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Author(s): Richard Bourke

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# EDMUND BURKE AND ENLIGHTENMENT SOCIABILITY: JUSTICE, HONOUR AND THE PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT

*Richard Bourke*[1] [2]

**Abstract:** This article situates the work of Edmund Burke, principally his writings on the French Revolution, in an enlightenment debate about sociability, monarchy and mixed government. It shows how his conception of manners in general, and honour in particular, relates to similar preoccupations in Montesquieu, Voltaire, Smith and Millar, and how that conception has consequences for his theory of authority and moderation in politics.

The writings and speeches of Edmund Burke constitute a sustained engagement with the major political questions of his age. To that extent they have an obviously circumstantial character. However, it is in the nature of major political questions that they are capable of provoking fundamental responses. Burke's career spanned a period in which Britain was deprived of colonial empire in North America and in which it acquired a commercial empire in South Asia. That same period saw, in Burke's estimation, the collapse of political civilization in France and the emergence of revolutionary fanaticism in Europe. Under these conditions of extreme upheaval, the considered defence of a political position is likely to become a defence of political principles. Accordingly, throughout his career, Burke was continually obliged to return to fundamental questions about the responsibilities of empire, the nature of government and the foundations of human society. Now it is perfectly clear that in all this Burke did not proceed by systematic philosophical inquiry, but it is equally clear that sophisticated public debate in the eighteenth century involved consideration of issues of overriding moral and political significance. Burkean argument was no exception. At its most expansive it depended at least implicitly upon an appraisal of the precise achievements of European civilization; and so at various times from the American War through to the Hastings Impeachment and the French Revolution, Burke set about elucidating the content of modern civilization with a view to establishing its political character.

On Burke's understanding, the most significant achievement of modern European civilization was to be found in the institution of moderate government. Moderate governments could be identified by the liberty which the subjects of those governments possessed, or felt they possessed. They could be

[1] I would like to thank David Armitage, David Bromwich, James Chandler, John Dunn, Iain Hampsher-Monk, Istvan Hont, Ed Hundert, J.G.A. Pocock, Chris Reid and Michael Sonenscher for their comments and advice on this article. Responsibility for the remaining errors lies with me.

[2] University of London, Queen Mary and Westfield College, Mile End Road, London E1 4NS.

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identified, in other words, by the security of life and property enjoyed by the governed over and against their governments. But such security was dependent in the final analysis on a separation of powers within the state. More particularly, it depended on the separation of executive from judicial power. That separation, as Montesquieu had argued, best took the form of trial by jury in which the judgments of jurors were nonetheless fixed by the letter of the law.[3] In this way, in moderate governments legal judgment could be rendered without fear of interference from competing organs of power in the state. As Burke put it in the *Reflections*: 'Whatever is supreme power in a state, ought to have, as much as possible, its judicial authority so constituted as not only not to depend upon it, but in some sort to balance it.'[4] Balance here implied a counterweight. Judicial authority should secure justice to the citizens of a state over and against its executive power. In this sense, Burke continued, the judicature should be 'something exterior to the state'.[5] That is, it should be independent of the state's regular institutions of government. Where such independence was enshrined in the constitution of a state, or made a part of its customary or fundamental law, there safety and tranquillity would be found to reign.

But there were conditions under which such constitutional provisions would remain secure and conditions under which they could be rendered precarious. In the first instance, the security of fundamental or customary law depended on its being deposited with an independent judiciary. But there were also social and political conditions on which the security of fundamental law depended. From a political point of view, the constitutional security of a state required that effective restraints be placed on the various branches of public power. In Britain, according to Burke, that meant protecting the authority of the legislature against encroachment from the executive. For Montesquieu, by contrast, it was best achieved by maintaining the subordinate powers of the state, in particular the patrimonial jurisdictions of the French nobility, as a brake on the arbitrary designs of the monarchy. But for both Burke and Montesquieu there were also social conditions without which any restraint upon power would be deprived of all practical efficacy. Those conditions comprised at once the distribution of property and the disposition of manners. This article is an attempt to set out what Burke took the appropriate disposition of manners in moderate governments to consist in and to that end it tries to show how the principle of honour came to occupy a central place in his

[3] See Charles-Louis de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller and Harold Stone (Cambridge, 1989), I, XI, 6: 'Most kingdoms in Europe enjoy a moderate government because the prince who is invested with the first two [legislative and executive] powers leaves the third [judicial] to his subjects.'

[4] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford, 1981), VIII, p. 253.

[5] *Ibid.*

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analysis. Honour is a variant on the Voltairean theme of politeness, and in the pages that follow I shall attempt to show how it functioned for Burke as the very solvent which maintained society in a condition of peace and tranquillity.

Burke's understanding is best approached through his analysis of the point at which the disposition of manners became incompatible with the survival of moderate government. That point was reached with the advent of revolution in France. The significance of the Revolution was to be found in the doctrine of the Rights of Man, but that doctrine carried within it a threat to the inherited system of European manners. From this perspective, the Revolution held out the prospect of the destruction not only of established government but of society itself. It was this which rendered the Revolution quite the most remarkable event in European history. But in arriving at this conclusion, Burke drew upon an understanding not simply of the various habits and aptitudes of particular societies but also upon an understanding of the foundations of human sociability itself. That understanding was the product of a thoughtful engagement with an extended enlightenment debate about the nature of human appetites and passions. This debate had been concerned to uncover whether human society was based upon relations of benevolence or utility, whether politeness was the product of benevolence and whether utility was the product of rational calculation. Burke was familiar with such theories of manners and moral sentiments through the works of Montesquieu, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. His own argument is therefore best understood in the context of their rival claims and assumptions. So while this article is principally concerned with Burke's understanding of the foundations of human behaviour and motivation, it is also necessarily concerned with the broader enlightenment debate about the character of human sociability.

## I

Throughout the *Reflections* Burke points to honour as a principle whose exercise is crucial to the maintenance of civility in territorial states. By extinguishing its operation, or debasing its currency, we are liable to dissolve communities, in the words of Burke's extravagant phrasing, 'into an unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos of elementary principles'.[6] Prestige is the element in which honour flourishes, and rank offers security to prestige. Without that security peaceable human intercourse is liable to come under threat from the indeterminacy of social norms: 'Who would insure a tender and delicate sense of honour to beat with the first pulses of the heart, when no man could know what would be the test of honour in a nation, continually varying the standard of its coin?'[7] During the course of this article I explore Burke's strategic deployment of honour as the founding principle of modern society and government. It is in this context that I attempt to show how the principle of honour

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 147.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

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acts for him as the enabling condition of justice in society, but also as the means by which political power is moderated in its conduct. It supplies the mechanism, in other words, by which governments are preserved from a descent into tyranny.

In the larger scheme of things, I want to suggest that both justice and moderation depend for Burke, in a way that they did not for Montesquieu, on virtue. They depend in the final analysis on the possibility of benevolent human action. This dependence, as I hope to show, can also be found in the political thought of Adam Ferguson, but it was not an integral part of the project of Adam Smith. Burke's argument was ultimately underwritten by a doctrine of benevolent sociability premised on the distinction of ranks. But we have seen that evolving a coherent position in the face of Revolutionary politics obliged him to draw upon the resources supplied by the broad eighteenth-century inquiry into the foundations of society, the origins of justice and the government of the passions. To that extent, as I have been arguing, Burke's engagement with the situation in France after 1789 was at the same time an intervention into the world of eighteenth-century philosophical dispute. Setting out the terms in which that intervention was orchestrated, we will constantly be obliged in the pages that follow to take stock of the larger debate from which the characteristically Burkean argument took its bearings. That process will take us from Voltaire and Montesquieu to Smith, to Millar and to Ferguson.

In identifying honour as a staple ingredient in the moral ties subsisting in modern states, Burke is deliberately raising the ghost of Montesquieu, whose political intelligence he recommends in both the *Reflections* and the *Appeal*. More particularly, he is bringing into view the 'principle of monarchy', which is described in the *Spirit of the Laws* as providing that particular constitutional form with the means of coherent action. Here we learn that monarchical government is supported by a definite organization of human interests, founded on the pervasive demand for pre-eminence and rank, by which the passions of individuals can find expression without collapsing society into a state of conflict. Honour, which comprises the demand for 'preferences and distinctions' — the 'prejudice of each person and each condition' — restrains the behaviour of individuals in the absence of human benevolence. Harmony is secured without each citizen consciously looking to the common welfare. Under these circumstances, in which each person sets their sights on preferential advantage, it is possible to act as a good citizen without seeking specifically to behave as a 'good man':

> You could say that it is like the system of the universe, where there is a force repelling all bodies from the centre and a force of gravitation attracting them to it. Honour makes all parts of the body politic move; its very action

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binds them, and each person works for the common good, believing he works for his individual interests.[8]

While attending to our own interests, endeavouring to distinguish ourselves in opposition to others, our passions do not stand in need of censors, governors, tribunals: 'The World', as Montesquieu put it, 'is the school of honor.'[9] In this world, the centre of gravity of which is the court, distinction is secured by the attentions of the monarch. Individuals competing for honours compete for praise. With Hobbes, honour was desperately secured at the expense of others: 'Glory is like Honour, if all men have it, no man hath it . . . every man must account himselfe, such as he can make himself, without the help of others.'[10] Self-love entailed an exclusive regard to oneself. But here ambition is understood to realize itself only in the sights of onlookers: in being driven to enhance our own distinction, we desire its exhibition before a collection of admirers.

Voltaire's tribute to the age of the Sun King, in the form of his *Siècle de Louis XIV*, appeared three years after the publication of the *Spirit of the Laws*. Here we discover a culture of preferment and ambition contributing to the advancement of politeness — 'l'europe a dû sa politesse à la cour de Louis XIV' — at the expense of 'faction, de fureur & de rébellion'.[11] The animosity which had taken hold of citizens in opposition to their kings since the time of Francis II gave way to 'une emulation de servir le prince' and provided for a correspondence between the throne and the nation, 'malgré le pouvoir absolu'.[12] In this scheme of things, all attention was directed towards the court, attracting the nobility in search of favours, and establishing in the process a concourse between the *bourg* and the *palais*:

> Les maisons, que tous les seigneurs bâtirent ou acheterens dans paris, & leurs femmes qui y vécurrent avec dignité, formérent des écoles de politesse . . . Les spectacles, les prommenades publiques, où l'on commencait à rassembler pour goûter une vie plus douce, rendirent peu-à-peu l'extérieur de tous les citoiens presque semblable. On s'apperçoit aujourd'hui jusques dans le fond d'une boutique, que la politesse a gagné toutes les conditions; les provinces se sont ressenties avec le tems de tous ces changemens.[13]

But while Voltaire argues that the splendour of the court acted as a bait to 'les seigneurs', enticing them from their estates into the city in search of 'une vie plus douce', and permitting the diffusion of politeness together with order in a society previously riven by faction and rebellion, the promise of favours

[8] Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, I, iii, 7.

[9] *Ibid.*, I, iv, 2.

[10] Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, in *The Clarendon Editions of the Philosophical Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Howard Warrender (Oxford, 1983), II, pp. 91–2.

[11] Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (2 vols., Berlin, 1951), I, p. 5, and II, p. 138.

[12] *Ibid.*, II, p. 138, and II, p. 110.

[13] *Ibid.*, II, pp. 139–41.

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in exchange for services is seen by him as capable of promoting both refinement and justice without attaching to privilege any solid institutional power.

But it is precisely the concrete embodiment of prerogatives in the form of subordinate jurisdictions which Montesquieu presented as indispensable to the establishment of moderation in territorial states:

> In a way, the nobility is the essence of monarchy . . . In a few European states, some people had imagined abolishing all the justices of the lords. They did not see that they wanted to do what the Parliament of England did. If you abolish the prerogatives of the lords, the clergy, nobility and towns in a monarchy, you will soon have a popular state or a despotic state.[14]

Montesquieu's suggestion here is that government, established for the security of justice, is likely to degenerate into despotism where the power of the state is able to act directly upon its population without the interposition of intermediate and subordinate privileges. In a monarchy, in which a single individual governs in accordance with fundamental laws, power is obliged to communicate itself through intermediate channels. The 'most natural' subordinate power in a monarchy is held to be the nobility.[15] But the monarchy and nobility must either hold each other in check or make an attempt on each other's authority. Rivalry, inevitably, degenerates into war, but a mutual check is supplied by honour. Power in a monarchy, Montesquieu is suggesting, is limited by the 'spring' of its government. But that spring — honour — can protect justice from the decrees of arbitrary authority only when the *prerogatives des corps* retain their independence. The English, Montesquieu contended, had removed intermediate powers in the interest of liberty. 'They are right to preserve that liberty', he continued, 'if they were to lose it, they would be one of the most enslaved peoples on earth.'[16]

But as he wrote this, it was still his belief that in England the spirit of liberty had been rigorously maintained. Popular sentiment favoured wit over taste, national literature tended more to Juvenalian satire than Horatian ceremony, manners appeared in a less tender, less frivolous guise. But moral seriousness remained intact. Honour sustained the French feudal nobility, but usefulness was the principle of a free government in which the aristocracy had been deprived of its 'gothic' autonomy: 'those who govern . . . would have more regard for those who are useful to them than for those who divert them'.[17] In England the 'form of an absolute government' presided over its essential freedom, and the spirit of emulation privileged utility over politeness.[18] But since the patrimonial jurisdictions of the French monarchy were inoperative within the state, representatives of the people and ministers of the crown required 'a

[14] Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, I, ii, 4.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*, III, xix, 27.

[18] *Ibid.*

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power whose regulations temper them'.[19] This power was supplied by a hereditary nobility which 'must have a great interest in preserving its prerogatives, odious in themselves, and which, in a free state, must always be endangered'.[20] The 'Important men', covetous of distinctions which serve to differentiate their interests from those of the popular assembly, can sit in judgment on abuses allegedly perpetrated in the course of public business. Legislative power, acting as judge where it represents the interested party, is incompatible with justice. The provision in the English constitution correcting this potential abuse, we are reminded, is what distinguishes it from the constitutions of certain ancient republics where the people sat as judge and accuser at the same time. The House of Lords, without constituting a feudal jurisdiction, performs its duty as a check on the possible growth of despotic power. At the same time Parliament as a whole is confined by the executive while the two branches of the legislature bind each other: 'As its legislative body is composed of two parts, the one will be chained to the other by their reciprocal faculty of vetoing. The two will be bound by the executive, which will itself be bound by the legislative power.'[21] Such mechanisms of restraint acted as an institutional safeguard or supplement to the spirit of liberty in regulating authority.

However, constitutional checks on the growth of political abuses are only as sound as the moral character of those who support it. In Britain the constitutional edifice of the state depended on the durability of the nation's mores. British liberty had to stand on the nation's fund of political virtue. Such an arrangement, in Montesquieu's view, was altogether more precarious than the French monarchy's dependence on a system of honour: 'As all human things have an end, the state we are speaking of will lose its liberty.'[22] But the system of honour in a constitutional monarchy like France, Montesquieu reveals, is in reality a species of 'false honour' which requires no self-sacrifice on the part of the individuals who maintain it. 'Philosophically speaking', he remarked, 'it is true that the honour that guides all parts of the state is a false honour, but this false honour is as useful to the public as the true one would be to the individuals who could have it.'[23] However, by 1790, it was Burke's judgment that the British system of mixed government was always going to prove more durable than the absolute monarchy of France. The court, now in the guise of parliamentary managers, wedded, through the power of patronage, monarchy to aristocracy and lords to commoners in a secure and enduring bond arising more from substantive connections than from formal legal ties. That bond, however, was always threatened by the steady growth of executive power. Since in the final analysis it was to parliament that one had to look for

[19] *Ibid.*, II, xi, 6.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] *Ibid.*, I, iii, 7.

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protection against an aspiring monarch, British liberty was forced to rely upon the political restraints which the representation of the state imposed upon itself. Restraint, as we shall see, was supplied by moral discipline, a discipline which French revolutionary politics would prove incapable of evolving but which in England was supplied by a form of virtuous honour more dependable, in Burke's view, than that 'false honour' which had failed to preserve constitutional monarchy in France.

Montesquieu's apprehensiveness about England becomes Burke's verdict on post-Revolutionary France, the government of which is deemed to have become 'the most completely arbitrary power that has ever appeared on earth'.[24] In attempting to account for this outcome, in seeking to identify the poison which came to infect the vitals of *ancien régime* France, Burke assimilates Voltaire's eulogy for the purpose of his own indictment: 'In the cities the nobility had no power; in the country very little.'[25] Disdaining to take part in civil government or police, standing aloof from administrative business, the nobility turned their backs on the third estate of the realm, affecting a drastic exclusiveness in relation to new wealth and talent. 'Nobility', Burke wrote, 'is a graceful ornament to civil order. It is the Corinthian capital of polished society':

> *Omnes boni nobilitati favemus*, was the saying of a wise and good man. It is indeed one sign of a liberal and benevolent mind to incline to it with some sort of partial propensity. He feels no ennobling principle in his own heart who wishes to level all the artificial institutions which have been adopted for giving body to opinion, and permanence to fugitive esteem.[26]

But good men, men of wealth and talent, had been estranged from the nobility in France, and the nobility, ordinarily a consolidating 'artificial institution', cultivated their vanity to the detriment of their involvement in the managerial organs of state. Under these circumstances, opinion loses its tangible embodiment and social esteem is free to revolutionize itself.

Montesquieu, having told his readers that 'laws represent mores' and that 'mores represent manners',[27] proceeded, as we have seen, to argue that manners in a monarchy were formed out of the relations between the prince and the nobility. The prince sought confirmation from the nobility and the nobility sought preferment from the prince. Such mutual regard goes by the name of honour, but honour requires the support of authority and the authority of a feudal nobility derived from its territorial power. Burke's purpose, in charting this territory once more in the wake of the Revolution in France, is to contend for an alternative account of the relation between liberty and authority in

[24] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 233.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 186.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 188. The Latin citation — 'all good men always take the part of the high-born' — is from Cicero, *Pro Sestio*, ix, 21.

[27] Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, III, xix, 16.

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modern states. That required an alternative account of how the passions of men are restrained in modern societies. In his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* of 1791, Burke explicitly addresses this issue, proclaiming that human appetites must be externally manipulated to the extent that they do not impose order on themselves:

> Men are qualified for civil liberty, in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites; in proportion as their love to justice is above their rapacity . . . Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without.[28]

Society requires justice if it is to escape from rapacity and our liberty consists in the quality of that justice. While the qualification for liberty depends on our disposition to refrain from invading the liberty of others, Burke advises his readers that it also depends on our ability 'to listen to the councels of the wise and the good, in preference to the flattery of knaves'.[29] This amounts to a presumption in favour of authority, but it also assumes that the appetites of those who wield authority may themselves be subjected to a moral discipline. The good and the wise are required to adjudicate competing claims to justice. Without this process of adjudication, peaceable interaction among the members of civil society could not survive. But Burke is also aware of the fact that any process of political arbitration requires that the arbiters themselves moderate their conduct, that their 'love to justice' wins out over their rapacity. In that sense, his argument turns on how goodness and wisdom are secured to rulers entrusted with authority over the liberty of the ruled.

Public virtue depends for Burke on the political efficacy of a natural aristocracy in the midst of the artificial institutions of civil society. That is, it depends on the extent to which the established division of political labour in a state can be brought into conformity with political merit. In the *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, Burke sets out to explain how the merits of the few are justified by the protection which they offer to the many:

> To enable men to act with the weight and character of a people, and to answer to the ends for which they are incorporated into that capacity, we must suppose them (by means immediate or consequential) to be in that state of habitual social discipline, in which the wiser, the more expert, and the more opulent, conduct, and by conducting enlighten and protect the weaker, the less knowing, and the less provided with the goods of fortune.[30]

Social discipline makes an appearance where the conduct of affairs is committed to those who merit political responsibility. The security of justice is

[28] *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), in *Writings and Speeches*, ed. Langford, VIII, p. 332.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), in *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (16 vols., London, 1803–27), VI, p. 216.

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therefore underwritten by deference to moral seniority. Justice and the common good are guaranteed to the vulnerable by the virtues of 'the wiser, the more expert, and the more opulent'. But in that case justice is secured in the last instance by the benevolence of the few and not by what Adam Smith had called 'a sense of its utility'.[31]

In what follows, I want to argue that Burke's engagement with the affairs of France brought him to rather different conclusions from those drawn in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* about the foundations of justice and of human society in general. Burke had described Smith's book in 1759 as being a work of great practical significance which he valued for its 'solidity and Truth'.[32] But whatever the truth of Smith's argument, his conclusions were not ones to which Burke himself subscribed. Smith allows for the establishment of society in the absence of virtue. Society arises from a kind of utilitarian reciprocity and not from the prevalence of goodwill. But for Burke, on the other hand, society cannot exist 'unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere'. If that control is not to be supplied exclusively by external coercion, it must be provided from 'within'. In Burke's account, the mechanisms of control ultimately derive from the moral resources of human benevolence. Benevolence, however, is not the most dependable of human affects. Its security depends upon the circumstances in which it most readily prospers. Those circumstances are largely met by opulence and ease, by freedom from necessity, and it is for this reason that the welfare of the many is best entrusted to the generosity of the few.

## II

According to Smith, in the pursuit of wealth we are driven by the desire for distinction rather than the literal anticipation of gain. We delight in the bounty of others by participating in the pleasure which we sympathetically attach in our imagination to their predicament. But our delight does not consist so much in the actual prosperity they enjoy, still less in the expectation of benefiting from their kindness; instead, it arises out of our sympathy for the honours and distinctions which fortune has brought to them in the form of splendour and riches:

> From whence arises that emulation which runs through all the different ranks of men, and what are the advantages we propose by that great purpose of human life which we call bettering our condition? To be observed, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation, are all the advantages which we can propose to derive from it. It is the vanity, not the

[31] The phrase appears in Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), II, ii, 3, 2.

[32] *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. E.C. Mossner and J.S. Ross (Oxford, 1977), 'Letter from Edmund Burke', pp. 46–7.

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> ease, or the pleasure, which interests us. But vanity is always founded upon the belief of our being the object of attention and approbation.[33]

The effortless empire which the rich establish over the affections of the needy proceeds from the ready sympathy which the affluent elicit from the multitude, astonished and uplifted by their exalted stature. The admiring multitude are pleased by the beauty, the illustriousness, the tasteful finery, of commodious living. But more than this, they delight in the awe and respect which the possessors of these frivolous objects seem to inspire. Emulation is prompted by the general desire to secure this respect for themselves — to muster astonishment and applause, to excite wonder and exaltation. Our decisive involvement in the hurry and business of life, our unthinking devotion to the 'two-penny stake' of existence, has its origin in the comprehensive ambition to earn — and to be seen to earn — the adulation of admiring spectators.

But it is precisely this vanity, this overwhelming desire for attention and prestige, which operates as a check upon the otherwise unruly impulse to maximize our advantage without restraint. In one of his political fragments — 'Que L'État de Guerre Nait de L'État Social' — Rousseau challenged the view which he took to have been expounded in the *Leviathan* that the state of nature amounted to a state of war in which each combatant aimed at a final and comprehensive conquest. Imagining this conquest to have arrived at a final stage of completion, can we suppose the sole survivor to exercise dominion over a vast, uninhabited waste and delight in his achievement? — 'à quels yeux', Rousseau asks, 'étalera-t-il son pouvoir?'.[34] Smith would have understood the point well: for the value of self-aggrandizement to be sustainable, it must be open to view; it must meet with sympathy and approval. In the race for honours and preferment, the premium which we place upon our own triumph is in the final instance answerable to the pleasure or displeasure which our conduct provokes in the minds of others. Esteem is the measure of success; it enables that 'agreed valuation' without which competition would become a lethal exploit. The need to exhibit our accomplishments, and by this exhibition to win for ourselves praise and encouragement, effectively humbles the 'arrogance' of self-love.[35] Through the very demand for reciprocity, individuals are rendered more tractable, their ferocity and selfishness are subdued. Putting ourselves continually on display in the hope of winning admiration amounts to an expression of the desire to arouse the sympathetic imagination of attentive spectators. Sympathy, in this sense, offers its own reward: we seek it out for the pleasure it bestows, we indulge our fellow-feeling, not from love or affection, but from the earnest wish to be

[33] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I, iii, 2, 1.

[34] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (4 vols., Paris, 1959–69), III, p. 601.

[35] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, II, ii, 2, 1.

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acknowledged, to have our sentiments beat time with the sentiments we encounter in society at large.

Moral norms are generated in Smith out of the dynamics of 'propriety', or an agreed aptness of behaviour. But while propriety is the foundation of virtue, sympathy is the key to the workings of propriety. In our sympathy with joy we imaginatively participate in the supposed situation of another — their joy becomes, after a fashion, our own. But we also, Smith wants to argue, enter into the grief of others. In what sense, we might therefore ask, is pleasure to be derived from our conception of both the sufferings and the delights of others? This, of course, was the question which Hume posed to Smith in a letter dispatched in July 1759. In a footnote to the second edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith set out his response:

> It has been objected to me that as I found the sentiment of approbation, which is always agreeable, upon sympathy, it is inconsistent with my system to admit any disagreeable sympathy. I answer that in the sentiment of approbation there are two things to be taken notice of; first, the sympathetic passion of the spectator; and, secondly, the emotion which arises from his observing the perfect coincidence between this sympathetic passion in himself, and the original passion in the person principally concerned. This last emotion, in which the sentiment of approbation properly consists, is always agreeable and delightful.[36]

In entering into what we fancy to be the passions attendant upon the situation of another, our approval is supplied by the pleasure of an assumed coincidence between their sentiments and our own. Sympathy is in reality indistinguishable from approval, and in expressing our approbation we keenly experience the distinct pleasure of this peculiar form of concordance.

By implication, disapprobation indicates a failure to attain this fellow-feeling, an inability to establish agreement between the sentiments of the spectator and those of the principal agent. But of course, in depending upon a society of judges and critics for confirmation of our own success, and in craving the positive estimation of our actions which it is in their power to give, we are inclined to avoid unnecessarily bringing upon ourselves the disapproving gaze of the world: the delight we experience in observing a perfect concurrence between our feelings and those of another, or in our being the object of resounding approbation, is matched by the dread of exclusion from the society of agreeable passions. By means of this fortuitous arrangement, the commerce of manners, sentiments and opinions is able to flourish without individuals looking further than their own desire to impress: propriety, in other words, is enabled by our own vanity; the anxiety to be pleased by pleasing others provides for that correspondence of sentiments and opinions without which social harmony could never be established.

[36] *Ibid.*, I, iii, 1, 9n.

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The machinations of propriety, maintained in society by the continuous circulation of opinion and estimation, enable that minimal tranquillity necessary for even the most rudimentary social existence. In referring this basic harmony to the mercenary exchange of sympathetic affections, Smith is conspicuously refusing to refer it to either the 'artifice of politicians', after the fashion of Mandeville, or to an interested reflection upon the demands of social utility, after the fashion of Hume. But he is also refusing to ascribe the foundations of society to human generosity or benevolence. No such refusal, however, is to be met with in Burke. We get some sense of Burke's position when we turn to the *Fourth Letter on a Regicide Peace*, where he cautions against the infectious designs of those enthusiastic Revolutionaries 'who seek their happiness by other roads than those of humanity, morals, and religion, and whose liberty consists, and consists alone, in being free from those restraints, which are imposed by the virtues upon the passions'.[37] Virtue, however, is in the first instance a property of the Good Man. It is the gentility and liberality of good men which we admire and endeavour to imitate. Moreover, in admiring them, we are bringing our sentiments into conformity with the dictates of religion, without which morality could never overcome self-love, while emulation would forever degenerate into envy: 'We know, and what is better we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all comfort.'[38] But in all this it is clear that self-esteem does not itself constitute the road to virtue through the self-imposed restrictions of propriety; rather, virtue latterly corrects the fierce and unruly propensities displayed by the indulgence of naked passion. Manners, in a sense, are already virtuous in Burke: they contain within them the positive values of humanity and self-command.

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith had made it clear that there is a 'considerable difference between virtue and mere propriety; between those qualities and actions which deserve to be admired and celebrated, and those which simply deserve to be approved of'.[39] The observance of propriety, founded upon the desire to be honoured and respected, effectively obliges us to evolve a sense of justice, however imperfect and frail our commitment to it might in practice be. But in conforming our behaviour to a sense of justice we do not transcend self-interest out of regard for virtue. Harmony is not in the gift of good men, and neither does it follow the achievement of virtue: instead, harmony for Smith is the occasion for the expression of virtue, an occasion whose promise, under conditions of prosperity and extensive commerce, is considerably amplified. Social tranquillity, produced by a mercenary

[37] *Fourth Letter on a Regicide Peace*, in *Writings and Speeches*, ed. Langford, IX, p. 110.

[38] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 141. On the centrality of religion to Burke's political thinking, see Iain Hampsher-Monk, *A History of Political Thought* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 278–82.

[39] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, I, i, 5, 7.

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commerce of passion and opinion, and conducted over time through the media of industry and accumulation, lays the foundation of order and rank which regulates the system of emulation. But this, of course, is to concede that self-regard lies at the root of estimation. A concession of this kind, however, Burke was not prepared to make. He believed that, for commerce to succeed, it must be founded on the distinction of ranks. It needs the security of 'protecting principles' if it is to be harmoniously pursued. It is from this perspective that Burke could contend in the *Reflections* that

> Where trade and manufactures are wanting to a people, and the spirit of nobility and religion remains, sentiment supplies, and not always ill supplies their place; but if commerce and the arts should be lost in an experiment to try how well a state may stand without these old fundamental principles, what sort of thing must be a nation of gross, stupid, ferocious, and at the same time, poor and sordid barbarians, destitute of religion, honour, or manly pride, possessing nothing at present, and hoping for nothing hereafter?[40]

Nobility maintains the currency of esteem, and religion encourages us to humble our pride in affectionately marvelling at the great. Through the value of gentility and the office of humility, Burke is substituting selflessness in the place of self-interest, and deference in the place of Smith's elaborate system of social accommodation.

Accommodation, in a world divided into rich and poor, may be unequal; but this is somewhat different from making inequality the precondition of accommodation. In the final analysis, Burke is committed to an inequality of virtue as the principle of social and political organization. It is for this reason that he could present a 'perfect democracy' as 'the most shameless thing in the world'. Under conditions of radical equality, a people are 'less under responsibility to one of the greatest controlling powers on earth, the sense of fame and estimation'.[41] It is clear that estimation on this account can operate as a controlling power upon the affections only where individuals are accustomed to congenial deference before the wise and the opulent: the dignity customarily attached to the bearers of wisdom and wealth frees them to display their virtue in the form of goodwill and self-control. Virtue disciplines passion, and passion, subject to this discipline, engenders propriety and politeness. But there is no hint in all this that propriety enables virtue. So much is made evident in the *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*:

> When the multitude are not under this discipline, they can scarcely be said to be in civil society. Give once a certain constitution of things, which produces a variety of conditions and circumstances, and there is in nature and reason a principle which, for their own benefit, postpones, not the interest

[40] Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 130–1.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 144.

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> but the judgement, of those who are *numero plures*, to those who are *vertute et honore majores*.[42]

Landed property, the material support of those who are *vertute et honore majores*, by its very nature confers the virtues of independence and liberality upon its possessors and, by the certainty of its transmission, bestows a durability upon national mores. It is, in a sense, the national stock of virtue and esteem. 'It makes our weakness subservient to our virtue', Burke argued, 'it grafts benevolence even upon avarice.'[43]

The force and depth of Burke's commitment to the relationship between honour and virtue, virtue and property, and property and nobility is best captured by the contrast which his work affords with the inquiries launched into precisely these themes by John Millar in the later decades of the eighteenth century. The growth of new government powers, in the aftermath of the 'Glorious Revolution', in the form of a standing army maintained by extensive public borrowing, appeared to Millar in 1771 to have been effectively counterbalanced by the concomitant growth of commerce with its attendant freedoms. The fluctuation of property, which it is impossible with justice to control, inevitably compromises the customary bases of authority. In his *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society*, Millar explained that

> As no one order of men continues in the exclusive possession of opulence, as every man who is industrious may entertain the hope of gaining a fortune, it is to be expected that the prerogatives of the monarch and of the ancient nobility will be gradually undermined, that the privileges of the people will be extended in the same proportion, and that power, the usual attendant of wealth, will be in some measure diffused over all the members of the community.[44]

It is well known that after the dubious ministerial tactics employed by Pitt in 1784, and more decisively after the events in France of 1789, Millar's attention came to be focused more sharply upon the relations between liberty and authority. How, he began to ask with a new seriousness, could power be safely diffused 'over all the members of the community'?[45]

In addressing this question, Millar began by examining the possibility of the mercantile interest combining against government in pursuit of its aims. The merchant, unlike either the farmer or the landed gentleman, is prone to connecting his long-term interest with the fate of his 'brethren', and is

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[42] Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, p. 216.

[43] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 102.

[44] John Millar, *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (London, 1771), p. 187.

[45] For Millar's reaction to these events, see John Craig, 'Account of the Life and Writings of John Millar, Esq.', in John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (Edinburgh, 4th edn., 1806), pp. cii–ciii.

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accordingly prepared to 'join with those of the same profession . . . in promoting measures for the benefit of their trade'. Millar further observes that

> the prevalence of this great mercantile association in Britain, has, in the course of the present century, become gradually more and more conspicuous. The clamour and tumultuary proceedings of the populace in the great towns are capable of penetrating the inmost recesses of administration, of intimidating the boldest minister, and of displacing the most presumptuous favourite of the back-stairs. The voice of the mercantile interest, never fails to command the attention of government, and when firm and unanimous, is even able to control and direct the deliberations of the national councils.[46]

But the growth of this mercantile association capable of directing national policy in defence of its own interests was matched by a general and protracted shift in the principles of association which bind the members of modern commercial polities: an adjustment, we might say, of the 'spring' of government to new circumstances. These new circumstances helped to introduce contract in the place of status as the principle upon which society was founded and, together with this, wealth as such grew capable of inspiring that complacent subordination and emulation which birth alone had been accustomed to expect. While order might still depend on rank, it did not depend on titles. The 'force of habit', Millar argued, 'is much more effectual in confirming the authority derived from wealth than that which is founded on personal qualities'.[47] As wealth changed hands, the rich could command the respect formerly paid exclusively to the great. But, more generally, as the habitual deference which had regulated the composition of society began to be qualified, the Whig principle of 'utility' began to supplant the Tory principle of 'authority' as the effective spring of government: allegiance, in other words, was steadily being founded upon considerations of general interest rather than on the bare respect due to superiority.[48]

But of course for Burke 'utility', or the common welfare, could be reckoned a Whig principle only on condition that public interest was seen to comprise the alliance between talents, gentlemen and magnates. This effectively meant that government in a modern territorial state could discharge its duty only by retaining a landed aristocracy; that subordinate contracts were possible only on account of the sobering and stabilizing impact of hereditary privilege; and that subordination was inconceivable without a prominent nobility. It was Millar's belief that the expansion of commerce, especially where it is accompanied by a general diffusion of learning, makes public discussion of the aims

[46] John Millar, *An Historical View of the English Government from the Settlement of the Saxons in Britain to the Revolution in 1688, To Which are Subjoined, Some Dissertations Connected with the History of the Government from the Revolution to the Present Time* (4 vols.; London, 1803), IV, pp. 136–37.

[47] *Ibid.*, p. 292.

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 286–7.

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and uses of government inevitable. Under these conditions, opinion is bound to favour those political arrangements which tend towards the equalization of ranks and a more general enjoyment of privileges. 'Hence', Millar declared, 'the distinction between the old and the new Whigs, by which a famous political character endeavoured lately to cover the desertion of his former tenets; and hence too a pretty general suspicion, that many nominal adherents of that party have become secret admirers of democracy.'[49] The division between 'old' and 'new' had come with the French Revolution, which was in due course seen as promoting the 'principle of utility' at the expense of all habitual reverence for authority. 'Philosophy', Millar commented, 'triumphed at length over ancient customs.'[50] But while the progress of knowledge through the ranks of society tended towards the promotion of the common interest, it was still in Millar's view liable to grow dangerous where it encouraged the suspension of all customary ties of obedience.[51] But there is a real difference between conceding the necessity of authority for the consolidation of utility, and the defence of privilege as the very essence of public utility. It was possible, in other words, after 1791, to commit oneself to the belief in a genuine distinction between the old and the new Whigs. It was Burke himself who advertised his commitment to the older creed.

## III

From early in his career, Burke consistently traced the principles of old Whiggism to the Whigs under Anne, who had apparently understood the maxims of party loyalty, who had taken private honour to be the foundation of public trust, and who had appreciated the relation between aristocratic freedom and social virtue. 'In one of the most fortunate periods in our history', Burke wrote in his *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, 'this country was governed by a *connexion*; I mean, the great connexion of Whigs in the reign of Queen Anne.'[52] Political connection, we learn, is built upon fidelity and friendship freed from the corrupting influence of faction precisely because they are embodied in men who bring the generosity and the liberality of a gentlemanly life onto the public stage. It was in this vein that Burke, thirty years later, argued for the embodiment of political institutions in people who inspire veneration and affection: 'To make us love our country, our country must be lovely.'[53] Loveliness is connected with the dignity and authority of the great, to whom we are in turn connected by the ties of local affection and with whom we associate that composure which facilitates the exercise of

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 307n.

[50] *Ibid.*, p. 308.

[51] See *ibid.*, p. 310.

[52] *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, in *Writings and Speeches*, ed. Langford, II, p. 316.

[53] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 129.

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virtue: 'To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections.'[54]

As the multitude are thereby imbued with a sense of national dignity, so they are taught to respect the virtues artfully displayed by men of quality. The state is most appropriately represented by interests connected with the values animated by the 'little platoon' — gentility, conviviality, liberality — while the stability and perdurance of those values in society maintain the existence of a virtuous moral discipline. But the stability and durability of virtue is itself secured by its foundation in the permanency of landed wealth. Extensive property in land liberates its possessor from envy and dependence. It is, in effect, the material basis of self-government and a necessary qualification for the government of others. As indigence is never the master of circumstance — Junto publicists like Addison and Steele had said as much on innumerable occasions — it is never a secure basis for virtue.[55]

The diffusion of property into many hands, it seemed reasonable to conclude, tends towards a dissipation of virtue. It tempts desire without securing justice; it severs passion from the public interest. The sense of justice comes to be keenly appreciated in society, not so much because propriety has achieved a degree of delicate refinement, but because property retards the transformation of ambition into rapacity. With the advent of the French Revolution, Burke could believe himself to have encountered a very real confirmation of the fact that social energy, in the form of talent and ability, would be dangerously unleashed when it escaped the conservative and moderating influence of accumulated masses of landed wealth:

> Nothing is a due and adequate representation of a state, that does not represent its ability, as well as its property. But as ability is a vigorous and active principle, and as property is sluggish, inert and timid, it never can be safe from the invasions of ability, unless it be, out of all proportion, predominant in the representation. It must be represented too in great masses of accumulation, or it is not rightly protected. The characteristic essence of property, formed out of the combined principles of its acquisition and conservation, is to be *unequal*. The great masses therefore which excite envy, and tempt rapacity, must be put out of the possibility of danger. Then they form a natural rampart about the lesser properties in all their gradations. The same quantity of property, which is by the natural course of things divided among many, has not the same operation. Its defensive power is weakened as it is diffused. In this diffusion each man's portion is less than what, in the eagerness of his desires, he may flatter himself to obtain by dissipating the

[54] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[55] See Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (5 vols., Oxford, 1965), II, p. 463; no. 248.

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> accumulations of others. The Plunder of the few would indeed give but a share inconceivably small in the distribution to the many.[56]

For passion to be tamed and harmonized with public interest, the desires of the many must be tempered and moderated by the property of the few. It was with the Whigs under Anne that gentlemen learned how best to give these social arrangements an enduring political expression — how political combination could be promoted for the defence of liberty and how ability could be harnessed to property through friendship. They learned how, in the words of Addison's 'The Campaign', cited in Burke's *Thoughts*, virtue and liberty could unite 'From long faith, and friendship's holy ties'.[57]

However, while the union of virtue, liberty and property secured the constitution in Britain, their disunion brought about Revolution in France. It was Burke's view that by 1790 French democracy had practically completed the process of converting itself into a federation of oligarchic republics precariously united by the tyranny of Paris. The democratic principle, under the general heading of natural rights, had originally been established while the objects of ambition — wealth and office — were still being held out to attract the newly enfranchised masses. The spectacle of gain naturally whetted the appetites of an expectant population, eager to realize their nominal rights in the form of actual power, but requiring management and regulation if the state was to survive as a single body. 'Their confederations, their *spectacles*, their civic feasts, and their enthusiasm, I take no notice of', Burke proclaimed; 'They are nothing but mere tricks'.[58] Nothing, that is, but fictions of political integrity erected in the face of an altogether more palpable disintegration. The only instruments available to bolster political unity were the army and the revenue. In other words, France could be maintained as a national sovereignty only by the dual expedients of an enforced paper currency and the force of arms.[59]

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[56] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 102. It is noticeable that the dynamic relationship between the 'passions' and the 'interests', discussed at length by Albert Hirschman in his *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977), takes the form in this passage of a contest between ability and property.

[57] Joseph Addison, 'The Campaign' 1.40, cited in *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, p. 317. For a more general discussion of friendship, see Addison's treatment of Cicero's *De Amicitia*, in the *Spectator*, I, 289; no. 68: '*Tully* was the first who observed, That Friendship imposes Happiness and abates Misery, by the doubling of our Joy and dividing of our Grief.'

[58] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 237.

[59] The classic treatment of Burke's reaction to the system of *assignats* is J.G.A. Pocock's 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution', in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1983). See also Pocock's Introduction to his edition of Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis, 1987).

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But if the paper tokens of confiscated Church property were to be imported as one crucial ingredient of national solvency — in both senses of that word — power would unavoidably come into the hands of the managers and conductors of circulation together with the agents entrusted with mortgaging Church plunder. 'The property of France', Burke had declared, 'does not govern it.'[60] More than that, property had itself become entirely 'volatalized' by tacking the value of land to the vagaries of a speculative market in paper currency: 'The great object of these politics is to metamorphose France, from a great kingdom into one great play-table.'[61] In Britain, between about 1694 and 1720, there had steadily evolved an alliance between the monied men and aristocratic court managers which contributed to stability at home and security abroad, and which left power squarely in the hands of sober and moderate politicians while still connecting all energy and ability to the state. But in France after 1789, with the exclusive empowerment of the directors of currency, power came to be settled in the towns amongst those acclimatized to the wizardry of financial markets and able to confer rapidly in pursuit of speculative profits. Sociability in general was reduced to the mean and shabby proportions of contractual exchange.

In accordance with this, Burke believed that French society and manners were being conquered through the medium of market business, which had been perfected by the combined efforts of 'burghers' and financiers left with no one to emulate but themselves:

> In towns combination is natural. The habits of burghers, their occupations, their diversion, their business, their idleness, continually bring them into mutual contact. Their virtues and their vices are sociable; they are always in garrison; and they come embodied and half disciplined into the hands of those who mean to form them for civil, or for military action.[62]

At one point in the *Reflections* Burke announced that 'among the Revolutions in France, must be reckoned a considerable revolution in their ideas of politeness'.[63] In fact, all politeness had effectively been annihilated — esteem had been debased, emulation corrupted and gentility extinguished. Social discipline had been suspended, and the doctrine of the Rights of Man had proved itself inimical to the noble virtues cultivated by the free correspondence of independent gentlemen. The jealousies of men 'in garrison' predominated over the generosity and friendship of men in clubs; an ignoble oligarchy of desperadoes crowded out the dignity and ease of aristocratic liberty.

The 'combination' arising from business transacted in French towns is manifestly different from the 'connexion' which links the disparate interests composing British society — landed, mercantile and monied — into a

[60] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 103.
[61] *Ibid.*, pp. 238, 240.
[62] *Ibid.*, p. 242.
[63] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

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harmonious whole. While liberality animates the latter, need confines the former: individuality and autonomy are necessarily compromised where social intercourse is conducted in terms of mutual want. It is in this context that we ought to consider Burke's remark that 'combination and arrangement' are impossible amongst 'country-people'.[64] They do not, in the first instance, have the benefit of that geographical proximity to the market which participation in the game of speculative trading requires. They are not constantly available for negotiation according to the electric fluctuation in rates of return:

> Anything in the nature of incorporation is impracticable amongst them. Hope, fear, alarm, jealousy, the ephemerous tale that does its business and dies in a day, all these things, which are the reins and spurs by which leaders check or urge the minds of followers, are not easily employed, or hardly at all, amongst scattered people.[65]

A shift in the balance of property had been accompanied by a shift in the balance of power. The nobility of the country might — as the greater gentry in Britain had done — employ their property to direct the affairs of the town. But their credit is now in the hands of financiers and burghers; their power of purchasing has been radically curtailed by the financial trade of the towns: 'If the country gentlemen attempt an influence through the mere income of their property, what is it to that of those who have ten times their income to sell, and who can ruin their property by bringing their plunder to meet it at market?'[66] But combination amongst the gentlemen of the country, we must remember, is only 'in a manner' impossible. They may happily pursue their interest in business and affairs, and combine for political advantage. But it is in the nature of their station, and in the disposition arising from that station, not to sacrifice their substance to the pursuit: 'Combine them by all the art you can, and all the industry, they are always dissolving into individuality.'[67] Their conferences are never conducted at the expense of the values of autonomy and friendship: their standing frees them from the degrading circumstances of necessity and fear, jealousy and alarm. Their freedom, it seems clear, is their virtue.

The connection between freedom and virtue in modern states had been given fairly extensive treatment by Ferguson in his *Essay on the History of Civil Society*. In reviewing the book for the *Annual Register*, Burke objected to its celebration of the Spartan system of manners and government, but still hailed the volume as a significant contribution to the science of politics.[68] What Burke took that significance to consist in is not impossible to determine. Ferguson's attention in the *Essay* was directed towards, amongst other things, the means by which the principles of government — particularly the principle

[64] *Ibid.*, p. 242.

[65] *Ibid.*

[66] *Ibid.*

[67] *Ibid.*

[68] *Annual Register* (1767), pp. 307–16.

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of monarchy — were corrupted. In territorial monarchies, the sovereign owes his authority 'to the founding titles and dazzling equipage which he exhibits in public'.[69] But while the principle of honour served to incorporate the members of large states into a single community without appealing to their public spirit, it was still peculiarly prone to degeneration if the values supporting the system of honour were to be seriously undermined:

> If those principles of honour which save the individual from servility in his own person, or from becoming the engine of oppression in the hands of another, should fail; if they should give way to the maxims of commerce, to the refinements of a supposed philosophy, or to the misplaced ardours of a republican spirit; if they are betrayed by the cowardice of subjects, or subdued by the ambition of princes; what must become of the nations of Europe?[70]

As far as Burke was concerned, the French Revolution brought about the realization of this imagined failure in demonic form: politics did, in fact, give way to a form of 'commerce' unredeemed by honour; prudence was indeed replaced by the 'refinements of a supposed philosophy'; and society did become infused with the 'misplaced ardours of a republican spirit'.

For all his sympathy with the civic virtues founded on the politics of classical city-states, Ferguson was keenly aware of the dangers involved in introducing anachronistic versions of republican equality into the extended territorial units over which modern governments in their various forms presided. For the maintenance of civility in large and comparatively dispersed communities, honour had to take the place of ancient virtue as the spring of modern politics. The problem, however, was that in this setting it was possible to imagine ambition being cut loose from the restraints imposed upon it by the quiet workings of gentlemanly elevation: once the means of social advancement lost the corrective restraints imposed upon it by a regular system of social esteem, manners would be corrupted, politeness would disappear, and the 'maxims of commerce' would predominate over the principles of virtuous liberality. Europe would be peopled by a collection of what Steele had termed 'Mechanick' beings: usurious, dependent, desperate and sordid. Only by elevating a certain order of citizens would society itself be delivered from a condition of indigent necessity to one of magnanimous liberty: 'We look for elevation of sentiment', Ferguson pointed out, 'and liberality of mind, among those orders of citizens, who, by their condition, and their fortune, are relieved from sordid cares and attentions.'[71] Just as only those whose fortune had released them from the drudgery of common 'cares' were capable of self-government, so only those who clearly exhibited the characteristics of

[69] Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1767), p. 104.

[70] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

[71] *Ibid.*, pp. 284–5.

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self-government could be trusted with the government of others: 'How can he who has confined his views to his own subsistence or preservation, be intrusted with the conduct of nations? Such men, when admitted to deliberate on matters of state, bring to its councils confusion and tumult, or servility and corruption.'[72]

Of course, for Burke it was not only people shackled to the brute materiality of existence who were poorly qualified for the comprehensive business of public action and deliberation. That very comprehensiveness presupposed leisure to acquire learning; it required a certain aloofness from the narrow confines of professional occupations and interests: hence Burke's contempt for the menial lawyers — 'mechanical, merely instrumental members of that profession'[73] — who had left their seats as clerks in provincial offices for seats in the national assembly. They could do no better than deliberate in the style of country attorneys accustomed to the proceedings of petty local jurisdictions. They were, in essence, incapable of raising their sights above litigious squabbles to the broad horizon of national politics. As he wrote in the *Reflections*:

> It cannot escape observation, that when men are too much confined to professional and faculty habits, and, as it were, inveterate in the recurrent employment of that narrow circle, they are rather disabled than qualified for whatever depends on the knowledge of mankind, on experience in mixed affairs, on a comprehensive connected view of the various complicated external and internal interests which go to the formation of that multifarious thing called a state.[74]

Now that sociability had been confounded with the commerce between the degenerate oligarchs of the *bourg*, and now that the state was at the disposal of professional bureaucratic functionaries dwarfed by the sublime business of public administration, France could be sutured together only by the emergency precautions of degenerate men.

Dignity, elevation and generosity had disappeared from politics. Power could no longer be considered 'gentle' nor obedience 'liberal': 'All the pleasing illusions . . . which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason'.[75] In the absence of these enabling 'illusions', law is left with no support but terror, and obedience becomes a matter of sheer expedience to be discontinued when the convenience ceases. Society becomes peopled with individuals who engage one another from motives of fear or pride, but never from affection. France is brought under the jurisdiction of naked power, unadorned and uncompromising, 'not standing on its own honour, and

[72] *Ibid.*, p. 286.

[73] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 93.

[74] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

[75] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

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the honour of those who obey it'.[76] The common sense of justice perishes with the sense of honour. But in allowing the principle of honour to be exploded, the Revolutionaries of France were also consigning the historical capital which had been its original foundation to oblivion: it was, after all, the principle of honour — 'This mixed system of opinion and sentiment' — which had its origin in 'ancient chivalry'.[77] As Ferguson had argued — with Robertson and Millar[78] — European manners, uniting courage with compassion, may be traced to the chivalric figure of the Christian knight, the sanctified hero contending for renown above spoil and moved as much to acts of charity as to feats of valour: 'The point of honour, the prevalence of gallantry in our conversations, and our theatres . . . are undoubtedly remains of this antiquated system'.[79]

But unlike those whom Burke had branded 'our oeconomical politicians',[80] Ferguson's emphasis fell less on the tendency of commerce to soften distinctions, and more on the mechanisms by which distinctions themselves became agents of the civilizing process. By removing those agents from the field, the process itself would be corrupted.[81] It was, in Burke's phrase, that 'generous loyalty', that 'proud submission', which abated ferocity, which humbled and subdued the fierceness of pride, and which co-opted human sentiment and opinion into the polite world of social esteem.[82] From this perspective, Sieyès's injunction in the *Essai sur les privilèges* — 'laissez le Public dispenser librement les témoignages de son estime'[83] — had the appearance of a declaration of war:

> Au moment où le Prince imprime à citoyen le caractere de privilégié, il ouvre l'ame de ce citoyen à un intérêt particulier, & la ferme plus ou moins aux inspirations de l'intérêt commun. L'ideé de Patrie se resserre pour lui; elle se renferme dans la caste où il est adopté . . . Alors naît dans son ame . . .

[76] *Ibid.*, p. 129.

[77] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

[78] See William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V, With a View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century* (2 vols., Dublin, 1762), I, pp. 62–3; and John Millar, *Distinction of Ranks*, pp. 57–62.

[79] Ferguson, *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, p. 311.

[80] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 130. For a discussion of Burke's debt to, and dissent from, 'Hume, Robertson, Smith and Millar', on the priority of manners over production and exchange as an instrument of civilization, see once again J.G.A. Pocock, 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution', in *Virtue, Commerce, History*, pp. 197–9.

[81] For a contrary view, see Robertson's *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, I, p. 71: 'Commerce tends to wear off those prejudices which maintain distinction and animosity between nations. It softens and polishes the manners of men. It unites them by one of the strongest of all ties, the desire of supplying their mutual wants.'

[82] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 127.

[83] Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Essai sur les privilèges* (Paris, 1788), p. 10.

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un désir insatiable de domination. Ce désir, malheureusement trop analogue à la constitution humaine, est une vraie maladie anti-sociale.[84]

It is from this position that Sieyès could conclude that the nobility, whose 'droits civils' made them a people apart in the nation, were 'imperium in imperio'.[85] The battle lines had been drawn; and — in Burke's analysis — the conflict, deprived of the meliorating codes of humanity and gallantry which had dampened the ferocity of European warfare, would surpass the brutalities of the Reformation wars.

It was Burke's view that one could not impose limits upon the '*abstract* competence of supreme power'. Limits, however, were imposed upon the '*moral* competence' of governments to the extent that they were brought into society with the people whom they governed.[86] For that process of restraint to function, the manners of society had to be compatible with moral generosity. This article has attempted to capture Burke's sense of the conditions under which moral generosity could flourish in society and the conditions under which it would be destroyed. The Revolution in France stood for Burke as an object lesson in how to extinguish social benevolence and erect a political despotism in the wake of its demise. In the *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* Burke argued that manners 'are more important than laws'. Indeed upon manners, laws substantially depend. But while manners might assist in the composition of society, they were also capable of being debased and barbarized: 'Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us.'[87] When society is reduced to a process of utilitarian exchange, it is no society at all. When the public is permitted freely to allocate the marks of its esteem, honour becomes subject to a free and equal competition. Under these circumstances, honour will be forced continually to vary the 'standard of its coin'. It is then that the very constitution of human beings becomes infected by 'une vraie maladie anti-sociale', and not, as Sieyès had it, when princes control the bestowal of privileges. Those who seek to level, Burke had claimed, extinguish in themselves all nobility of spirit. When an attempt is made to diffuse power over all the members of a community, those who are *vertute et honore majores* are sacrificed to the greater number and, in the process, virtue and honour themselves are left to perish.

*Richard Bourke* QUEEN MARY AND WESTFIELD COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

[84] *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

[85] Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?* (Paris, 3rd edn., 1789), p. 13.

[86] Burke, *Reflections*, p. 71.

[87] *Writings and Speeches*, ed. Langford, IX, p. 242.

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