Fisher Ames was a conservative Massachusetts Federalist and one of the fiercest critics of the rising Jeffersonians. He served in Congress during the Washington administration, but poor health forced him out of politics and to an early death. He lived to see the election of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency in the United States and the French Revolution and subsequent terror and rise of Napoleon Bonaparte in France. Those events seemed to confirm his worst fears about the coming of a democratic age that would shatter not only monarchical government but also established social order and traditional civil liberty. He feared that democratic idealism would eventually give way to mob rule, anarchy, and dictatorship in the United States as it had in France. The democratic ethos, he thought, prioritized equality above all else, and the pursuit of equality would eventually lead the people to sacrifice liberty.

There are some popular maxims, which are scarcely credited as true, and yet are cherished as precious, and defended as even sacred. Most of the democratic articles of faith are blended with truth, and seem to be true; and they so comfortably sooth the pride and envy of the heart, that it swells with resentment, when they are contested, and suffers some spasms of apprehension, even when they are examined. Mr. Thomas Paine’s writings abound with this sort of specious falsehoods and perverted truths. Of all his doctrines none, perhaps, has created more agitation and alarm than that, which proclaims to all men, that they are free and equal. This creed is older than its supposed author, and was thread-bare in America, before Mr. Paine ever saw our shores; yet it had the effect, in other parts of the world, of novelty. It was news, that the French revolution scattered through the world. It made the spirit of restlessness and innovation universal. Those who could not be ruled by reason, resolved that they would not be restrained by power. Those who had been governed by law, hungered and thirsted to enjoy, or rather to exercise, the new prerogatives of a democratic majority, which, of right, could establish, and, for any cause or no cause at all, could change. They believed that by making their own and other men’s passions sovereign, they should invest man with immediate perfectibility, and breathe into their regenerated liberty an ethereal spirit that would never die. Slaves grew weary of their chains, and freemen sick of their rights.

All men being free and equal, rulers become our servants, from whom we claim obligation, though we do not admit their right to exact any. This generation, being equal to the last, owes no obedience to its institutions; and, being wiser, owes them not even deference. It would be treachery to man, so long obstructed and delayed in his progress towards perfectibility, to forbear to exercise his rights.

...THE philosophers among the democrats will no doubt insist, that they do not mean to equalize property, they contend only for an equality of rights. If they restrict the word equality as carefully as they ought, it will not import, that all men have an equal right to all things, but, that to whatever they

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have a right, it is as much to be protected and provided for, as the right of any persons in society. In this sense, nobody will contest their claim. Yet, though the right of a poor man is as much his right, as a rich man’s, there is no great novelty or wisdom in the discovery of the principle, nor are the French entitled to any pre-eminence on this account. The *magna charta* of England, obtained, I think, in the year 1216, contains the great body of what is called, and our revolutionists of 1776 called it, *English liberty*. This they claimed as their birth-right, and with good reason; for it enacts, that justice shall not be sold, nor denied, nor delayed; and, as, soon afterwards, the trial by jury grew into general use, the subjects themselves are employed by the government to apply remedies, when rights are violated. For true equality and the rights of man, there never was a better or a wiser provision, as, in fact, it executes itself. This is the precious system of true equality, imported by our excellent and ever to be venerated forefathers, which they prized as their birthright. Yet this glorious distinction of liberty, so ample, so stable, and so temperate, secured by the common law, has been reviled and exhibited to popular abhorrence, as the shameful badge of our yet colonial dependence on England.

As the common law secures equally all the rights of the citizens, and as the Jacobin leaders loudly decry this system, it is obvious, that they extend their views still farther. Undoubtedly, they include in their plan of equality, that the citizens shall have assigned to them new rights, and different from what they now enjoy. You have earned your estate, or it descended to you from your father; of course, my right to your estate is not as good as yours. Am I then to have, in the new order of things, an equal right with you? Certainly not, every democrat of any understanding will reply. What then do you propose by your equality? You have earned an estate; I have not; yet I have a right, and as good a right as another man, to earn it. I may save my earnings, and deny myself the pleasures and comforts of life, till I have laid up a competent sum to provide for my infirmity and old age. All cannot be rich, but all have a right to make the attempt; and when some have fully succeeded, and others partially, and others not at all, the several states in which they then find themselves, become their condition in life; and whatever the rights of that condition may be, they are to be faithfully secured by the laws and government. This, however, is not the idea of the men of the *new order of things*, for, thus far, the plan belongs to a very old order of things.

. . . To enjoy rights, without having proper security for their enjoyment, ought not indeed to satisfy any political reasoners, and this is precisely the difficulty of the democratic sect. All the rights and equality they admire are destitute of any rational security, and are of a nature utterly subversive of all true liberty. For, on close examination, it turns out, that their notion of equality is, that all the citizens of a republic have an equal right to political power. This is called republicanism. This hastens the journey of a demagogue to power, and invests him with the title of *the man of the people*. This, the people are told, is their great cause, in opposition to the coalesced tyrants of Europe, and the intriguing federal aristocrats in America.

Let me *cut out the tongue* of that blasphemer, every democratic zealot will exclaim, who dares to deny the rightful and unlimited power of the people. It is indeed a very inveterate evil of our politics, that popular opinion has been formed rather to democracy, than to sober republicanism. The American revolution was, in fact, after 1776, a resistance to foreign government. We claimed the right to govern ourselves, and our patriots never contemplated the claim of the imported united Irish, that a mob should govern us. It is true, that the checks on the power of the people themselves were not deemed so necessary, as on the temporary rulers whom we elected: we looked for danger on the same side, where we had been used to look, and suspected everything but ourselves. Our dread of rulers devoted them to imbecility; our presumptuous confidence in ourselves pulled all the weak, and credulous, and vain, with an opinion, that no power was safe but their own, and, therefore, that should be uncontrollable and have no limits. This is democracy, and not republicanism. The French revolution has been made, the instrument of faction; it has multiplied popular errors, and rendered them indocile. Restraints on the power of the people, seem to all democrats, foolish, for how shall they restrain themselves?
mischievous, because, as they think, the power of the people is their liberty. Restraints, that make it less, and, on every inviting occasion for mischief and the oppression of a minority, make it nothing, will appear to be the abandonment of its principles and cause.

All democrats maintain, that the people have an inherent, unalienable right to power: there is nothing so fixed, that they may not change it; nothing so sacred, that their voice, which is the voice of God, would not unsanctify and consign to destruction: it is not only true, that no king, or parliament, or generation past can bind the people; but they cannot even bind themselves: the will of the majority is not only law, but right: having an unlimited right to act as they please, whatever they please to act is a rule. Thus, virtue itself, thus, public faith, thus, common honesty, are no more than arbitrary rules, which the people have, as yet, abstained from rescinding; and when a confiscating or paper money majority in congress should ordain otherwise, they would be no longer rules. Hence, the worshippers of this idol ascribe to it attributes inconsistent with all our ideas of the Supreme Being himself, to whom we deem it equally impious and absurd to impute injustice. Hence, they argue, that a public debt is a burden to be thrown off, whenever the people grow weary of it; and hence, they, somewhat inconsistently, pretend, that the very people cannot make a constitution, authorizing any restraint upon malicious lying against the government. So that, according to them, neither religion, nor morals, nor policy, nor the people themselves can erect any barrier against the reasonable or the capricious exercise of their power.

Is it true, however, (if it be not rebellion to inquire) that this uncontrolled power of the people is their right, and that it is absolutely essential to their liberty? All our individual rights are to be exercised with due regard to the rights of others; they are tied fast by restrictions, and are to be exercised within certain reasonable limits. How is it, then, that the democrats find a right in the whole people so much more extensive, than what belongs to any one of their number?

There is perhaps no country in the world, where visionary theory has done so much to darken political knowledge, as in France, nor where facts appear at length so conspicuously to enlighten it.

Nobody seemed any longer to have power, but the people. They had all power, and, of course, unbounded liberty. How little is it considered, that arbitrary power, no matter whether of prince or people, makes tyranny; and that in salutary restraint is liberty. A stupid, ferocious multitude, who are unfit to be free, may play the tyrant for a day, just long enough to put a scepter of iron into their leader's hand. To use quaint language, in order to be the more intelligible, it may be said, that, when there is no end to the power of a multitude, there can be no beginning to their liberty.

Review the transactions in France since 1789, and it will appear, that there is no condition of a state, in which it is more impossible that liberty should subsist, or, more nearly impossible that, after being lost, it should be retrieved, than after order has been overthrown, and popular licentiousness triumphs in its stead.

The old government of France was a bad one; but the new order of things was infinitely worse. Most persons suppose this is to be ascribed to the excess of liberty; they think there was too much of a good thing. Now the truth is, there was no liberty at all—absolutely none from the first, no reasonable hope, scarcely a lucky chance for it. Who had liberty? Clearly not the king, the nobles, nor the priests, nor the king's ministers; all these were in jeopardy from the 14th July, 1789: not the rich; they were robbed and driven into banishment: not the great military officers who had gained glory in the American war; they were slain: not the farmers; their harvests and their sons were in requisition: not the merchants; they were so stripped, that their race was extinct; they were known only on the grave-stones of Nantz and Lyons; they were remembered in France, like the mammoth, by their bones. But, say the democrats, the people, the many, in other words, the rabble of the cities, were free: bread was issued to them by the public. Yes, but it was the bread of soldiers, for which they were enrolled as
national guards to uphold the tyranny of robbers and usurpers; and as soon as this very rabble relucted at their work, the more desperate cut-throats from Marseilles were called for, to shoot them in the streets.

... Liberty is not to be enjoyed, indeed it cannot exist, without the habits of just subordination: it consists, not so much in removing all restraint from the orderly, as in imposing it on the violent. Now the first step in a revolution, is to make these restraints appear unjust and debasing, and to induce the multitude to throw them off; in other words, to give daggers to ruffians, and to lay bare honest men's hearts. By exalting their passions to rage and frenzy, and leading them on, before they cool, to take bastilles, and overturn altars, and thrones, a mad populace are well fitted for an army, but they are spoiled for a republic. Having enemies to contend with, and leaders to fight for, the contest is managed by force, and the victory brings joy only as it secures booty and vengeance. The conquering faction soon divides, and one part arrays its partisans in arms against the other; or, more frequently, by treachery and surprise cuts off the chiefs of the adverse faction, and they reduce it to weakness and slavery. Then more booty, more blood, and new triumphs for liberty!!

... Thus the progress of mob equality is invariably to despotism, and to a military despotism, which, by often changing its head, embitters every one of the million of its curses, but which cannot change its nature. It renders liberty hopeless, and almost undesirable to its victims.