

## THE SKEPTIC'S BURKE

### *Reflections on the Revolution in France, 1790-1990*

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The world of contingency and political combination is much larger than we are apt to imagine.

—Edmund Burke

#### I. INTERPRETATIONS: WAS BURKE RIGHT?

Two hundred years since Burke published the *Reflections* we may still pose the question: Did Burke win the debate? One would not have thought it. His flamboyant rhetoric has been identified as the classic site of a backward-looking traditionalism, eternally waving Marie Antoinette's allegedly torn sheets at a modernization and progress ushered in by revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Burke did not expect to win. One could almost say he anticipated marginalization. "If a new order is coming on," he realized, *his* "political opinions must pass away as dreams."<sup>2</sup> He spoke often enough of opponents' views as "dreams," but he saw that there was, nevertheless, a choice of orders. The new order may be fostered by dreams but become a new reality:

If a great change is to be made in human affairs, the minds of men will be fitted to it. The general opinions and feelings will draw that way. . . . Then they who persist in opposing this mighty current in human affairs will appear rather to resist the decrees of Providence itself.<sup>3</sup>

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*AUTHOR'S NOTE: This essay commemorates the bicentennial of the publication of Burke's famous book and also the American Political Science Association presidency of the author's teacher, Judith N. Shklar, whose comments (and also those of David Johnston) found as usual their mark.*

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A sea change has brought in new tides of opinion. The dramatic events of 1989-90, the collapse of communism in Western countries (and also the Gulf War which marks the end of the end of history) will no doubt come to play their role. The changes I want to record predate these events and are scholarly or address broad changes in the Western intellectual community. An extension of an amended theory of totalitarianism from the Russian to the French Revolution and a displacement of the attribute "modernizer" from the figure of the Jacobin revolutionary to a new heterodox figure, the *ancien régime* bourgeois aristocrat, has sponsored a new historiography of the Revolution. These currents of thought are perversely allied with internal transformations along the right-left spectrum, which might renew conservative hostility to Burke (as a historicist skeptic), rehabilitate Burke's old reputation as a liberal patriot, and awaken the left to a peculiar convergence of Burke's and their sympathies.

The revisionist historians include François Furet, author of *Interpreting the French Revolution* (who is allied loosely with Mona Ozouf, Keith Baker, and others, collaborators in *The Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*), Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, who wrote *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, and Simon Schama, author of *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*.<sup>4</sup> Schama is closer to a Burkean rejection of the Revolution en bloc than Furet who wants to pit 1789, which he likes, against 1793, which he detests. In his account, the Revolution simply went off the road, to invoke the automobile metaphor employed by Furet's one-time collaborator, Denis Richet.<sup>5</sup>

Furet and Schama highlight Burkean themes without acknowledging Burke as a specific source. Furet's central point is non-Burkean and even progressive in the old manner, but it leads to a Burkean theme. 1789 conferred a special privilege, Furet thinks, on his native country: "France was the country that, through the Revolution, invented democratic culture."<sup>6</sup> The Revolution's "historical importance lies in the one trait that was unique to it, since this 'unique' trait was to become universal: it was the first experiment with democracy." This discovery is unconnected to economy or class: "Neither capitalism nor the bourgeoisie needed revolutions to appear in and dominate the history of the major European nations in the nineteenth century."<sup>7</sup>

Yet, Furet argues, the democratic culture discovered in the Revolution was an ambivalent heritage. In expressing the trouble with this heritage, he reaches toward Burke's startling claims about the novelty of Jacobin politics. The Revolution discovered and legitimized in its political factions a form of egalitarian association, unconnected to interest or institution and sustained

by talk alone. Radical democratic talk, straining against the paradox of its own egalitarianism to legitimate leadership, created power without the embarrassment of electoral procedures to connect the talk to an electorate, that is to say, to a people. Jacobinism was a mechanism, Furet argues, which in the "guise of the 'People' took the place of both civil society and the state." In the culture fostered by this "mythical identity" of the people with power, one finds "the matrix of totalitarianism."<sup>8</sup>

Furet separates the Enlightenment, in particular, Rousseau, from Jacobin readers like Robespierre: "The Jacobins were an unforeseen product of the course of Revolution."<sup>9</sup> Furet's use of the Arendtian phrase, totalitarianism, was intended, however, to reconnect two revolutions, 1789 and 1917, but to erase from the connection a positive valency supplied by Marxism. In socialist thought, the French Revolution became a promise, not merely a conclusion, a promise redeemed in 1917. Pitting 1789 and its own promise of rights and representative government against a Jacobin 1793 was also a way to sever 1917 from 1789. By contrast, 1793 looked backward and forward, back to the heritage of absolutism (now assuming a democratized form) and forward to a totalitarian 1917: "By way of Bolshevism the Jacobin party enjoyed an illustrious twentieth century."<sup>10</sup> For Furet, the political good of democracy, sustained by rights, elections, and constitutional procedures, is located dangerously close to the evil of totalitarianism, which hides behind democratic forms to undermine democratic content.

Schama agrees with this portrait of Jacobinism and pushes the debate into two further controversies.<sup>11</sup> It is one thing to accept that revolutionary violence and the Jacobin Terror were not merely "circumstantial" (i.e., legitimate responses to anarchy and to internal and external threats) but basic to the functioning of the revolution from the beginning.<sup>12</sup> It is still quite another to suggest that the Revolution could and ought to have been avoided. Schama condemns 1789. He has unkind things to say about even the liberal aristocratic revolutionaries, especially about them, because it was people like the foolish Lafayette who let matters get out of hand.<sup>13</sup> The Burkean themes implicit in these discussions are the question of reform short of revolution and the question of Rousseauism.

France was reformable; Schama thinks it was financial policy, not financial structure, that failed. Before and after 1787-89, French financial problems were greater, but French governments managed to finesse them.<sup>14</sup> The problem with the French monarchy continued to be the problem with the Revolution (and with France until 1870). They failed to develop representative institutions to correspond to a democratic culture.<sup>15</sup> Burke's lament was similar. France had an ancient constitution which was reformable, though it

had almost been destroyed by absolute government. (Burke was already, so to speak, Tocquevillian.) Burke approved of the Revolution up to the calling of the Estates General and wished it had enacted the recommendations of the *cahiers* instead of pursuing a futile debate about sovereignty that made the representative government it legitimately sought impossible to achieve.<sup>16</sup>

Representative government was not only a practical reform eminently necessary to an arbitrary rule that wished to legitimate itself (a point on which Burke and Schama concur);<sup>17</sup> representation was rendered both more necessary and more difficult by the cult of romantic sensibility that had taken hold in France. Rousseau expressed this cult perfectly (Burke and Schama believe), and therefore it is to Rousseauism that Schama returns following the tracks of Burke's pamphlet wars in the 1790s.<sup>18</sup>

The new historiography of the Revolution returns to the old themes of the *Reflections* and Burke's other writings: (1) Jacobinism as a novel kind of despotism, today called totalitarianism; (2) the Revolution as unnecessary and reform as plausible; and (3) Rousseauist sensibility and its contribution to revolutionary events.

Not only have historians discovered a revolution that looks more like Burke's revolution, internal debates within political and social theory have focused on new themes that enter into a reassessment of Burke. Conservatives who were close readers have always distrusted Burke. The issue that frames their attention is precisely that highlighted by new forms of modern skepticism. Deconstructionist, post-Nietzschean, postmodern philosophies seek to expose the absence of sure foundations for dearly held moral and political beliefs. It seems likely that Burke did not believe in foundations either, though the "decent drapery" of his well-wrought traditionalist rhetoric helps to veil this particular kinship with the *philosophe* and the post-Lockean skeptic. Burke is implicitly Lockean and Humean in his epistemology and psychology. Consequently the foundations of political order can lie in nothing stronger than the memory and habits of its adherents.

Burke puts peculiar pressure on the very idea of a distinction between nature and habits or contingencies. "Art is man's nature," he claims, raising questions about the grounds for an appeal from convention to nature and about the relationship between the contingencies that make up our history and identity.<sup>19</sup> Burke observes that "a common soldier, a child, a girl at the door of an inn, have changed the face of fortune, and," he adds, "almost of nature."<sup>20</sup> The "almost" shields the timid reader from a radical claim: There is no telos in history; it exposes no natural end, progressive or otherwise. Lives may be integrated by traditions, but traditions lack inner necessity. Nature is what we have contingently inherited. Its future, the future of our

nature, is adumbrated in another suggestion: "The world of contingency and political combination is much larger than we are apt to imagine."<sup>21</sup> Pinning our nature on unimagined contingencies, Burke goes further than his radical rivals, which is why he draws back from their social projects, lest we "be obliged to pass . . . 'through great varieties of untried being,' " a process likely to be accompanied by "fire and blood."<sup>22</sup>

I would guess that Leo Strauss's and also Harvey Mansfield, Jr.'s anxieties about Burke are motivated by these considerations.<sup>23</sup> Both are ambivalent about a thinker whose conservative credentials are unchallenged by those who look only at his mastery of the rhetoric of natural law and Anglican social theory.<sup>24</sup> Strauss's chapter on Burke is strategically placed at the end of *Natural Right and History*, which is a degenerative history of political philosophy, with the worst coming last. In this chapter, Burke is praised as a conservative, but as in the psychobiographies, Burke is twinned with his fellow philosophe and enemy, Rousseau. Burke was, Strauss concludes, too concerned with "individuality" in all its forms, though happily, "the spirit of 'sound antiquity' " present in Burke's writings saved him (or is it his reader?) from a modern natural right almost indistinguishable from a historicism which denies the grounds of right.<sup>25</sup> Mansfield comes to a similar conclusion: "Property by prescription implies government without a founding. . . . The best claim to rule comes . . . by securing the *abandonment of rival claims*."<sup>26</sup>

It is possible to affirm as well as reject a "deconstructionist" Burke. Conservatives are eloquent about the need for transcendent foundations without being able to locate any, and it may be that foundations sufficient for our endeavors can be found (and chosen or rejected) precisely where Burke claimed to find them in that "narrow scheme of relations called our country" or in "inheritance" variously defined rather than in a shaky universalism, which Burke once described as the experience of being "lost in the waste expanse and boundless barren ocean of homicide philanthropy." I take it anyway that David Bromwich's *A Choice of Inheritance* plants itself on the other side of the political fence from Strauss and yet attempts to affirm on behalf of liberalism Strauss's understanding of Burkean skepticism.<sup>27</sup> Bromwich's Burke is preoccupied by the "displacement" of people of various descriptions who are forced out of their inheritance by detached cosmopolitans. Inheritance expresses our nature. We have, nevertheless, "a choice of inheritance," Bromwich says, quoting the magisterial passages from the *Reflections*. This means that inheritance and nature must be chosen in order to be operational.<sup>28</sup>

One argument for a liberal appropriation of Burke does no credit to either and is, I think, false. Burke and the liberal, it has been suggested, exemplify

bad faith. Their positions are compromises between the alternatives of traditionalism and radicalism. On the conservatives' own account above, Burke *cannot* be a conservative. MacPherson's little book on Burke explores the other alternative. Burke's arguments for distributive shares can be aligned to Rawlsian arguments, MacPherson thinks, but their common justifications for inequality give them a bad conscience and an illegitimate politics. To quote MacPherson on the reasons for this is to explode the myth of liberal compromise and to demonstrate the differences between then and now: "The egalitarian principle is the official ideology of the communist world and the Third World, and their acceptance of it lies uneasily on the conscience of liberals in the Western World."<sup>29</sup> Soviets who accept liberal forms of inequality and the despotic egalitarian rhetoric of Middle Eastern despots reaffirm the coherence of liberal positions.

In any event, many radicals have forsaken Marx for Nietzsche. Their politics are less inspired by threats to equality than by threats to diversity. They have their own grounds for making anti-Jacobin arguments. If by way of the Frankfurt School and Foucault, it is modernity itself which reveals a quasi-totalitarian face, why should not Burke, the marginalized prophet of counterrevolution, and hence of counter modernity, become a plausible sage for this species of radicalism?

One reason why not is that Burke can just as easily be positioned as the champion of the modernizers. His sympathy for the bourgeois aristocrats of the *ancien régime* was not based on the belief that they were the victims of revolutionary modernization. He believed they made better modernizers than the Jacobins. There are, alas, many descriptions of modernity. A left politics that rejects a universalizing Jacobin state but accepts commercial exchange and capitalist production within a complex constitutional order could call itself Burkean, for it was from this stance that Burke extended his sympathies, often to political underdogs, the Catholic Irish, Indians exploited by the East India company, the American rebels.<sup>30</sup>

Iain Hampsher-Monk hints at a Burkean left when he says that Burke's politics are "still a challenge to today's heirs of enlightenment rationalism," a rationalism which he thinks lies behind a "communism and capitalism" as "immensely destructive agents of modernization." He assures us that "Burke was no socialist," and yet he seems to think that the socialist and Burke have much to communicate about.<sup>31</sup>

Socialism as punishment for the sins of rationalism is not to my taste. I opt for the liberal Burke. Nevertheless, in a world defined in terms of a predatory administrative rationality and its threat to our "inheritance" broadly understood, Burke is not the most implausible political philosopher for the

left. He must be at least as plausible as Nietzsche, who is more conservative about inequality and representative government and lacks Burke's sympathy for the underdog.

My views on Burke are informed by three distinct interpretations of him. As these interpretations appear to share only a view of Burke as modern or quasi-modern, it may be useful to comment briefly on them and their interconnections. I have already said quite enough about a school of thought that brings together conservatives and liberals (Strauss, Mansfield, and Bromwich) to look at the philosophical grounds of Burke's beliefs, and so I will pass on to the other two schools of thought, those interested in Burke's biography and those concerned with his views on political economy.

Commentators fascinated with Burke's personality, or persona, discover counterintuitive claims about Burke's allegiances. Conor Cruise O'Brien begins this line of speculation by writing sensibly about Burke as an Irish Catholic outsider to the Anglican English establishment.<sup>32</sup> Burke's career as a double agent receives a new twist in Isaac Kramnick's biography, which discovers surplus or unjustified "rage" in the philosopher and accounts for it as issuing from sexual and class ambivalence. Burke was a bourgeois required by his position and ambition to defend a feudal order against cultural radicals in England and France to whom he felt a secret affinity, perhaps in more than one sense.<sup>33</sup> Bruce Smith drops, happily, the sexual speculation, but he finds in Burke's persona a way to attack conservatism as neurosis. Burke cannot acknowledge the ambition in himself and projects it on to Jacobin, and other, opponents. "Burkean conservatism was a plea for forgetting"; this it was, but it was never Burke, I argue, who forgot.<sup>34</sup>

A third group of interpreters focuses on the substance of Burke's theory of society, especially as this touches on property, political economy, and its relation to authority. For these commentators, landed property and bourgeois commerce are not mutually exclusive terms, and both enter into a complex relationship with unpropertied persons of "ability" subordinated but essential to the propertied establishment. This is the modernizing Burke. J.G.A. Pocock is at one with C. B. MacPherson in arguing that on the question of the promotion of commerce in a liberal regime, "Burke was to the last a man of his modern age, with little nostalgia in his make-up."<sup>35</sup>

Though an exponent of a left Burkean critique of modernity, Iain Hampsher-Monk similarly bases his interpretation of Burke on the philosopher's attentiveness to the "political economy of empire." Ireland, America, India, and free trade—"there runs the theme of empire and how to accommodate it to domestic politics."<sup>36</sup> This is an interesting suggestion. The French Revolution is not even, as the author thinks, an exception to this claim for a career-long

preoccupation with economy and empire. The Jacobin confiscations did not bankrupt France but secured it a basis for conquest. The Revolution was also a continuation by other means, Burke came to think, of the French state elites' ambition for external hegemony, now released from traditional constraints of a propertied establishment.

The biographers are not wrong to concentrate on Burke's "doubles," but they are misled when they conclude that Burke was himself unaware of his complicity in them. The outsider who masters languages of power and authority corresponds to the philosopher who doubts these languages can be anchored outside themselves. A person well aware of the boundaries of the language of power, and of the colonies and distinct languages that lie beyond these boundaries, will be disposed to an almost Montesquian dread of empire because he will lack confidence in any universal language the empire must invoke to rule. He will not be, however, a romantic about colonies, whether Ireland and India or the uniqueness of anyone's inheritance, for he knows that the sons of Ireland wish to emigrate and that there are ways of stepping into a language of power from outside that suggested that languages are commensurable and not wholly alien.

Even the language of the Jacobins was not alien, as Burke well knew. Burke carefully situated himself as an exemplary man of talent into a theory of a complex play of forces in which ambitious talent was either tempered by the sluggishness of the propertied, who could not be "electrified" into action by mere talk, or triumphed over uncommunicative property and created a "monstrous" regime but also, possibly, a new order. Burke was perfectly aware of his kinship to the Jacobins, but this does not mean he was one. The double life that Burke could not affirm publicly had little relation to class or sexual ambivalence or to political compromises but was motivated by a Lockean skepticism. The fragilities he wished to veil were foundational. The languages in which we express our deepest commitments were not well anchored, he thought.

A person who believed there were truths of religion and truths of political order would be less troubled by their denial, for a providential history could scarcely be defeated by human illusions and an order written into the nature of things would reassert itself despite human error. Burke's conservatism was not motivated by transcendent beliefs but by their denial. For him, a way of life abandoned was truly lost.

Burke thought he lived in a world where every opinion was closely linked to every other. Maintaining those opinions, beginning with the religious, meant that life was an anxious game of dominos. Opinions all stood together



or all fell together. He got this image of the linked character of social life from an interpretation of Montesquieu's "esprit"; though, for Montesquieu, opinions and spheres of life were often delinked and stood or fell on their own. If Burke was a liberal, he was an anxious one for whom the opinions which sustain an ethos exhibit a fragile interdependency. Only when he despaired of English resistance to the French in the last years of his life could he write in a way that implied that men and women were individuals unconnected to a decaying regime but capable of sustaining it now from their own internally generated resources. By then, Burke was ready to explore other similarities to the political theory of his rivals than one which merely extracted individuals from their embeddedness in an ancient constitution (see the conclusion).

It may be useful to say a few words about the general presuppositions of the political theory that Burke confronts. Neither Burke nor his opponent is more modern than the other. Burke's theory legitimates intermediary structures which relate citizens to each other in ways that differentiate them; the opponent looks past institutions to focus on the similarities of isolated agents. An agent-centered perspective adopts the language of contract which underwrites the notion of the intellectual detachment of agents from one another and the present insufficiency of reasons they have for obeying one another. Also revealed through contract is the urgency of negotiation. Contractors must communicate. This contrasts with Burkean caution about the occasions for empowering talk and the occasions for ignoring talk. The language of contract reinforces the idea of the normalcy of persons whose opinions are unconnected to institutions and of situations in which cultural inheritance does not have a presumptive claim on an agent.

This is a world described by a line of thinkers that goes from Paine to Habermas. In it, the relatively plastic capacity of agents to communicate and to combine and recombine depends, a Burkean politics suggests, on untested metaphysical presumptions about the predispositions of men and women stripped of, or weaned away from, their inheritance. Burke fears the absence of restraint on unattached men and women (whereas we worry more about their passivity and indifference). Ambition has outlets in every society, but these act as constraints as well. Burke fears the ambition of the unpropertied more than that of the propertied, since the latter were relatively immune to talk and therefore not prone to change their opinions. Outside the normal conventions, it will be harder for the talkative and ambitious to sustain any intuitive sense of what is right for the very good reason that these intuitions are operative only within the boundaries of these conventions.

## II. THE REFLECTIONS, 1790-1990

Burke's classic work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, has for two hundred years highlighted the great events from its peculiar angle of vision, offering its dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy of revolution as the telos through which democratic modernity emerges. It was not Burke's sole response to the Revolution. A torrent of words spilled from Burke's pen in the last decade of his life in the form of reports on Parliamentary debates, book-length letters, prefaces and memorials, including the "Debate on Army Estimates" (1790); "Letter to a Member of the National Assembly," "An Appeal from New to Old Whigs," and "Thoughts on French Affairs" (1791); "Remarks on the Policy of the Allies with Respect to France" (1793); "Brissot's Address to His Constituents" (1794); "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity" (1795); "Letter to a Noble Lord" (1796); and the four massive "Letters on a Regicide Peace" (1796-97) — Letter I: "On the Overtures of Peace," Letter II: "Genius and Character of the French Revolution" (1796), Letter III: "Rupture of the Negotiation," and Letter IV: "To the Earl Fitzwilliam" (1796-97, unfinished).

The events in France forced Burke to articulate more fully than he might otherwise have done those views which now make up his political philosophy. While the elements of this philosophy are to be found in the *Reflections*, the later writings often provide instructive twists on the argument. More interesting are the tensions in his assembled opinions and the shifts discernible in his assessment of the Revolution, as it becomes a more stable force on the Continent and as the will of the English to resist weakens.

It should always be stressed how early in the Revolution Burke came to his views about it. The book was published in November 1790, with the composition begun in January or February of that year.<sup>37</sup> That is to say, Burke wrote the *Reflections* during the peaceful year of the Revolution, before the rise and fall of Girondins and Jacobins, before the French wars on European neighbors (on republics and monarchies alike), before the September (1792) Massacres and (almost) all the other bloody *journées*, before the civil war in the Vendée, before the abolition of the monarchy, the execution of the royal family, the parade of constitutions, and the cycles of anarchy and repression, before the terror, before Thermidor, and before Napoleon and his wars in Europe. Burke's *Reflections* was intended to warn and, therefore, to predict. No other philosophical writing on politics succeeded in predicting so accurately and with such relevant specificity the course of subsequent events. Certainly, Marx did not succeed to this degree.

Burke's training in philosophy and history were not sufficient to explain his prescience. He knew he was addressing something new, and the past was no guide: "Prudence in new cases can offer nothing on grounds of retrospect."<sup>38</sup>

Surprisingly, his first recorded sentiments on the revolt register a note of mild affirmation. The news of the fall of the Bastille provoked in him the thought, "The spirit [of] it is impossible not to admire."<sup>39</sup> That Burke could have uttered such a remark startles; at least it helps to explain why Thomas Paine and Anarcharsis Cloots could have written to Burke as late as January and April 1790 to inform him of what Thomas Jefferson and others had witnessed in Paris, with the idea that Burke would be sympathetic to all he heard.<sup>40</sup>

Burke himself plainly declares in the army debate (1790) that even his considered later preferences continued to support the early activities of the Estates General. Its members should have redressed the grievances stated in the cahiers, which they failed to do.<sup>41</sup>

What had already occurred in November and December 1789 was the nationalization of church property as the solution to the problem of French debts and the introduction of a currency, the *assignats*, backed by these confiscations. In one blow the revolutionaries attacked religion and property, and it is commonly thought that these events aroused Burke's sense of horror and pushed him in his last decade into a career of counterrevolutionary agitator.

It would seem to follow from these events that he was prompted to look more closely at what in the character of the revolutionary elites could inspire them with the idea of church confiscation. He then developed his thesis of parallel groups of atheistic intellectual outsiders, hostile to church and state, and financial speculators, whose dealing and mobile preoccupations did not instill in them the sense of propriety of those who merely produced or exchanged. Both groups shared a common delight in abstraction—the abstraction of ideas and of money which permitted them to regard life at the horizons of their feelings, to invoke a Burkean image, and to consider their condition as an occasion for experiment and innovation.<sup>42</sup>

Brilliant and innovative though this theory of revolutionary elites was (as innovative as the elites it described), I do not think that the confiscation which occasioned it was the primary consideration that made Burke hostile to the Revolution. His mind was already decisively made up by September 1789. The confiscation and the attack on the Church only confirmed views which he had conceived earlier concerning the *political* character of the Revolution. This political critique, formed in July and August 1789, is discussed at length

in the *Reflections* and other writings and should remain uppermost in the minds of Burke's readers.

On September 27, 1789, Burke wrote to his friend William Windham that the people of France had "along with their political servitude . . . thrown off the Yoke of law and Morals." The National Assembly had evidently precluded successful reform because of its "subversion of all orders, distinctions, privileges, impositions, Tythes, and rents." He added that though they appear "omnipotent," he doubted that they had any more "deliberative capacity" or "free judgment" than the hapless king, "as there is a Mob of their constituents ready to Hang them if They should deviate into moderation, or in the least depart from the Spirit of those they represent."<sup>43</sup>

The merging of the three estates was followed in August by the suppression of the seigneurial regime. He barely mentioned the latter. It was the experiment with constitutional form, which rendered any subsequent reform arbitrary, that agitated him. The end of seigneurialism was largely cosmetic, as the social change had already taken place in many parts of France.<sup>44</sup> Feudal dues were well done away with. It was not this reform but the arbitrary act of legitimation — discarding the ancient constitution — that put in question the legitimacy of any subsequent rulers and crystallized Burke's sense of the shape of things to come: "The improvements of the national assembly are superficial, their errors fundamental."<sup>45</sup>

He had expected that the French might recover their liberties in a form of representative government that evolved out of the legitimating model of the Estates General. He regarded departures from this model as justification to depart from any model. The Revolution had destabilized itself and no metaphysical argument about "natural rights" could get it back on track. The degree of political strength actually obtained by the Third Estate within a reformed Estates General would have been a matter of relative indifference to Burke. The path to representative government lies with preservation of form, not with the discarding of it.

One of Burke's aims in the *Reflections* is to warn his countrymen against false analogies. English radicals believe that the French have adopted a Lockean model of revolt from the Whig Revolution of 1688. If a French 1789 fulfills the promise of an English 1688, it is time to re-import the model. Burke thinks that, in breaking with the forms of established authority, the French have already gone beyond anything that was attempted in 1688, when, to invoke a Burkean image, the nakedness of the revolutionary rupture was veiled in a narrative of political continuity. The name, Locke, that theorist of discontinuity, does not appear in this account. The falseness of the analogy is best described in the army debate: "With us it was the case of a legal

monarch attempting arbitrary power — in France it is the case of an arbitrary monarch beginning, from whatever cause, to legalise his authority.”<sup>46</sup>

The “from whatever cause” provides a Burkean narrative of continuity for the French. The rupture of authority must be explained as a restoration of the king’s legitimate authority. Burke agrees that the French king lacks legitimacy: “Your constitution, it is true, whilst you were out of possession, suffered waste and dilapidation; but . . . you might have repaired those walls.”<sup>47</sup> The representation that would legitimize the government in France could not be introduced without the forms of authority represented *in* the king. The “leading [of] the king in triumph” from Versaille to Paris in August 1789 (a repeated motif in the *Reflections*) had already, Burke calculated, destroyed that authority.<sup>48</sup>

Burke also intends to demonstrate that the reforms pursued in France could not have improved on English liberties. The argument explores a contrast between an ancient constitution, whose virtue is that it was designed by no one person, group, or generation, and the new model French constitution, dependent on a single group of legislators. What the revolutionary mind sees as the virtue of being able to begin anew, without irrational encumbrance from the past, Burke sees as the vice of having to depend on the limited imagination of one group (or one generation), a group that is, moreover, alienated from its past and from its fellow citizens, since the institutions through which the latter spoke have been eradicated.

Burke’s invocation of an “ancient constitution” is an appeal to maintain continuity, so far as possible, with the precedents of legal procedure, but it should also be broadly understood as the whole cultural inheritance of a people, as this bears on a public life with representative institutions. Reform is always relevant: “A state without means of change is without means of its conservation.”<sup>49</sup> Improvement depends on attending to inheritance: “A people will not look forward . . . who never look backward.”<sup>50</sup>

Why not? Burke has two explanations which press from the two sides of the question. On one hand, the reformer requires dignity. A people who reject their past cannot help having a low opinion of those formed by that past, namely, themselves: “You began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you.” By contrast, “respecting your fathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves.”<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, the ambitious sometimes respect only themselves. They need a past whose gravity imposes itself on them: “Always acting as if in the presence of canonized forefathers, the spirit of freedom, leading in itself to misrule and excess, is tempered with an awful gravity.”<sup>52</sup>

For Burke, tradition is not a prison. The rationalizing innovator creates a narrower world. Dispensing with the awkward complexity of the past, the innovator appears to have infinite horizons at her disposal but finds herself in a world of her own creation, that is to say, a world marked by the inevitable narrowness of the imagination of a single person or group.

Respecting inheritance means respecting the diversity of interests within it. Institutionalized as a separation of powers, this play of interests is the procedural safeguard of political liberty. The play of interests is also a substantive picture of liberty. A citizen informed by and able to maneuver within the differentiated and variegated lives of other citizens receives daily lessons in the meaning of liberty and a model for his own pursuits. Addressing the French and drawing on Montesquieu's Newtonian imagery, Burke laments:

You had all that combination, and all that opposition of interests, you had that action and counteraction. . . . These opposed and conflicting interests, which you consider so great a blemish in your old and in our present constitution, interposes a salutary check to all precipitate resolution. . . . *Through that diversity of members and interests, general liberty had as many securities as there were separate views in the several orders.*<sup>53</sup>

In contrast to this picture of English pluralism, the French "have attempted to confound all sorts of citizens, as well as they could, into one homogeneous mass." The revolutionaries have made themselves vulnerable to the confined intelligence of a single assembly.

### III. A CHOICE OF CONSTITUTIONS

Let us pause to look at these arguments from the perspective of Burke's rights-oriented adversary. It has been my assumption (argued in section I) that Burke and his opponent are both indebted to Enlightenment skepticism. Skepticism (about moral foundations and so on) is not only a discovery of post-Nietzschean philosophy, it is a decisive element as well in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French and English thought. It leads to two oddly opposed political understandings. Burke's opponents believe that skepticism helps them see through traditions. Burke believes that the skeptics will see new reasons to cling to tradition. In Burke's understanding, a people's inheritance fosters a Montesquian "esprit," or ethos, through which they think and act. Living in alienation from this informing spirit may lead to "truths" of speculation, but it will also assure political ruin. If there is nothing definite to appeal to beyond what we already have (and hence no further

foundation to possession), then all such appeals fall in a political void of boundless speculation.

Burke's opponents, on the other hand, have directed their skepticism precisely at the institutions to which he clings, because they see a figure on the horizon, obscured and oppressed by tradition and institution, a figure which is, so to speak, a pure residue of their skepticism, the imaginary point on which the skeptics themselves stand. This is the self bearing the rights of its isolated individuality, bound initially to no one but with the capacity to talk, and hence to negotiate, with other selves with similar rights.

In other words, the radical Enlightenment discovered "man," to invoke the eighteenth-century archaism, a "man" whose identifying mark was his belief that all institutions were either provisional or illegitimate, that life and society were constituted by talk and could be reconstituted by more talk (though talk, "man" added, which was "rational.") If Burke did not wholly despise these ideas, he certainly wanted to subordinate their typical carriers, unpropertied men of talent, to those whose habits of mind would not so readily dispose them to look past or see through the veils of custom and institution. From the perspective of a twentieth-century philosophy we could say that Burke was among the first to challenge the existence of "man." Men and women informed by inheritance he understood, but "man" and the arcane rules of his behavior, supposedly founded on skepticism, Burke thought was an illusion and a phantom.

From the point of view of the heirs of the radical enlightenment, Burke's defense of the English constitution could be criticized on three grounds. First, individuals have a right to the neutrality of their government. Their interests are to be treated fairly, and careful planning, not the haphazard traditions of a landed aristocracy, guarantees that. Second, Burkean tradition inhibits the range of freedoms and ways of life that individuals could peaceably enjoy. Only a political life less dependent on the crust of convention and more on the imagination of men and women assembled to debate their possibilities can make a full range of freedoms available. ("*Sous le pavé, la plage*," as Parisian students said in 1968.) Third, though comfort may lie in attachment to tradition, this simply obscures the aim of radical individualism: personal liberty.

It is sometimes said that Burkean conservatism constitutes an alternative paradigm, and within this alien culture, the preceding claims have no meaning. This is not at all the case. Burke defends the English constitution on precisely the grounds of neutrality, diversity, and personal liberty. In "On the Genius and Character of the French Revolution," Burke returns to the contrast of two types of constitution. Because the nonrevolutionary, unsys-

tematic constitutions have evolved "in a great length of time and by a great variety of accidents . . . they have not been directed to any *peculiar* end, eminently distinguished and superceding every other." This is the goal of state neutrality. The "state," he says, "has been made to the people, and not the people to the state."<sup>54</sup>

Diversity is also the result: "Every state has pursued not only every sort of social advantage, but it has cultivated the welfare of every individual. His wants, his wishes, and even his tastes have been consulted." In a moment of democratic imagination, Burke claims: "Governments formed without system are confused with the multitude and with the complexity of their pursuits." By contrast, government which "has unity and consistency in perfection" is restricted in its pursuit of neutrality and diversity to the politically correct definitions of those terms possible at one time and one place.

These latter governments are rational despotisms. The rulers see past custom and abstract from tradition only too readily: "To them the will, the wish, the want, the liberty, the toil, the blood of individuals is as nothing." This detachment from tradition leads to a view of society as merely a relation of forces: "The state is all in all. Everything is referred to the production of force: after, everything is trusted to the use of it."

As for the ideal of personal liberty, its lively appeal in Europe is the happy, but unintended, effect of institutions that have been required to be responsive to the "complexity" of the social order. "This has produced a degree of personal liberty in the forms most adverse to it" (an obvious allusion to prerevolutionary France). If in other countries personal liberty was an accident sustained by "the system of manners and the habitudes of life than by the laws of the state . . . in England [it] has been a direct object of government."<sup>55</sup>

Property is the main bearer of this cultural inheritance. For Burke's rivals, property opposes public culture, especially democratic culture; Burke thinks property embodies it. In its haphazard and unequal forms, property expresses diversity and serves as a labyrinth of complexity that opposes any one group's endeavor to remodel. This could be ruefully admitted by Burke's rivals who fear a diversity that includes exploitation and a complexity that prohibits reform. By contrast, Burke fears "the dreadful energy of a state, in which the property has nothing to do with the government." The consequence will be that "nothing rules but the mind of desperate men."<sup>56</sup>

But what if one were to say "nothing rules but the mind of well-intentioned democratic men and women"? This does not change the argument. It is not the moral qualities of the members of the assembly to which Burke objects



but the fact that there is only one assembly, and no intermediary institutions, governing France. It is not the reform but the reformer's tool, an absolutist state handed over to an arbitrary assembly that Burke fears. The searchlight of reform may cast a bright light on an exploitation that would be otherwise obscured by the interpositions of intermediary associations, but a searchlight cast on one exploitation requires that everything else is cast into darkness, including other forms of exploitation.

The argument is recognizably Montesquean, as was much else in Burke's attack on the Revolution. Burke was sure that Montesquieu would have been among the first of the émigrés.<sup>57</sup> (Montesquieu's corpse was, in fact, desecrated by revolutionary grave robbers.<sup>58</sup>) Montesquieu was one of the few French authors Burke respected (although he did not always agree with him).<sup>59</sup> Burke thought he saw the impact of Rousseau on the rebels; but if they read Montesquieu, Burke was sure they had not understood him.<sup>60</sup> Sick and distraught over the death of his son, Burke went out of his way to receive the grandson of Montesquieu who had emigrated to England.<sup>61</sup>

Montesquieu's argument about the complexity and political liberty sustained by England's separation of powers was a perfect foil for his implicit argument about French absolutism. Burke made the same points. The administrative rationality of an absolutist king was little different from that of a revolutionary assembly. The moral qualities, desperate or well intentioned, of the Court and the Revolutionary Assembly were not the main issue. The isolated singularity of each was. The contrast between the isolated, distorted rationality of a unified administration and the rationality of many minds expressing diverse sentiments of public collaboration through the conflict engendered by a separation of powers was the central idea in Montesquieu's political thought. Burke adapted it to brilliant effect in his writings on the Revolution.

Burke sometime opposed Montesquieu.<sup>62</sup> Burke's description of the English constitution is only superficially similar to Montesquieu's portrait. Their understandings of the role of "esprit" differed. One difference between Montesquieu and Burke is crucial to understanding Burke's project. Burke defended India against Montesquieu's views on despotism. He also refashioned the idea of oriental despotism. Montesquieu's distinction between the freedom carved out in Europe and the despotism of the East pushes too readily into a dichotomy of the free and the unfree, an ideology by which the European conqueror justifies his displacement of, in this case, the Indian people. Burke wants to show that the customary life of the Indian people is not despotic. A people could be embedded in their social practices without being unfree. (He made much the same argument about English practice

when confronted by the rationalizing demands of English and French radicals.) About despotism in India, he said; "I mean to show the direct contrary of everything that has been said on the subject. . . . I mean to prove that every word which Montesquieu has taken from idle and inconsiderate travelers is false."<sup>63</sup>

Burke reformulates the idea of despotism as an extra-European threat and turns it into an intra-European phenomenon. Despotism becomes the "monstrous," an only too European phenomenon: the Jacobin republic.<sup>64</sup> The move from the extra-European "despot" to an intra-European "monster" only makes explicit, however, Montesquieu's implicit warnings about French and Spanish absolutism. Oriental despotism was never confined to the East. The despotism of India is caused, Montesquieu thinks, by an absence of enlightenment and by the feverish imagination that otherwise prevails in a hot climate.<sup>65</sup> For Burke, the monstrosity of the Jacobin republic is an indictment of the very enlightenment that took shape on its soil. Both Montesquieu and Burke are ambivalent about a figure they studied closely: the detached, ambitious intellectual. (One must study the figure of Usbek to understand Montesquieu's views on the subject.) The balance is tipped in Burke's case further away from the virtues of an enlightenment that Montesquieu found in its net effects admirable.

Burke also did not forget that Montesquieu legitimated two radically distinct forms of government and that one of them, the republic, was defended by revolutionaries who had studied Montesquieu as closely on virtuous republics as Burke had studied English monarchy and representative government. Robespierre quoted Montesquieu, not Rousseau, when he discussed virtue. Rousseau had adopted Montesquieu's model of the republic to his own purposes. Burke thinks that the French state elite, both *before* and *after* the Revolution "had continually in their hands the observations of Machiavel on Livy. They had Montesquieu's *Grandeur et décadence des romains* as a manual."<sup>66</sup>

Montesquieu is a more ambivalent figure for Burke than is usually made out. By the time, however, Burke had uttered these remarks, in 1796, his own thinking was more focused on the advantages of republics and the disadvantages of complex monarchical states.

#### IV. WAR-INDUCED REVISIONS IN BURKE'S ARGUMENT

Burke's restatement of themes from the *Reflections* suggests shifts in his views and also suggests the pressure on his argument induced by the war with

France: (1) He seizes on a word that seems to him appropriate to what he wants to say. It was to have a twentieth-century history. The revolution is "total." (2) The Revolution is not, however, wholly new and without historical precedent. (3) The Revolution becomes a decidedly classless affair. Its elite is far less connected to any propertied interest than he claims in the *Reflections*. (4) He further develops the theme of the Revolution as the consummation of a peculiarly urban style of communication. (5) Burke comes to admire the "energy" of his Jacobin enemies and to perceive more clearly the disadvantages of the English alliance of ability and property. These restatements are more fully discussed in turn.

1. In "Thoughts on French Affairs," Burke claims that the events in France "announced a *total* revolution."<sup>67</sup> He later thinks of it as a "complete revolution." It is complete because it "seems to have extended even to the constitution of the mind of man."<sup>68</sup> He also uses the phrase "total revolution" to describe British as well as French intentions; a "total revolution" precipitates a total war: "When *our* politicks lead *us* to enterprize a great, and almost *total* political revolution in Europe, we ought to look seriously into the consequences of what we are about to do."<sup>69</sup> This is the first hint that Jacobin energy, in politicizing everything, forces its enemies to follow in its footsteps. The ancient constitution is not immune to the energy of its opponents.

2. Initially claiming that the Revolution was without precedent, Burke discovered two models for it by 1791: the events of the Reformation and the republics of classical antiquity. As it was a "revolution of doctrine" he contemplated (one which wanted to universalize itself and refused to be "governed by circumstances any more than by places"), his mind was drawn to religion and the model of the Reformation: "It would be to repeat the history of the last two centuries to exemplify the effect of this revolution." The Reformation fostered religious fanaticism, but the French were fanatics without religion. Not since Antiquity had the "modern world" witnessed "the spirit of general political faction separated from religion."<sup>70</sup>

His discussion of republican factions seems to borrow from an earlier treatment of the theme. Both treatments subvert the doctrine of the relationship of ability and property. In a republic, the two leading factions seek to rule not through interest but through "political dogma." This "choice is not unwise." Opinions are the strongest interests and seem to "supercede any other."<sup>71</sup> In the *Reflections*, opinions outweigh interests, but they do not supersede interests. Property has interests, not opinions, or rather, its opinions are attached to its interests. The claim that opinion rules in the long run seems to suggest that history is always on the side of unpropertied ability, which has only opinions.

A young Burke linked republican factionalism with freedom, a move which Burke understandably might want to obscure in his essays on the Revolution. He says in the early text, "Whilst these parties disagreed in a choice of a master, by contending for a choice in their subjection, they grew imperceptibly into freedom, and passed through the medium of faction and anarchy into regular commonwealth."<sup>72</sup> No defender of the long-run integrity of the French Revolution could have expressed his or her expectations more eloquently.

3. Burke's views on class relationships changes in the course of the 1790s. In the *Reflections*, property normally plays a conserving role. It provides channels of opportunity for the unpropertied ambitious and an inertial sense of gravity, a moral weight, for these ambitions: "Ability is a vigorous and active principle, and . . . property is sluggish, inert, and timid."<sup>73</sup> But a certain type of property holder, the "monied interest," defies the standard model and manifests qualities that bring it into alliance with ability.<sup>74</sup>

One must also note the special stress on the public life of property. If one asks whether Burke is really committed to naked oligarchy, as one plausible interpretation of the role of landed wealth in English affairs might suggest, one could say that for him, private interest, qua private, has *no* role to play in public life. The *Reflections* is filled with objections to "private reason" or "private interest": "We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that individuals would do better to avail themselves of the general bank."<sup>75</sup> This passage is especially interesting because it counters the image of the rule of naked private interest with an image of a bank as an appropriate site of public collaboration, thus apparently extending public legitimacy to the monied interest.

Burke also says it is a "barbarous philosophy" that supposes laws are supported only by "private speculation" and "private interests."<sup>76</sup> Though Burke is not foolish enough to ignore the naked self-interest of the propertied, he is equally serious about the educative effect played by the manners associated with property. The ethos of property as well as that of ability is what Burke calls the "spirit of the gentlemen and the spirit of religion . . . the nobility and the clergy."<sup>77</sup> The two types do not represent to Burke, as they do to us, the legal privileging of self-interest in the public realm. They represent two types of manners, two ways of checking and transforming self-interested brutes into collaborative citizens. They are, as with all opinions, "pleasing illusions," but we may wish to hold onto these longer than others for they "made power gentle, and obedience liberal . . . harmonized

the different shades of life [and] incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society."<sup>78</sup>

What happens to this theory in Burke's subsequent writings? By 1791, Burke was willing to drop the exclusive emphasis on the "monied interest" and to spread the blame for revolution more broadly to include the "merchants [and] principal tradesmen" as well. Perhaps more important, he ceased to distinguish so sharply between the kinds of urban commercial interests and the landed interests:

I once thought that the low estimation in which commerce was held in France might be reckoned among the causes of the late revolution. . . . But I found long since, that persons in trade and business were by no means despised in France in the manner I had been taught to believe.<sup>79</sup>

Far from resisting business, nobility and the prestige of land was the reward of success in it: "Nobility was of so easy an acquisition that it was the fault of all [in business] who did not obtain its privileges." This reinterpretation is more consistent with Burke's general view (and recently that of Schama and Nogaret-Chaussinand). Whatever status tensions existed between businessmen who became noble and those who did not, both together constitute a modernizing elite and provide support for the view that reform was an alternative to revolution in France.

These revisions in his view of France seem to incline Burke to cast a more suspicious eye at his own country. His gloomy appraisal is that the circulation of elites from business (and "ability") to nobility works less well in England than in France:

At no period in the history of England have so few Peers been taken out of trade or from families newly created by commerce. In no period has so small a number of noble families entered into the counting-house.<sup>80</sup>

England has a narrower elite than Burke once thought. Prerevolutionary France had a more open elite. All the commercial interests, not just the monied interests, were implicated in the Revolution. Does this mean that the French Revolution is the work of a modernizing bourgeois commercial elite? Burke is just one step away from this Marxian picture of the Revolution. He turns dramatically away from this view, however. Whichever commercial interest played a role early in the Revolution, none can now be seen in the governance of France: "*The political and civil power of France is wholly separated from its property of every description* (Burke's emphasis).<sup>81</sup>

The Revolution has become classless and also purely political. Burke's initial insight into the Revolution in the summer of 1789 has sustained him. The fundamental problem with the Revolution is not its class basis but that, having opened up the foundational problem by exposing the nakedness of authority (a reference to Marie Antoinette is not completely irrelevant!), no class, however ambitious or self-interested, could survive a challenge to its authority. Only the political class remains, that is to say, those who represent no interest but themselves and can keep up with a running dialogue in search of elusive foundations, a dialogue in which a missed cue means the guillotine.

It is not the bloodiness of the Terror or the number of its victims that so captures the imagination of readers but, rather, that it presents a spectacle of a fatal game of self-referential talk, in which the provisional winner is the person who can evade the paradox of simultaneously speaking for everyone while remaining self-referential. The losers are those from whom the veil of universality has been lifted. In the *Reflections*, Burke linked the monied interest, the urban interest, and the military interest.<sup>82</sup> The first two interests are eliminated by the fatal game of talk, permitting those who could stop the game, the military interest, to pick up the pieces.<sup>83</sup> This is Furet's analysis of Jacobinism, whose twentieth-century Bolshevik career he notes. Burke also attached this name to the phenomenon: "Jacobinism is the revolt of the enterprising talents of a country against its property."<sup>84</sup>

4. The Revolution represents the triumph of the city over the country, even when the urban *interests* cease to play a role in the governance of the Jacobin Republic, an urban *spirit*, a special style, continues to characterize the Revolution.

The "sluggish" property mentioned in the *Reflections* evokes the rhythms of the countryside and of the landed elite. Burke thinks that the Revolution has declared war on the countryside: "It is the great drift of [revolutionary] regulations, to reduce that description of men to a mere peasantry." The rhythms of the city, which are the rhythms of a general "circulation" replace the sluggishness of property. "Money increases and circulates. . . . The circulation of news becomes more and more diffused," and all who participate in this general "circulation" are more readily "electrified" and made "to lose the natural spirit of their situation."<sup>85</sup>

5. Under the pressure of the war with France, Burke appears to revise his views of the two constitutions. He was irritated with the English elite because they did not learn to imitate the French. "Sluggish, inert, timid" property could not awaken to the threat: It was too ready to conclude an early peace with the "Regicide Republic." Due to the "complexity" of interests protected by the English constitution, England could not mobilize its resources effec-

tively in war. "We must walk in new ways," Burke insists, "or we can never encounter our enemy."<sup>86</sup>

Burke carries this irritability with sluggish property into his diatribe against the Duke of Bedford, a man, Burke thinks, who behind his unearned wealth ignorantly casts aspersions on men of talent, such as Burke. Many commentators have seen in this essay the emergence of Burke's double, a Jacobin with a grudge, exposing the injustice and moral obtuseness of aristocratic society. It is hard to resist this move, but the themes are not really new. One can find similar sentiments in the *Reflections*. There, he asks why we "tolerate" the "petit maison and petit soupers . . . all the innumerable fopperies and follies in which opulence sports"? His answer is that we tolerate them "not from love of them, but for fear of worse" — not exactly the most convincing defense of wealth.<sup>87</sup>

Burke repeats the sentiment in the "Letter to a Noble Lord," but there is now a new edginess. The English constitution "shines alike on the useful and the worthless."<sup>88</sup> By "worthless" he means the "Noble Lord": "I have done all I could to discountenance . . . inquiries into the fortunes of those who hold large portions of wealth without any apparent merit of their own." He wants the Duke to know that he has always recognized that unearned wealth "alone" has made the Duke of Bedford his superior.<sup>89</sup> The Duke's ignorance and indolence is a sorry sight compared to the "always vigilant, active, enterprising" Jacobin, a figure who now acquires more heroic stature.<sup>90</sup> The Jacobin would carve the Duke into meat were it not for the men of talent like Burke.<sup>91</sup>

I know their kind, he admits. "I can form a tolerable estimate," he says, "of what is likely to happen from a character chiefly dependent for fame and fortune on knowledge and talent."<sup>92</sup> It is this sort of line that inclines the reader to speculate about what Burke saw of himself in the mirror of his Jacobin rivals. It has been my contention that when he looked in this mirror he saw a fellow philosophical skeptic, not an *enragé*.

Even by 1793, the Jacobin, or as Burke abstractly says, his "energy," had emerged as an admirable figure: "In France . . . no man comes forward but by his spirit of enterprise and the vigour of his mind." English indolence is no match for this:

If we meet this energy with poor commonplace proceedings, with trivial maxims, paltry old saws, with doubts, fears and suspicions, with a languid, uncertain hesitation, with a formal official spirit . . . down we go to the bottom of the abyss.<sup>93</sup>

No enthusiast of the new could have better described all that he found wrong with the Burkean defense of tradition. By 1796, instead of praising the virtues of sluggish property, Burke complains about "reptile prudence." Instead of

celebrating the complex balance of different categories of wealth that prevents the assault on any one of them, Burke declares, "If we command our wealth, we shall be rich and free; if our wealth commands us, we are poor indeed." Risk has replaced the virtue of moderation: "Often a man lost his all because he would not submit to hazard all in defending it." Having predicted the bankruptcy of France, Burke reverses himself and praises higher English public debt with which to finance the war.<sup>94</sup>

"Let us not deceive ourselves, we are at the beginning of great troubles."<sup>95</sup> The constitution itself is in decline. England is at war with a people of immense energy. "Nothing looks more awful and imposing than an ancient fortification," he says. This was the perspective on the England he defended in the *Reflections*. Now he claims that "besides the debility and false[!] principles of [its] construction, to resist the present modes of attack, the fortress itself is in ruinous repair." His only hope is that "*miserable works* have been defended by the *constancy* of the garrison."<sup>96</sup>

Burke's views have come full circle. Unattached ability is enlisted to remind irresponsible heirs of their duties to inheritance. Resistance to the "electrified" and "circulating" citizens of the Jacobin Republic requires that risk replace moderation and that citizens look soberly at the defects of their own constitution. Its defense depends only on their "constancy," not on the structure of ancient balance. In fighting a state which represents the triumph of the political, public life in England must demonstrate that it knows how to "command wealth" and be free of it.

Burke blamed Rousseau for sponsoring selfish individualism, but when that individualism seized a great state and filled it with energy, Burke addressed the English as citizens distinguishable from their embeddedness in institutions. He appealed to them as individuals in order to find in them not selfishness but "constancy." He addressed citizens whom he now presumed knew they had a "choice of inheritance" and who also knew that they must pay a price "in blood and fire" for now choosing it.<sup>97</sup>

## NOTES

1. The famous purple passage reads: "A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with blood, burst into the chamber, and pierced with a hundred strokes of bayonets and poinards the bed from when this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked." I cite from three readily available editions of the *Reflections*. The first is *Two Classics of the French Revolution* (no editor), which contains Burke's *Reflections* and Paine's *Rights of Man* (New York: Anchor, 1989). The others are Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by Conor



Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1968), and Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987). These are abbreviated as follows, citing the above passage: *Reflections*, (A), 84; (O), 164; (P), 62.

2. I have relied on two standard editions of Burke's writings, *Works of Edmund Burke*, Beaconsfield ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901), 12 vols. (This appears to be the same as the Little, Brown 1869 ed.), and Edmund Burke, *Works*, Bohn's British Classic (London: George Bell & Sons, 1893), 8 vols. The former will be cited as the Boston, the latter as the London edition as follows: "An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs," 1791, *Works*, Boston 4:215, London 3:115.

3. For Burke's minor writings on the French Revolution during the period 1790-94, I cite vol. 8 of a new edition of Burke that will eventually supersede the aforementioned editions: Paul Langford, general ed., *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981 —; to be completed in 12 vols.), L. G. Mitchell, ed. vol. 8, *The French Revolution, 1790-1794* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989). This work will be referred to as follows: "Thoughts on French Affairs," *Writings* 8:386.

4. François Furet, *Interpreting the Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Furet and Mona Ozouf, *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1989); Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

5. François Furet and Denis Richet, *La Révolution Française* (Paris: Fayard, 1973), reprinted from Hachette 1965-66 ed. They wrote alternate chapters, and this now well-known phrase, "le dérapage de la Révolution," was written by Richet, pp. 125-58. For recent summaries of the interpretive controversies occasioned by the bicentennial, see Olivier Bétourné and Aglaia I. Hartig, *Penser l'histoire de la Révolution* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 1989), and Geoffrey Best, ed., *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and Its Legacy, 1789-1989* (London: Fontana, 1988).

6. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 24.

7. *Ibid.* 79, 24.

8. *Ibid.* 180. See Burke, "Jacobinism is the revolt of the enterprising talents of a country against its property" ("Regicide Peace," Letter I), *Works*, Boston 5:309, London 5:207.

9. *Interpreting*, 204.

10. Furet, "Jacobinism," in *Critical Dictionary*, 715.

11. For Schama on the Jacobins, see esp. *Citizens*, 623, 725, 785, 787, 804.

12. For Furet on the problem of "circumstances" and the related notion of an "aristocratic plot," see *Interpreting*, 61-72, 53-58; Schama, "Violence was the motor of the revolution," in *Citizens*, 859, also 447.

13. For summary judgments of Lafayette, see *Citizens*, 24-29, 870-73.

14. For Burke on financial policy, see *Reflections*, (A) 132, (O) 220, (P) 103; for Schama on financial policy, see *Citizens*, 60-71, 881. The issue of reformability is also connected with revisionist assumptions about aristocratic modernization and Jacobin anticapitalism. See *Citizens*, 116-117, 184-85, 785, 787, 853-54, 884. Also see Chaussinand-Nogaret, *French Nobility*, 84-116.

15. *Citizens*, 857.

16. *Reflections*, (A) 47-49, (O) 121-23, (P) 31-33.

17. *Works*, Boston 3:226, London 8:279 ("Debate on the Army Estimates," 1790).

18. Burke discusses Rousseau in "Letter to a Member of the National Assembly," in *Writings* 8:312-19. For Schama on romantic sensibility and Rousseauism, see *Citizens*, 153, 156, 161-62, 170-71, 861, 873-75, 885-86.

19. *Works*, Boston 4:176, London 3:86.
20. *Works*, Boston 5:236, London 5:154 ("Regicide Peace," Letter I).
21. *Writings* 8:264 ("Thoughts on French Affairs").
22. *Reflections*, (A) 265, (O) 376, (P) 218.
23. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 294-323; Harvey Mansfield, Jr., *Statesmanship and Party Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), and *Selected Letters of Edmund Burke*, edited by Harvey Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). See also Mansfield's "Burke and Machiavelli on Principles in Politics," in *Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and the Modern World*, edited by Peter Stanlis (Detroit: University of Detroit Press, 1967), 49-80.
24. J.C.D. Clark believes that Burke is an "unoriginal" exponent of views within a "tradition of Anglican political theology," in *English Society, 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice during the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 249. C. B. Courtney stresses Burke's indebtedness to the English common law tradition and to Ciceronian stoic natural law in his *Montesquieu and Burke* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1975) reprint, 1963 Blackwell ed., 145. There is no doubt that Burke mastered these vocabularies of political communication, but what did he really think of them?
25. Strauss, *Natural Right and History* 323.
26. Mansfield, "Introduction," *Selected Letters*, 20.
27. David Bromwich, "Burke, Wordsworth, and the Defense of History," in *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 43-78; also note at 296: Burke's "understanding of . . . contingency . . . can make paragraphs of his writing sound like Nietzsche."
28. Bromwich, *A Choice of Inheritance*, 46-47, 78. The title phrase is found in *Reflections*, (A) 46, (O) 120, (P) 30.
29. C. B. MacPherson, *Burke*, Past Masters Series (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 72-73.
30. Bromwich and Conor Cruise O'Brien stress these Burkean sympathies. See O'Brien's "Introduction" to the *Reflections*.
31. Iain Hampsher-Monk, *The Political Philosophy of Edmund Burke* (London: Longman, 1987), 42.
32. See O'Brien's "Introduction" to the *Reflections*, 9-81; also his essays in *The Suspecting Glance* (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 33-50, 67-91.
33. Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
34. Bruce James Smith, *Politics and Remembrance: Republican Themes in Machiavelli, Burke and Tocqueville* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 151.
35. J.G.A. Pocock, "The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 209; also his "Introduction" to the *Reflections*, vii-lvi, and "Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas," in J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).
36. Hampsher-Monk, *The Political Philosophy of Edmund Burke*, 15.
37. Burke wrote an earlier letter to Depont, the "Gentleman in Paris" of the dedication, in November 1789. Two recent accounts of the writing of the *Reflections* are L. G. Mitchell, "Introduction" to vol. 8 of *The Writings of Edmund Burke*, 1-32; and F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: George Allen, 1985), 31-61.
38. *Writings* 8:364.

39. Thomas Copeland, general ed., *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 6: July 1789-December 1791, edited by Alfred Cobban and Robert Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 10.

40. *Writings* 8:12.

41. *Works*, Boston 3:220-21, London 8:275 ("Debate on the Army Estimate"). Also see *Writings* 8:329 ("Letter to a Member of the National Assembly," 1791).

42. These notions are further articulated in the "Letters on a Regicide Peace." See Pocock's discussion in the "Introduction" to *Reflections*, xxxvi-xxxviii, and in *Virtue, Commerce and History*, 205-8, also see my part 4.

43. *Correspondence* 6:24-26.

44. Schama, *Citizens*, 853-54.

45. *Reflections*, (A) 264, (O) 375, (P) 217.

46. *Works*, Boston 3:226, London 8:279.

47. *Reflections*, (A) 47, (O) 121, (P) 31.

48. *Reflections*, (A) 78-99, (O) 157-81, (P) 57-75. This repeated motif defines the crucial moment in the Revolution for Burke; the pages framed by this motif are concerned with form and authority.

49. *Reflections*, (A) 33, (O) 106, (P) 19.

50. *Reflections*, (A) 45, (O) 119, (P) 29.

51. *Reflections*, (A) 48, (O) 122-23; (P) 31-32.

52. *Reflections*, (A) 46, (O) 121, (P) 30.

53. *Reflections*, (A) 47, (O) 122, (P) 31.

54. *Works*, Boston 5:373; London 5:253-54.

55. *Works*, Boston 5:373-75, London 5:254-55. The passages discussed in the preceding three paragraphs of the text are found on these pages from "Regicide Peace," Letter II.

56. *Works*, Boston 5:367-67, London 5:256.

57. *Correspondence* 6:81.

58. Robert Shackleton, *Montesquieu: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 398.

59. *Correspondence* 6:80-87. Also see "Appeal from the New Whigs to the Old," in *Works*, Boston 4:211-12, London 3:113. The passage is more complex and ambivalent than it appears. Burke evidently considered inserting this portrait of Montesquieu into the *Reflections*. See *Correspondence* 6:341n, where a passage that could only be the one now in "The Appeal" is assumed by French Laurence to be a part of the *Reflections*.

60. *Correspondence* 6:80-81.

61. *Correspondence* 9:49, in June 1796.

62. See, for instance, "Abridgment of English History," in *Works*, Boston 7:293, 315-16, London 6:281, 297.

63. *Works*, Boston 11:207. This passage is not in the London, Bohn edition.

64. *Reflections*, (A) 21-22, (O) 92, (P) 9. The Revolution is both "out of nature" and "monstrous." This motif in Burke reappears in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which is essentially about the Revolution. She was fascinated with Burke's description of the fleeing Marie Antoinette.

65. Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, 14:3 (various editions). For an English translation, see Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, edited and translated by Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 14:3.

66. *Works*, Boston 5:367, London 5:249. For Robespierre on Montesquieu's "virtue," see Bernard Manin, "Montesquieu," in *The Critical Dictionary*, 730-31.

67. *Writings* 8:338.
68. *Works*, Boston 5:175.
69. *Writings* 8:488 ("Remarks on the Policy of the Allies," 1793).
70. *Writings* 8:341-43 ("Thoughts on French Affairs," 1791).
71. *Writings* 8:343.
72. *Works*, Boston 7:331, London 6:308 ("Abridgment of English History").
73. *Reflections*, (A) 63, (O) 140, (P) 44.
74. *Reflections*, (A) 122-24, 170, 210; (O) 209-11, 264, 311; (P) 95-96, 136, 170.
75. *Reflections*, (A) 100, (O) 183, (P) 76.
76. *Reflections*, (A) 91, (O) 171, (P) 68. The famous passage follows, as the fruit of private reasoning: "In the groves of their academy . . . you see nothing but the gallows."
77. *Reflections*, (A) 92, (O) 173, (P) 69.
78. *Reflections*, (A) 90, (O) 171, (P) 67.
79. *Writings* 8:346 ("Thoughts on French Affairs"). For Burke's views on the monied and landed interests in the *Reflections*, (A) 122-23, (O) 209-11, (P) 95-96.
80. *Writings* 8:347.
81. *Writings* 8:365.
82. *Reflections*, (A) 206, (O) 306, (P) 167.
83. *Reflections*, (A) 227ff., (O) 331ff., (P) 185. With your army, "you have the wolf by the ears."
84. See notes 8 and 10.
85. *Writings* 8:344, 346. See the contrast of country and urban styles in the *Reflections*, (A) 210-11, (O) 311-13, (P) 170-71.
86. *Works*, Boston 5:240, London 5:157.
87. *Reflections*, (A) 178, (O) 273, (P) 142.
88. *Works*, Boston 5:209.
89. *Ibid.*, 196-97.
90. *Ibid.*, 213.
91. *Ibid.*, 217.
92. *Ibid.*, 215.
93. *Writings* 8:480 ("Remarks on the Policy of the Allies").
94. *Works*, Boston 5:241, 242, 243, 294; London 5:158, 159, 196; "Regicide Peace," Letter I.
95. *Works*, Boston 5:240, London 5:157.
96. *Works*, Boston 6:100-1, London 5:425, "Regicide Peace," Letter IV, 1797.
97. *Reflections*, (A) 46, 265; (O) 120, 376; (P) 30, 218.

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