

systems in the process.

Politics and Personhood at the Founding

When the United States was founded, politics and personhood had come together, but in the progressive direction.

Historian Lynn Hunt at UCLA goes through the history in detail in her book *Inventing Human Rights: A History*. She starts with the defining passage of the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

If these rights are self-evident, she asks, why does Jefferson have to say that they are self-evident? And when did they become self-evident?

Hunt, a former president of the American Historical Society, studied the writing and culture of France, England, and the Thirteen Colonies. She shows that those ideas were not there in the 1600s, and came into existence in the mid-1700s, mainly after 1760, when Western Europe and the States were swept up in a major cultural change. That change can be seen in the period's novels, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie*, the biggest bestseller of the century, with seventy editions between 1761 and 1800. *Julie* was written as a collection of intimate letters between two lovers. Readers identified deeply with the emotional lives of the characters, whose psychological states were revealed and developed from letter to letter, arousing empathy for the plights of ordinary people. Between 1760 and the 1780s, such novels multiplied, laws were passed ending torture by the state as being inhuman, portraits showing the individual characteristics of their subjects started to be painted, manners changed to increase personal control over one's body (e.g., blowing your nose into a handkerchief), and the idea of individual autonomy came into existence in a rush.

These changes were propelled by empathy, by identification with the