in part on Enlightenment liberal ideas about universal natural rights and the republican ideal of self-government. He also makes arguments invoking religion and ethnicity. What, in his view, has the Protestant God ordained for America? In what sense are the Israelites, and not the English, the colonists' true forebears? Why does he link American national identity primarily to Europe and not England? Are these religious and ethnic claims in tension with his liberal and republican arguments?

Thomas Jefferson

Jefferson echoes John Locke in declaring American independence from Britain. Jefferson appeals to the "laws of nature and of nature's God". What are these natural laws? How have the British violated them? What, in Jefferson's view, is the basis of legitimate government?

How should we understand the universalist, egalitarian claims of natural rights in the Declaration of Independence with its denunciation of "merciless Indian savages" and the silence regarding the status of women and African-American slavery that followed?

Abigail and John Adams

On what grounds does Abigail Adams make her case that women should not be bound by laws in which they have no voice or representation?

How does John Adams respond to his wife's urging that he "Remember the Ladies" in building an independent nation, in particular, by limiting the power of "Naturally Tyrannical" husbands over their wives?

Frederick Douglass

What ideas does Douglass emphasize in arguing against slavery to his predominantly white audience? What, if anything, do his arguments suggest about the universality or inclusiveness of liberal principles?