

THE BRITISH DEBATE ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

EDMUND BURKE AND HIS CRITICS

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DECLARATION

This dissertation is the product of my own independent research and it has not been submitted for a degree at any other institution.

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explore the British response to the French Revolution through an investigation of the debate between Burke and his critics on the subject. The dissertation is divided into two major parts: first, a comprehensive analysis of Burke's critique of the French Revolution and, secondly, an extensive examination of the reaction of his critics to his arguments.

Edmund Burke approached the French Revolution with a shrewd discernment. He took up his pen against France because he was aware that her Revolution, since, in his opinion, it was of a universal nature, would prove dangerous to the old order of the whole of Europe. But how did the Revolution happen? What had made it so formidable? Burke traced the origins of the French Revolution to the economic, social and intellectual changes that had previously taken place in French society. It was a revolution led by the militant middle class and propelled by Jacobinism. To prevent Jacobinism from undermining European civilisation, Burke devoted himself to a long crusade against the French Revolution. At the same time, Burke, who had previously been regarded as a reformer, was obliged to defend his own political consistency which was challenged because of his attack on the French Revolution. He endeavoured to relate his politics to the tradition of the 1688 Revolution and he defended the integrity of his present action on the principles of the old Whigs whose politics, in his opinion, had always been to assert Britain's mixed and balanced constitution.

Burke's critics, on the other hand, generally welcomed the Revolution in France as a great triumph of liberty over despotism. Most of those who opposed Burke were ideologically inclined to embrace the doctrine of popular sovereignty based on the radical theory of the natural rights of man; and their acceptance of this doctrine had rendered them politically hostile to the old order. From such an intellectual framework, these radicals ventured, from various aspects, to vindicate the French Revolution. This dissertation undertakes to explore their perception of its universal implication, their interpretation of its origins, their justification of its necessity, their apologia for its defects, their defence of its leaders, and their conviction of its ability to achieve perfection in the future. The whole seems to form both a vigorous answer to Burke and an active justification of the French Revolution. The critics of Burke, in vindicating the French Revolution, were also defending their own radical politics at home. The establishment of freedom in France encouraged them to press for change in Britain. Parliament and the established church formed the main objects in their programme of reform. The British reformers, generally speaking, did not argue in support of a violent revolution at home. It was their opinion, however, that without a timely reform, Britain could be heading in that direction.

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I never dreamt of coming to Britain to work on British history until I was awarded a three-year scholarship (1983/1986), by the Education Ministry of the Republic of China, for studying abroad. I am grateful for this. I would also like to extend my thanks to the Faculty of Arts of Edinburgh University for granting me a Vans Dunlop Scholarship (1986) and for awarding me a Jeremiah Dalziel Prize in British History (1988) for my work on Burke's interpretation of the French Revolution.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to examine one major episode in the British response to the French Revolution: the controversy on Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). The impact of the French Revolution on Britain has never ceased to attract the attention of historians,¹ but it is only recently, with the Revolution celebrating its 200th anniversary, that substantial efforts have been made to research this subject.² This new surge of interest notwithstanding, there are surprisingly few works so far dedicated to the study of the great debate on the Revolution itself, which was, without doubt, the main ideological exchange of the time. Indeed, academic performance in this respect over the last four decades, if we take the publication in 1950 of Alfred Cobban's selections on this topic as a starting point for making an assessment, has not appeared as impressive as might have been expected. This is not, of course, to deny that some research on this subject has indeed been carried out. It has certainly been made the subject of several documentary studies.³ There are, moreover, considerable achievements on the literary dimension of the debate.⁴ Rather few efforts, however, seem to have been devoted to a more extensive analysis of its main themes. There is, therefore, still a lot of work that needs to be undertaken.⁵

¹ Modern scholarship on this subject can be said to have begun with P. A. Brown's *The French Revolution in English History* (London, 1918), which remains to this day an important work.

² The achievements hitherto scored are manifold. The impact of the Revolution on the British radical movement has been well presented by: Gwyn A. Williams, *Artisans and Sans-Culottes: Popular Movements in France and Britain during the French Revolution 1789-1815* (London, 1968); Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (London, 1979); H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789-1815* (Oxford, 1985). Publications on other aspects of the impact include: Robert R. Dozier, *For King, Constitution and Country: The English Loyalists and the French Revolution* (Lexington, 1983); Frank O'Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (London, 1967); J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England, 1793-1815* (Cambridge, 1982); Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French War, 1793-1815* (London, 1979). Professor Dickinson's new volume on *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* (London, 1989), which is a collection of articles by different historians examining various aspects of the impact, offers an excellent sample showing the strength of recent research in this field.

³ See: Alfred Cobban (ed.), *The Debate on the French Revolution* (London, 1950); Marilyn Butler (ed.), *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolutionary Controversy* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁴ See: James T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* (London, 1963); Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language, 1791-1819* (Oxford, 1984); F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1985).

⁵ There are, so far, not many contributions on this aspect. The main work remains R. R. Fennessy's *Burke, Paine and the Rights of Man: A Difference of Political Opinion* (The Hague, 1963). Thomas Philip Schofield has recently completed a thesis on 'English Conservative Thought and Opinion in response to the French Revolution' (Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 1984); and he has also published 'Conservative Political Thought in Britain in Response to the French Revolution', *Historical Journal*, xxix (1986), 601-22.

Any student who attempts to approach the British debate on the French Revolution is apt to find the massive literature he has to cope with particularly daunting. It has been recently estimated that pamphlets of all kinds which appeared in Britain between 1789-1801 in response to the French Revolution number about four thousand. Even those which are directly related to the more restricted topic of the Burke-Paine dispute still amount to no less than 340 titles.⁶ There is, nevertheless, one possible way out of the dilemma which so many publications present. If one chooses to focus the investigation solely on the controversy over Burke's *Reflections*, the sources which need to be handled can be significantly reduced and made more manageable. The number of tracts in reply to Burke's critique of the French Revolution - even if we take into account all those which argued for or against any of his pamphlets on the subject - is around one hundred and fifty. This, in fact, forms an almost ideal field of research for a dissertation such as this.⁷ There is another, and more important, strategical advantage if such an approach is adopted. The controversy on Burke's *Reflections* lasted for several years and it involved most of the leading minds from all over the British Isles. It virtually constituted the central part of the great debate on the Revolution. From this angle, therefore, a proper examination of the theme offers an important avenue to the understanding of the main currents of British opinion concerning both the French Revolution itself and its bearings on Britain.

The research deployed in this dissertation sets out to approach the British reception of the French Revolution through an extensive analysis of the debate between Burke and his critics on this subject. The main line of discussion examines how British writers interpreted what was then happening in France. This has been, perhaps surprisingly, an aspect which has hitherto been generally neglected by most of those historians who have sought to deal with the British debate on the French

⁶ See the bibliographical analysis in Gayle Trusdel Pendleton, 'Towards a Bibliography of the *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* Controversy', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, lxxxv (1982), 65-103.

⁷ This is also the line which this study is to follow. This dissertation will try to make extensive use of any work Burke had written on the Revolution and any pamphlet which replied to him. It must be pointed out that, in the latter case, I shall refer to those only which can be asserted as obvious responses. For this reason, I am prepared to exclude tracts which may at best be accepted as implicit replies, such as William Godwin's *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (London, 1793). There are different opinions about the relevance of Godwin's *Political Justice* to the debate. F. E. L. Priestley asserts that the work is neither a reply to Burke, nor a defence of the French Revolution: see the 'Critical Introduction and Notes' to Priestley's edition of Godwin's *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (Toronto, 1946), iii, 4. And so does Don Locke: *A Fantasy of Reason: The Life and Thought of William Godwin* (London, 1980), p. 48. James T. Boulton admits that the tract 'almost defiantly remains aloof from the furore over Burke's *Reflections*, but he emphasises that Godwin had shown a 'keen awareness of the controversy': see *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* pp. 207-8. F. P. Lock is more in favour of directly treating it as 'one critique of Burke': see *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 167-70.

Revolution. The dissertation is divided into two major parts. There will be, first of all, a comprehensive analysis of Burke's critique of the Revolution, and then, secondly, an extensive examination of the reactions of Burke's critics to his arguments. The entire work is intended to be not so much a philosophical exposition, as an historical analysis, of the great British debate on the French Revolution.

In coming to terms with Burke's reaction to the French Revolution, one must bear in mind that the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, while undoubtedly his major piece on this subject, is by no means his only work. French affairs were the main concern of most of Burke's writings composed in and after 1790. His attack on France intensified as the Revolution progressed. It can, indeed, be fairly asserted that in a sense most of Burke's later writings on the French Revolution, written after the publication of the *Reflections*, can be categorised more or less as various developments on the themes which that great work had first thrown out. To understand the whole picture of Burke's view of the French Revolution, however, one needs to take into account the complete corpus of his writings, whether tracts or correspondence, relevant to that event. With regard to the main discussion, the venture here will chiefly focus on two related themes in Burke's work. It will undertake, on the one hand, to inquire into what Burke had to say about the Revolution itself and, on the other hand, it will continue to review how he came to defend his own political integrity in taking up his pen against the French Revolution.

Edmund Burke approached the Revolution in France with an unusually shrewd discernment. He based his case against the Revolution on an acute appreciation of its origins, its nature, and its potential impact.⁸ It will be pertinent, hence, to commence this dissertation with an initial examination of the motives that inspired Burke to turn against an apparently foreign event. Burke launched a severe attack on France mainly because of his keen awareness that the Revolution, since, in his opinion, it was of a universal nature, would prove dangerous to the old order of the whole of Europe, and hence not even Britain could escape its impact. But how did the Revolution happen? What had made it so formidable? To answer these questions it is necessary to analyse Burke's perception of the origins, and the dynamics, of the French Revolution. He traced the collapse of the ancien regime in France back to the economic, social and

⁸ Historians are apt to undervalue Burke's interpretation of the French Revolution, which has often been dismissed as being strongly biased and ill-informed. See below, chap. 2, section i. Modern studies, indeed, seem to have generally ignored this aspect of Burke's achievement. For a critical survey of recent scholarship on Burke, cf. F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* pp. 189-99.

intellectual changes that had previously taken place in French society. He deemed the militant middle class to be the main force of the Revolution and Jacobinism its propelling principle. It was, above all, a revolution whose nature was anti-aristocratical, anti-clerical and anti-traditional. We must also attend to Burke's crusade against the French Revolution. He was convinced that should Jacobinism prevail in France, European civilisation would soon be jeopardised. To prevent this, he called for a united front of all states to exterminate the Jacobin revolution. It was only by restoring France to the European commonwealth of nations that, he believed, peace would become possible.

Burke was, meanwhile, obliged to defend his own political consistency which was soon challenged because of his attack on the French Revolution. Burke had previously been regarded as a reformer and people were surprised at his strong reaction against the French Revolution. How, then, could he justify his own action? Burke endeavoured to relate his politics to the tradition of the 1688 Revolution, which was, to him, a change not, like that of France, meant to undermine, but to restore, the old order in Britain. He defended the integrity of his present action on the principles of the old Whigs whose politics had always been to assert Britain's mixed and balanced constitution of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy.⁹ It had been his purpose, throughout his career, to defend the constitutional balance within Britain. This accounted for his support for the American Revolution, which asserted the right of the colonists as Englishmen to defend their traditional rights against monarchical encroachment. This also explained his attack on the French Revolution, which turned out to be producing an extreme version of democracy. Burke had, after all, always argued in favour of moderation. He was ready to support cautious reform, but still determined to resist violent revolution.

This dissertation will proceed, secondly, to investigate the response within Britain to Burke's thoughts on French affairs. Emphasis here will be placed in the main on the arguments of his radical critics who actually played the major part in the debate. It will discuss both the foundation of their political ideology and their defence of the French Revolution. The British radicals generally welcomed the Revolution in France as

⁹ Frederick A. Dreyer has argued that Burke's thought belongs to the tradition of Lockean Whiggism. See his *Burke's Politics: A Study in Whig Orthodoxy* (Ontario, 1979). Burke, however, might be more prepared to identify his own politics with the Whiggism of Lord Somers. See: Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (6 vols. Bohn's Standard Library, 1877-1885), ii, 294; *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. T. W. Copeland *et al* (10 vols. Cambridge, 1958-70), vi, 331. 'To the Earl of Charlemont - 8 Aug. 1791'.

a great triumph of liberty over despotism. Most of those who opposed Burke were ideologically inclined to endorse a doctrine of popular sovereignty based on the radical theory of the natural rights of man; and their acceptance of such a doctrine was to render them politically hostile to the old order. With but few exceptions, Burke's critics were apt to hate the aristocracy, detest the church, and decry the old constitution. This intellectual framework rendered their defence of the French Revolution intelligible. From this context, we will venture to look into the various aspects of their vindication of the Revolution: their appreciation of its universal implication, their interpretation of its origins, their justification of its necessity, their apologia for its defects, their defence of its leaders, and their conviction of its ability to achieve perfection in the future. Their work seems to form both a vigorous answer to Burke and an active justification of the French Revolution.

There is another dimension in the response of the British radicals. It is manifest that the critics of Burke, in vindicating the French Revolution, were also defending their own radical politics at home. The establishment of freedom in France encouraged them to press for reform in Britain. For all its reputation as a land of liberty, Britain was in fact replete with oppression and injustice, which, in the opinion of Burke's opponents, resulted mainly from the corruption and decline of its mixed constitution. There was, hence, a general call for change. Most of the British radicals were persuaded that in the present state of Britain a proper reform in Parliament would be the most effective measure able to cure all her distempers. The established church was the other major object of reform; the bulk of polemics on this theme duly reflecting the active involvement of the Dissenters in the debate on the French Revolution. The reformers in Britain, generally speaking, did not contend in support of a violent revolution at home. It was their opinion, however, that without a timely reform, Britain could be heading in that direction.

A comprehensive examination of the debate on the French Revolution offers, in the final analysis, a pertinent approach to the nature of political ideologies in Britain in the 1790s. It is the purpose of this dissertation to sort out the intricate arguments of the debate, intending to provide them with an intelligible framework, and to invest them, if possible, with a coherent structure. Such an endeavour, it is hoped, may enable historians to penetrate more easily into the ideological world of one of the most fascinating debates in late eighteenth-century Britain.

Part One

BURKE'S CRITIQUE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

CHAPTER 1
THE REVOLUTION SYNDROME

The French Revolution found in Edmund Burke an unexpected, yet staunch, critic. To analyse his polemics against the Revolution, it is necessary in the first place to explore how he conceived the event and its impending impact. This topic, according to Burke, can be dealt with in three aspects: that is, the effect of the revolution on France herself, its relevance to British politics and, above all, its implication for the future of Europe.

I

The outbreak of the French Revolution had taken most people in Britain by surprise. The responses that occurred were immediate, though diversified.¹ Burke was not the first among the British to respond to it. As a matter of fact, his initial reaction had appeared rather perfunctory.² It was not until 9 August 1789, almost four weeks after the storming of the Bastille, then he threw out a private comment. In his letter to the Earl of Charlemont, he thus revealed:

As to us here our thoughts of every thing at home are suspended, by our astonishment at the wonderful Spectacle which is exhibited in a Neighbouring and rival Country - what Spectators, and what actors! England gazing with astonishment at a French struggle for Liberty and not knowing whether to blame or to applaud! . . . In the mean time the progress of this whole affair is one of the most curious matters of Speculation that ever was exhibited.³

The feeling was a combination of curiosity and amazement. That the most powerful monarchy in Europe should have collapsed almost overnight was indeed beyond comprehension: 'All these things,' as Burke claimed, 'have happend out of the ordinary Course of Speculation.'⁴

¹ For the early reception of the French Revolution in Britain, see: P. A. Brown, *The French Revolution in English History*, pp. 28-40; T. P. Schofield, 'Conservative Political Thought in Britain in Response to the French Revolution,' *Historical Journal*, xxix(1986), 602.

² For Burke's attitude at the early stage of the French Revolution, see: C. B. Cone, *Burke and the Nature of Politics: the Age of the French Revolution* (University of Kentucky Press, 1964), pp. 292-294.

³ *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, (hereafter, *Corr.*), vi, 10. 'To the Earl of Charlemont - 9 August 1789'.

⁴ *Corr.*, vi, 37. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 12 Nov. 1789'.

Burke admitted that what had happened in France had indeed given rise in his mind to 'many Reflexions' and 'some Emotions'. Owing to his yet imperfect knowledge of France, and the novelty of the occurrence itself, however, he had at first cautiously refrained from risking any early judgement.⁵ The spirit of the French struggle for liberty, he admitted, was 'impossible not to admire'. He had even heartily wished that France might one day establish 'a solid and rational scheme of liberty'. Concerning the general tendency of the Revolution, however, he was not without his doubts. The popular violence in Paris - 'the old Parisian ferocity' as he called it - had shocked him not a little, and had roused his concern about the newly acquired freedom of France. Burke was convinced that 'the spirit of liberty in action' would always become 'a strong principle at work'. Freedom, therefore, must be combined with a spirit of moderation or it would become 'noxious' and turn out to be a 'nuisance'. Liberty, to be beneficial and permanent, ought to be incorporated with public force, civil order and social manners. If the future constitution of France could be settled upon such principles and calculated for securing the life, liberty and property of the people, then, Burke assured his French friend, Depont: 'I believe there is no Man in this Country whose heart and Voice would not go along with You.'⁶ The French Revolution, nevertheless, had followed a very different course. When it ran to extremes, Burke soon abandoned his early reservations and stood out as its unequivocal critic. One major strand in his critique was his view of the appalling consequences of the Revolution for France herself.

Since the formation of the National Assembly, the revolutionary movement in France had taken a drastic turn. Without much struggle, the ancien regime was shattered and a new order heralded by the *Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens*. The whole course, as Burke remarked, looked not only 'new' but 'revolutionary'.⁷ It was, however, the general lawlessness and destructiveness in the Revolution that had mainly attracted Burke's attention. According to his observation, the French people in that great turmoil had, along with their political servitude, at once 'thrown off the Yoke of Laws and morals'.⁸ Constraints being once eased away,

⁵ *Corr*, vi, 41. 'To Charles-Jean-Francois Depont - (Nov. 1789)'

⁶ *Corr*, vi, 41-43. 'To Charles-Jean-Francois Depont - (Nov. 1789)'; *Corr*, 10. 'To the Earl of Charlemont - 9 Aug. 1789'; Edmund Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' (1790), *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (hereafter, *Burke's Works*), ii, 282-283.

⁷ Edmund Burke, 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* (1796), v, 415.

⁸ *Corr*, vi, 25. 'To William Windham - 27 Sept. 1789'.

the distraction it caused was terrifying. In a short time, he pointed out, the French had

completely pulled to the ground their monarchy, their church, their nobility, their law, their revenue, their army, their navy, their commerce, their arts, and their manufactures.⁹

It was catastrophic. France was ruined: everywhere could be seen

Laws overturned; tribunals subverted; industry without vigour; commerce expiring; the revenue unpaid, yet the people impoverished; a church pillaged, and a state not relieved; civil and military anarchy made the constitution of the kingdom.¹⁰

Indeed, Burke estimated: 'As much injustice and tyranny has been practised in a few months by a French democracy, as in all the arbitrary monarchies in Europe in the forty years of my observation.'¹¹ And thus devastated, he claimed, France must be considered as 'not politically existing'.¹² Not only had the framework of the old order been entirely destroyed, even 'the Elements which compose Human Society seem all to be dissolved, and a world of Monsters to be produced in the place of it'.¹³

Amidst the general disintegration of the ancien regime in France, the most spectacular scene, naturally, was the destruction of her monarchy. This can be grasped from two angles. In a narrow sense, it referred to the miserable fall of the royal family. Since the dreadful event of 6 October 1789, the King of France had been completely subdued.¹⁴ From then on, Burke wrote, the world had beheld in Louis XVI

a monarch, insulted, degraded, confined, deposed; his family dispersed, scattered, imprisoned; his wife insulted to his face like the vilest of the sex, by the vilest of all populace; himself three times dragged by these wretches in an infamous triumph; his children torn from him, in violation of the first right of nature; . . . his revenues

⁹ Edmund Burke, 'Substance of the Speeches, in the Debate on the Army Estimates' (1790), *Burke's Works*, iii, 271.

¹⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 312.

¹¹ *Corr.*, vi, 96. 'To Captain Thomas Mercer - 26 Feb. 1790'.

¹² 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 270.

¹³ *Corr.*, vi, 30. 'To Richard Burke, Jr. - (circa 10 October 1789)'.

¹⁴ For Burke's colourful description of this incident, see: 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 343-4.

dilapidated and plundered. . .

The calamity befalling this unfortunate king, he added, was perhaps the 'greatest that ever fell upon one man'.¹⁵ Indeed, in the torrent of the revolution, he was not even able to save himself. On the other hand, the authority of kingship itself had also broken down. The National Assembly, Burke claimed, undertook to turn the king into a mere executive officer, who was afterwards merely to carry out, as a machine, the orders of the Assembly, without any deliberative discretion in any act of his function. This would, in effect, amount to degrading the French monarch into 'nothing more than a chief of bumbailiffs, sergeants at mace, catchpoles, jailers, and hangmen'. He was to become no longer either the source of honour or the fountain of justice. There would be nothing left in his position that could have the smallest degree of just correspondence, or amicable relation, with the supreme power he was supposed to possess.¹⁶ Above all, the general trend of the Revolution seemed to be pointing to republicanism. If kingship happened to be retained, Burke was convinced, that was purely tactical and temporary: 'They only held out the royal name to catch those Frenchmen to whom the name of king is still venerable.' Once this reason expired, he predicted, it would be soon extinguished:

In spite of their solemn declarations, their soothing addresses, and the multiplied oaths which they have taken and forced others to take, they will assassinate the king when his name will no longer be necessary to their designs; but not a moment sooner. . .¹⁷

The existence of monarchy, in essence, was not compatible with the principles of the Revolution. The creation of the French republic in September 1792, and the execution of Louis XVI in January 1793, had indeed come in time to fulfil Burke's prediction. These later developments of the Revolution had brought an end to a monarchy which had almost 'continued for fourteen hundred years'.¹⁸

The nobility and church, the two pillars of monarchy, meanwhile, had also crumbled. The French Revolution was fundamentally anti-aristocratic. It was a

¹⁵ Edmund Burke, 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs' (1791), *Burke's Works* iii, 114-5.

¹⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 468-70, 473.

¹⁷ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly' (1791), *Burke's Works* ii, 532.

¹⁸ Edmund Burke, 'Preface to the Address of M. Brissot to His Constituents' (1794), *Burke's Works* iii, 513.

campaign which professed, Burke noted, 'an implacable hostility to nobility and gentry, and whose savage war-whoop was "*a l'Aristocrate*".¹⁹ Measures had been taken to dismantle the aristocracy. In August 1789, the feudal system was abolished; and most of the seigneurial rights and privileges soon went with it. The noble titles, one year later (June 1790), were also officially annulled; hence, all the noble names and titular descriptions were decried 'as something horrible and offensive to the Ears of mankind'.²⁰ The nobility of France thus fell to the ground and, after this fall, many of its members were 'degraded in their rank, undone in their fortunes, fugitives in their persons'.²¹ Indeed, Burke lamented, the Revolution had destroyed a vast body of nobility and gentry who were, he claimed, '*amongst* the first in the world for Splendour, and the *very* first for disinterested services to their Country':

These they persecuted, they hunted down like wild **b**easts, they expelled them from their families and their houses, and dispersed them into every Country in Europe, obliging them either to pine in fear and misery at home, or to escape into want and exile in foreign Lands.

It led to the utter dissolution of the French noblesse: 'There are, at this day,' Burke estimated in 1792, 'no fewer than ten thousand heads of respectable families driven out of France; and those remain at home, remain in depression, penury, and continual alarm for their Lives.'²²

The fate of the French church had not fared better. Anti-clericalism constituted another feature of the French Revolution, one of whose great aims, Burke indicated, had been '*to destroy their Church*'.²³ The Revolution had pursued its policy of desecrating the Gallican church through two stages. It had first acted, in November 1789, to secularise the property of the church, whose economic basis was hence shattered. The confiscation of ecclesiastical estates had been made under the pretext of rescuing the financial crisis of the state. Burke, however, was to denounce it as no less than a blasphemous plunder of the church and an unjustifiable punishment of

¹⁹ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works* iii, 277.

²⁰ *Corr.*, vii, 55. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

²¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 114.

²² *Corr.*, vii, 55, 60. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

²³ *Corr.*, vi, 103. 'To John Noble - 14 March 1790'.

virtually 'all prelates'.²⁴ It tended to debase the holy order, reducing many 'men of opulent condition, and their innumerable dependents, to the last distress'.²⁵ The next step was the introduction of the *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* (July 1790), which was intended to reorganise the Church of France, with a view to turning it into a mere civil institution of the state. It proposed, on the one hand, to salary, and hence to equalise, the clergy and, on the other, to render all clerical offices elective. To Burke, in fact, these plans were deliberate attempts to degrade the clergy and, utterly, to abolish the church.²⁶ The enforcement of such measures, in fine, had incurred great injustice. Those who refused their oaths to support the *Civil Constitution* had become the objects of merciless persecution:

That these tests were. . . to enable men to hold a poor compensation for their legal estates, of which they had been unjustly deprived; and, as they had before been reduced from affluence to indigence; so, on refusal to swear against their conscience, they are now driven from indigence to famine, and treated with every possible degree of outrage, insult, and inhumanity.

It developed into a new persecution, which turned out to be 'infinitely more bitter than any which had been heard of within this century'.²⁷

If the ancien regime had irrevocably fallen, what about the new order then? The Revolution, of course, had its noble goal. It was well known that the French people had revolted for the 'rights of man', and that by revolution they meant to bring in a free system of government. It should therefore be enquired: had this object been achieved? The Revolution would be for no purpose should that effort fail. To Burke, however, the prospect seemed deeply pessimistic. The French, he claimed, had brought in a new order which tended to be in all appearance 'a most bungling, and unworkmanlike performance'. It contained in its structure no principle of coherence, cooperation, or just subordination; and the whole would turn rather against the 'condition and wants of the state'.²⁸

²⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 418.

²⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 94. 'To Captain Thomas Mercer - 26 Feb. 1790'.

²⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 418-9; Edmund Burke, 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies' (1793), *Burke's Works*, iii, 443; *Corr.*, viii, 204-5. 'To the Rev. Thomas Hussey - 17 March 1795'.

²⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 9-10.

²⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 80. 'To Unknown - (Jan. 1790)'.

When Burke approached the new order of France, his attention was first drawn to the conspicuous fact that many proclaimed principles of the Revolution had been grossly transgressed. The National Assembly, he observed, had in its conduct 'directly violated not only every sound principle of government, but every one, without exception, of their own false or futile maxims; and indeed every rule they had pretended to lay down for their own direction'.²⁹ The 'rights of man', for example, had been asserted as the Bible of the Revolution; ironically, it was this doctrine which was first to be violated. It occurred notably in the new system of representation which was designed to be based on the triple bases of territory, population and contribution. According to the principle of territory, one third of the representation would be deputed purely on account of geographical arrangement. In this respect, that is, the doctrine of the 'rights of man' would be totally irrelevant. The second basis was population, which, in principle, ought to take account of nothing but persons, who, by the 'rights of man' principle, 'are strictly equal, and are entitled to equal rights in their own government'. If this principle was observed, all men in France would be possessed of unconditional votes. In contradiction to this, however, electoral qualifications had been set up. It was thus instituted that a direct tax of three days' labour would be required for voting in the primary assemblies, six days' labour for the secondary assemblies and finally the value of a mark of silver for deputies to the National Assembly. With Burke, these qualifications constituted an audacious and inconsistent encroachment upon the 'indefeasible rights of men': 'You order him to buy the right, which you before told him nature had given to him gratuitously at his birth, and of which no authority on earth could lawfully deprive him.' Though admittedly not so oppressive, they were none the less strong enough to destroy the rights of men. It would exclude from a vote the man whose natural equality stood the most in need of protection and defence. It was indeed to sacrifice a man 'who has nothing else but his natural equality to guard him'.³⁰

The last basis of the representation, again, had entirely lost sight of the 'rights of man'. It was grounded upon the principle of contribution, which, having rested '*entirely* on property', was in Burke's eyes 'totally different from the equality of men and utterly irreconcilable to it'. The National Assembly was itself not blind to this fact, which proved too obvious to be ignored. To make up such incongruity, a grotesque

²⁹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 11.

³⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 444-446.

compromise had been worked out. It was thus proposed that the representation in terms of contribution would be granted to the department as a whole rather than the individuals who paid. Upon this plan, in other words, different departments would be represented unequally in line with their mass contributions to the state, while all the franchised individuals within the same department would vote 'upon an exact par'. Here, however, Burke was keen to discern a double violation of principle. On the one hand, the principle of property was no sooner admitted than it was subverted again. For though the predominance of property was in this case secured to the whole department, the individuals who actually paid the highest contributions were not entitled to benefit from the advantage of their own riches. At the same time, according to this principle, voters from different departments would probably enjoy different votes. Consequently, Burke declared, the principle of equality which had been previously violated when tax qualifications were set, would be invaded again, even among the franchised voters themselves.³¹ The new system of France, as a whole, had failed to materialise the principle of the 'rights of man'.

The professed principle of democracy, meanwhile, had been crippled as well. Burke contended that France, if she stuck strictly to her principles, would have established a democracy which, except for an hereditary monarch, could become 'much more truly democratical than that of North America'.³² The reality, however, proved to be far otherwise. The spirit of a pure democracy, in Burke's opinion, consisted in the practice that every man could 'vote directly for the person who was to represent him in the legislature'. The advantages of this were twofold. It would, first, enable the voters to know their candidates before their votes were cast and, secondly, allow the constituents to retain some hold upon their deputies by personal obligation so as to secure the latter's accountability. But the new electoral system of France had violated this principle. It adopted a scheme of indirect elections, according to which the deputies to the legislature would be elected through three stages rather than chosen directly by the primary constituents. In this manner, the constituents would be rendered unable either to know the qualities of their deputies, or to call them to account for their conduct in case of abuse. Under this system, indeed, there would exist 'little, or rather no, connexion' between the last representative and the

³¹ *Ibid.*, 446-447.

³² *Corr.*, vi, 25. 'To William Windham - 27 Sept. 1789'.

first constituent.³³ It distorted the spirit of election and thereby compromised the principle of democracy.

The 'rights of man' and democracy had been both declared as the fundamental principles of the French Revolution; their being grossly violated, therefore, became highly significant. It served to prove that the French principles, for all their boasted excellence, were futile in practice. Indeed, Burke tended to believe, their practical futility would ultimately rather argue their theoretical falsehood: '[C]an false political principles,' he wondered, 'be more effectually exposed, than by demonstrating that they lead to consequences directly inconsistent with and subversive of the arrangements grounded upon them?'³⁴

If the principles of the Revolution had been found wanting, revolution politics, in Burke's eyes, appeared all the more reprehensible. It was observed, first of all, that the new political structure of France was extremely defective. The National Assembly, Burke pointed out, had taken advantage of the national crisis illegally to seize the supreme authority of the nation. It came to monopolise virtually all the power of the state.³⁵ But its whole structure stood in need of a mechanism of checks and balances. Externally, the executive branch of the state had already been rendered virtually subservient; there was, besides, neither a senate nor an independent judicature to serve as its restraint or corrective.³⁶ Internally, meanwhile, the National Assembly, since it was newly formed, had no fundamental laws, strict conventions, or respected usage to be its own regulation.³⁷ The moderate wing of its members, moreover, had, from the start, been either purged or intimidated into silence; and one potential brake from within was hence also lost.³⁸ In the end, Burke declared, the National Assembly, because of no proper control, had grown into a body possessed of almost 'every possible power': 'Their idea of their powers is always taken at the utmost stretch of legislative competency'.³⁹ 'Nothing in heaven or upon earth,' he added, 'can serve as

³³ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 444-445, 458-460.

³⁴ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 522.

³⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 315, 435.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 468-78.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 318, 467-8.

³⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 340; 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 9.

³⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 467-8.

control on them.⁴⁰

Powerful as it appeared to be, nevertheless, the National Assembly had its own troubles. It had always to suffer the tyranny of a tumultuous mob, which was ever 'ready to Hang them' should they depart from its will.⁴¹ It must also face the intimidation of an unruly army, which 'would instantly dissolve them' if they ordered it to disband. Under such interventions, Burke claimed, the National Assembly had not only lost its independence, but could not even maintain the 'physiognomy and aspect of a grave legislative body'. In fact, its members had acted before the mob but

the farce of deliberation with as little decency as liberty. They act like the comedians of a fair before a riotous audience; they act amidst the tumultuous cries of a mixed mob of ferocious men, and of women lost to shame, who, according to their insolent fancies, direct, control, applaud, explode them; and sometimes mix and take their seats amongst them; domineering over them with a strange mixture of servile petulance and proud, presumptuous authority.⁴²

The Assembly was, that is, reduced to no more than the organ of the Parisian mob.⁴³ It might appear powerful when following the 'popular voice', but it was virtually possessed of no decided authority. The legislators there could have neither real deliberative capacity nor free judgment.⁴⁴ With a 'compelled appearance of deliberation', Burke added, their votes were all carried out under the 'dominion of a stern necessity':

It is notorious, that all their measures are decided before they are debated. It is beyond doubt, that under the terror of the bayonet, and the lamp-post, and the torch to their houses, they are obliged to adopt all the crude and desperate measures suggested by the clubs composed of a monstrous medley of all conditions, tongues and nations.⁴⁵

The new democracy of France had, in this manner, degenerated into a mere tyranny of

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 318.

⁴¹ *Corr.*, vi, 25. 'To William Windham - 27 Sept. 1789'.

⁴² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 340-1.

⁴³ *Corr.*, vi, 36. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 12 Nov. 1789'.

⁴⁴ *Corr.*, vi, 25. 'To William Windham - 27 Sept. 1789'.

⁴⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 340-341.

'a licentious, ferocious, and savage multitude'.⁴⁶

Burke had, in the quotation above, mentioned the 'clubs'; here, he took notice of another vital aspect of revolutionary politics. The formal government of France, it seemed, had disintegrated in the ferment of the Revolution. From this angle, Burke claimed, revolutionary France had in reality 'no government', and the power of the state fell into the hands of 'factions'.⁴⁷ It was obvious that by 'factions' he must have referred to those political associations, that is, the 'Clubbs and committees',⁴⁸ which, since the Revolution, had mushroomed throughout France. Among them the most predominant were, no doubt, the Jacobin clubs,⁴⁹ which soon became the only power that directed all the affairs of state:

This is the power now paramount to every thing, even to the Assembly itself called National, and that to which tribunals, priesthood, laws, finances, and both descriptions of military power, are wholly subservient.⁵⁰

France was, Burke pointed out, in effect governed by 'two hundred and fifty clubs'.⁵¹ Most of them were again affiliated to the 'great patriarchal Jacobiniere of Paris'. These Jacobin clubs had gained almost an absolute power. There was in that country no other authority, judicial or executive, that could have the least weight with them, whenever they chose to interfere; and 'they chose to interfere in everything, and on every occasion'.⁵² During the National Convention, moreover, commissioners had been dispatched to make continual circuits through every district and every army. 'There they supersede all the ordinary authorities civil and military, and change and alter everything at their pleasure.' New magistrates were imposed upon the people, without even 'the form or ceremony of an election'.⁵³ Thus, an affected democracy was

⁴⁶ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 14.

⁴⁷ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority' (1793), *Burke's Works* iii, 490.

⁴⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 55. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

⁴⁹ For a modern study of the Jacobin clubs, see: Michael L. Kennedy, *The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution: The First Years* (Princeton, 1982).

⁵⁰ 'Thoughts on French Affairs, &c. &c.' (1791), *Burke's Works* iii, 372.

⁵¹ *Corr.*, vii, 61. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

⁵² 'Preface to the Address of M. Brissot to His Constituents', *Burke's Works*, iii, 524.

⁵³ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 419, 421.

heading, Burke lamented, 'in a direct train of becoming shortly a mischievous and ignoble oligarchy'.⁵⁴

Burke was convinced that the Jacobins would, in the end, have to maintain their absolute rule by sheer terror and persecution. These people were activists who were always vigilant and who had never been slow in taking the alarm against any discontent.⁵⁵ Those discontented, if they should dare to stir, would soon be suppressed as 'rebels and mutineers'. And whoever was suspected of opposition would have to answer it 'with his life, or the lives of his wife and children'.⁵⁶ Their treatment of their opponents, above all, was all the more cruel. To those royalists 'who contend for their lawful government, their property, and their religion', Burke observed, they had never shown 'the least tincture of mercy'.⁵⁷ During the high time of terror (1793-94), worst of all, the committees of 'vigilance and safety' had been everywhere set up and all kinds of inquisition, imprisonment, confiscation and execution had hence followed. 'We see every man, that the Jacobins choose to apprehend, taken up in his village or in his house, and conveyed to prison without the least shadow of resistance.'⁵⁸ Indeed, Burke exclaimed, the terror had once become such that 'You cannot see one of those wretches without an alarm for your life as well as your goods'.⁵⁹ And here, he was angered, had ended 'all the deceitful dreams and visions of the equality and rights of men'.⁶⁰

The military establishment of France, next, also fell into complete disarray; and Burke, from the start, had felt great concern over the 'late assumption of citizenship by the army, and the whole of the arrangement, or rather disarrangement, of their military'. The French Revolution had indeed seriously weakened the discipline of the army. Soldiers were seen debauched from their officers and turned into 'base hireling mutineers, and mercenary sordid deserters'. Many of them had deserted their ranks, and melted into 'a furious, licentious populace'. The entire organisation was on the

⁵⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 396.

⁵⁵ 'Preface to the Address of M. Brissot to His Constituents', *Burke's Works*, iii, 523, 525.

⁵⁶ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 525, 542.

⁵⁷ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 384-385.

⁵⁸ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 418, 420.

⁵⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 385.

⁶⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 465.

brink of total anarchy: 'In the present state of the French crown army,' thus Burke enquired,

is the crown responsible for the whole of it? Is there any general who can be responsible for the obedience of a brigade? Any colonel for that of a regiment? Any captain for that of a company? And as to the municipal army, reinforced as it is by the new citizen-deserters, under whose command are they? Have we not seen them, not led by, but dragging, their nominal commander with a rope about his neck, when they, or those whom they accompanied, proceeded to the most atrocious acts of treason and murder?⁶¹

In Burke's opinion, nevertheless, these disorders had originated mainly from the ill-judged policies of the Revolution itself.

The National Assembly had, through various ways, conduced to undermine military discipline. First of all, Burke pointed out, the Assembly, in order to secure control over the army, had started with a mischievous operation by bribing the soldiers to 'an universal revolt against their Officers'.⁶² Likewise, all the happenings of the Revolution that passed before the soldiers' eyes could not fail to make an impact:

The soldiers remember the 6th of October. They recollect the French guards. They have not forgotten the taking of the king's castles in Paris and Marseilles. That the governors in both places were murdered with impunity, is a fact that has not passed out of their minds. They do not abandon the principles laid down so ostentatiously and laboriously of the equality of men. They cannot shut their eyes to the degradation of the whole noblesse of France, and the suppression of the very idea of a gentleman. The total abolition of titles and distinctions is not lost upon them.

Experiences of this nature, there was no doubt, must add to sap their respect of authority. Furthermore, Burke went on, efforts were also made to instill in the soldiers the spirit of the Revolution. For this purpose, the National Assembly had undertaken to disseminate among the army all its resolutions, proceedings and debates, and all those works of the 'doctors in religion and politics'. It had in this manner, Burke claimed, virtually kept a 'school' systematically to spread principles 'destructive to all spirit of subordination':

⁶¹ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works* iii, 273, 276-278.

⁶² *Corr.*, vii, 55. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

The soldier is told he is a citizen, and has the rights of man and citizen. The right of a man, he is told, is to be his own governor, and to be ruled only by those to whom he delegates that self-government. It is very natural he should think that he ought most of all to have his choice where he is to yield the greatest degree of obedience.

Burke asserted that such doctrines were detrimental to the unity of the army. They struck at the central point, around which 'the particles that compose armies are at repose': 'They have destroyed the principle of obedience in the great, essential, critical link between the officer and the soldier, just where the chain of military subordination commences and on which the whole of that system depends.'⁶³

A fatal mistake was further committed when the National Assembly came to cope with the disorder of the army. Instead of rigorous measures being taken to stop this 'most terrible of all evils', the army had been urged to mingle with local 'clubs and confederations', and take part in their 'feasts and civic entertainments'. It was hoped that through free conversations between soldiers and citizens, the army could imbibe civic virtues which might help to soften their ferocious nature, thus disposing them to obey. Burke, however, considered this to be chimerical. He was convinced that 'civic swearing, clubbing, and feasting' could never become the proper means to teach soldiers better to observe the austere rules of military discipline. Rather, he asserted, all such schemes to fraternise 'mutinous soldiers' with 'seditious citizens' would weaken still more the military connections between soldiers and their officers. They might perhaps serve to produce 'admirable citizens after the French mode, but not quite so good soldiers after any mode'.⁶⁴

The command of the army had betrayed serious problems, too. The military forces, Burke claimed, could never exist 'under a divided command'; the army of France unfortunately was in need of 'a single authority'.⁶⁵ Within the new structure of power, the command of the king was but nominal because he would often be hamstrung by the National Assembly, which was the 'true seat of power'. Their discord would become all the more obvious on the issue of promotion, over which the king had no more than a provisional power of nomination, while the National Assembly reserved the final say. This divided authority, Burke feared, would bring about adverse effects.

⁶³ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 482-483, 490-1, 495-496.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 483-485, 487.

⁶⁵ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 277-278.

Those officers who were not favoured by the king, but could carry their promotions through their personal connections in the Assembly, would slight the king's authority, while those who were recommended by the king yet rejected by the Assembly, were likely to 'nourish discontents in the heart of the army against the ruling powers'. It was, thus, to sow the seeds of factionalism which could lead utterly to jeopardise the efficiency of the army itself.⁶⁶

According to Burke, above all, the king and the National Assembly had in fact both their own weaknesses with regard to military command. No army could be led without a 'real, rigorous, effective, decided, personal authority'; before the army, then, the king must be every thing, or he would be nothing. Since the French King was, as noted above, possessed of no real authority, there was no way that he could effectively command the army. Meanwhile, the National Assembly, though it had ultimate authority, was apt to be crippled by its own internal instability. As the Assembly must be re-elected every two years, its policy could become 'as uncertain as their duration is transient'. Armies, Burke observed, had so far pledged a very precarious obedience to popular authority; and least of all would they yield to an assembly which was to have but a short duration. With the weakness of the king on the one hand and the fluctuation of the National Assembly on the other, Burke warned, the army could remain 'for some time mutinous and full of faction', until

some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiers, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself. Armies will obey him on his personal account.

There would be no other way out. But once such a strong man should emerge, he predicted, the whole course of the Revolution would end with a military dictatorship, and 'the person who really commands the army is your master; the master . . . of your king, the master of your Assembly, the master of your whole republic'.⁶⁷

There is little doubt that the French Revolution was largely caused by the financial crisis of the old regime. The immediate object of the National Assembly, as Burke pointed out, was, of course, to 'improve the system of revenue'. It is then necessary, at last, to see how this problem had been dealt with. The finances of France, like

⁶⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 488.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 488-489.

other sectors, had been similarly cast into confusion during the Revolution. Here, Burke was again ready to blame this chaos on the National Assembly itself, whose imprudent act, he claimed, had added to worsen the financial disorder of the state. The Assembly had, among others, chosen to decry their ancient system of taxation in many of its most essential branches, the salt tax for instance, charging them with being 'ill-contrived, oppressive, and partial'. This public denunciation led to bad effects. It encouraged the people of the salt provinces, who were already impatient under taxes, immediately to relieve themselves by throwing off the whole burden. Other districts, animated by this example, soon followed suit; and many of them came to take upon themselves to judge their grievances by their own feelings, to apply their remedies by their own opinions, and, most of all, to decide 'what part of the old revenue they might withhold'.⁶⁸

A government, to be sure, could not subsist without a sound revenue; how, then, had the National Assembly managed to finance the new regime? 'In the destruction of the Old Revenue constitution they find no difficulties – but with what to supply them is the Opus,' claimed Burke.⁶⁹ The Assembly was found not able to secure an ample revenue. According to its own committee report, Burke pointed out, the national income of France since the Revolution, far from increasing, had in reality declined by more than one third. Notwithstanding, the expenditure of the new government, considering its financial situation, seemed to remain as prodigal as ever. Deficits, hence, continued to be a difficult problem. To Burke's chagrin, moreover, the new taxation was not in fact imposed with judgement and equality. Facing resistance from the districts, the National Assembly, not capable of enforcing an equal and universal imposition, was driven instead to tax 'by dispositions'. Those parts of the country which were the most submissive, the most orderly, or the most affectionate to the government, as a result, were forced to bear 'the whole burthen of the state'. It turned out to be as unjust as it was oppressive. Since this arbitrary taxation was unable to answer the financial needs, the National Assembly, next, ventured to make up the deficiency by appealing to 'voluntary benevolence', which Burke would brand as a 'tax in the disguise of benevolence'. Finally, 'patriotic donations' were even called for to make good the failure of the former. These last two measures were obviously desperate projects which, Burke stressed, were rarely resorted to during the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 496, 499–500.

⁶⁹ *Corr.*, vi, 25. 'To William Windham – 27 Sept. 1789'.

peacetime, and which, he added, even if able to meet their end for the moment, could not be expected to solve their fundamental financial problem. They would rather serve to drain off the resources of the nation. In truth, Burke remarked: 'The whole indeed of their scheme of revenue is to make, by any artifice, an appearance of a full reservoir for the hour, whilst at the same time they cut off the springs and living fountains of perennial supply.'⁷⁰

All these plans of impositions, not surprisingly, had failed to 'fill up any perceptible part of the wide gaping breach which their incapacity has made in their revenues'.⁷¹ It was also deemed not to be feasible for the new government to raise loans, as was usually done during the old regime, since it, Burke claimed, had not yet existed long enough to establish 'a foundation of Credit'.⁷² In desperation, the issue of the 'assignats' seemed to become their last resort.

The question of the assignats actually constituted the main theme in Burke's criticism of the financial policy of the Revolution. Burke did not in principle dispute the use of paper currency, but he had great doubt about the ability of the National Assembly to give it a sound credit, which would be essential for its normal circulation. The credit of a government, Burke pointed out, depended very much on whether it could secure a settled revenue. The paper currency issued, to a large extent, had to represent the real cash on reserve, or it would become no more than a fictitious bill. In the present case, however, the order was completely reversed, for the assignats, instead of representing real money, had rather stood for the 'total and urgent want of it'.⁷³ It might of course be argued that the assignats would be funded upon the appropriated church property and royal domains. For Burke, nevertheless, this plan would be tantamount to establish 'a current circulating credit' upon a '*Landbank*' which seemed never quite reliable.⁷⁴ To make matters worse, the poor management of the National Assembly also added to weaken the speculated credit of the confiscated estates. No effort had been made to assess the correct assets and liabilities of these properties. It was indeed discovered later that the financial burden which the National Assembly, after the confiscation, had to take over from the church had amounted to a

⁷⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 499-501.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 501.

⁷² *Corr.*, vi, 53. 'To Philip Francis - 12 Dec. 1789'.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁷⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 505.

sum much larger than could be expected from the church property. The revenue to be secured from the sale of the royal domains was also found to have been grossly exaggerated.⁷⁵ But these resources would be used to fund the assignats; that was to be depended on as the financial panacea to 'cure all the evils of the state':

Is there a debt which presses them? - Issue *assignats*. Are compensations to be made, or a maintenance decreed to those whom they have robbed of their freehold in their office, or expelled from their profession? - *Assignats*. Is a fleet to be fitted out? - *Assignats*. If sixteen millions sterling of these *assignats*, forced upon the people, leave the wants of the state as urgent as ever - issue, says one, thirty millions sterling of *assignats* - says another, issue fourscore millions more of *assignats* . . . They are all professors of *assignats*. Even those, whose natural good sense and knowledge of commerce. . . furnish decisive arguments against this delusion, conclude their arguments, by proposing the emission of *assignats* . . . All experience of their inefficacy does not in the least discourage them. Are the old *assignats* depreciated at market? - What is the remedy? - Issue new *assignats* . . .

There appeared to be no other prop 'than this confiscation to keep the whole state from tumbling to the ground'.⁷⁶

For want of a solid credit, the value of the assignats proved untenable. There had occurred, Burke reported, an immediate depreciation of 'five per cent., which in a little time came to about seven'.⁷⁷ He went on to predict that the assignats would result in a total depreciation when once the sale of the confiscated property ran out.⁷⁸ It had, indeed, at one time 'sunk so very low, as to leave but one, and that a very short, step to its utter annihilation'.⁷⁹ Unable to stand upon its own credit, the assignats, at last, had to be supported by the sheer power of government. It was later declared to be legal tender, that was hence to be received compulsorily:

They have compelled all men, in all transactions of commerce, in the disposal of lands, in civil dealing, and through the whole communion of life, to accept as perfect payment and good and lawful tender, the

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 507; 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 371.

⁷⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 503-504, 509.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 510.

⁷⁸ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 372.

⁷⁹ *Corr*, vii, 389. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (Circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

symbols of their speculations on a projected sale of their plunder.⁸⁰

Burke asserted that, when once a state compelled its creditors to take paper currency to clear its debts, there was a virtual bankruptcy.⁸¹ He had soon pointed out that France had sunk everyday more and more in real cash, and swollen more and more in 'fictitious representation', that 'so little within or without is now found but paper'. In France, at last, the assignats turned out to be not so much a symbol of prosperity, as the 'badge of distress'.⁸² It was, he added, made the 'instrument of all the interior miseries of France'.⁸³

Having so far examined the new order in its essential aspects, Burke was utterly convinced that the French Revolution had proved to be a great disaster. Instead of redressing grievances and improving the fabric of the state, the Revolution had brought on France devastations which nothing but a long war could ever bring down on a country.⁸⁴ For sure, the burden of the people had not been relieved 'in any form'.⁸⁵ Yet, the vigour of the nation had suffered such a dilapidation that, Burke apprehended, it might take a very long time before France could be restored to her former active existence.⁸⁶ He came to conclude that 'France has bought undisguised calamities at a higher price than any nation has purchased the most unequivocal blessings'.⁸⁷

Indeed, the people of France failed to achieve freedom. For all their boasted commitment to the ideal of the 'rights of man', Burke claimed, their sacrifice for the Revolution had in fact not been made on the altar of liberty.⁸⁸ The Revolution had brought France sinking into a state no better than 'a series of shortlived tyrannies'. It ushered in a regime which turned out to be, he declared, of all the governments the

⁸⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 423.

⁸¹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 370.

⁸² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 501-502.

⁸³ *Corr*, vii, 381. 'To the Duke of Portland - 1 Aug. 1793'.

⁸⁴ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 275.

⁸⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 512-513.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 403; 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 270; *Corr*, vi, 36. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 12 Nov. 1789'.

⁸⁷ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 311.

⁸⁸ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 275.

most absolute and despotic. '[I]t is the only nation I ever heard of, where the people are absolutely slaves, in the fullest sense, in all affairs public and private, great and small, even down to the minutest and most recondite parts of their household concerns.'⁸⁹ The French people had replaced an abusive government with a tyrannical regime;⁹⁰ indeed, they only changed 'one piece of barbarism for another, and a worse'.⁹¹ All that France had so far acquired, Burke continued, was 'not a comparative good, but a positive evil'. He was convinced

that the present state of things in France is not a transient evil, productive of a lasting good; but that the present evil is only the means of producing future and (if that were possible) worse evils. - That it is not an undigested, imperfect, and crude scheme of liberty, which may gradually be mellowed and ripened into an orderly and social freedom; but that it is so fundamentally wrong, as to be utterly incapable of correcting itself by any length of time, or of being formed into any mode of polity. . .⁹²

To Burke, in the final analysis, the new liberty which the Revolution claimed to have achieved would come to be no more than a 'frantic delusion'.⁹³

As for the future of France, the prospect did not look optimistic. Born of violence, Burke pointed out, the French democracy had begun ill. 'I feel no security, that what has been rapacious and bloody in its commencement, will be mild and protecting in its final settlement.'⁹⁴ Since violence and anarchy had almost become the order of the day, he feared that, as long as the Revolution lasted, the French people would renew over again 'the same ferocious delight in murder and the same savage cruelty'.⁹⁵ Before a final settlement could be achieved, Burke predicted, France might 'be obliged to pass, as one of our poets says, "through great varieties of untried being", and in all its transmigrations to be purified by fire and blood'.⁹⁶ This verdict proved prophetic.

⁸⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 400-401.

⁹⁰ *Corr.*, vi, 97. 'To Captain Thomas Mercer - 26 Feb. 1790'.

⁹¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 13.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁹³ *Corr.*, vi, 97. 'To Captain Thomas Mercer - 26 Feb. 1790'.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 79. 'To Unknown - (Jan. 1790)'.

⁹⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 517.

But to sum up his overall opinion of, and his general feeling about, the French Revolution, Burke had thus concluded:

All circumstances taken together, the French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world. The most wonderful things are brought about in many instances by means the most absurd and ridiculous; in the most ridiculous modes; and, apparently, by the most contemptible instruments. Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies.

When one came to view this 'monstrous tragi-comic scene', he added, the most opposite passions must 'necessarily succeed, and sometimes mix with each other in the mind; alternate contempt and indignation; alternate laughter and tears; alternate scorn and horror'.⁹⁷

II

Burke was ever of the opinion that the French Revolution would infallibly make a far-reaching impact on the future of Europe. 'The great Revolution which has taken place in France,' he told the Earl of Charlemont, 'threatned to make no small change in the State of the rest of the world, and in our part of it as well as in any other.'⁹⁸ He discerned very keenly that an alarming situation was being ushered in. For the first time, a political movement, based on the principle of the 'rights of men' and slighted hitherto as merely speculative, was proving to be a thing feasible in practice; and this very fact, Burke stressed, was to make a 'mighty difference in the effect of the doctrine'.⁹⁹ Viewing it from the perspective of a long European political tradition, he believed, as a result of its triumph in France, a 'practicable breach' had already been made 'in the whole order of things and in every country'.¹⁰⁰ 'This declaration of a *new species* of government, on new principles. . . is a real crisis in the politics of Europe.'¹⁰¹ And it was a great crisis, he added, 'not of the affairs of France alone, but

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁹⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 330. 'To the Earl of Charlemont - 8 Aug. 1791'.

⁹⁹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 379.

¹⁰⁰ 'Letter to William Elliot, Esq.', *Burke's Works*, v, 77.

¹⁰¹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 349.

of all Europe, perhaps of more than Europe'.¹⁰² The triumph of Jacobinism in France had sparked off a universal conflagration which had spread over Europe,¹⁰³ and

The whole Edifice of antient Europe is shaken by the Earthquake caused by that fire – one part of the Building only is level with the ground – but all is impaired very considerably.¹⁰⁴

No nation, in sum, could stay out of the danger.¹⁰⁵

The danger came chiefly from the extraordinary nature of the French Revolution itself. In the past, Burke pointed out, revolution always tended to be no more than the internal affair of one government. It had mostly turned on matters but of 'local grievance', or of 'local accommodation', and therefore could have little or nothing to do with the interests of neighbouring countries. But the French Revolution was of quite another character and description: it seemed, observed Burke,

to bear little resemblance or analogy to any of those which have been brought about in Europe, upon principles merely political. *It is a revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogma.* It has a much greater resemblance to those changes which have been made upon religious grounds.

Its principles, like those of the Reformation of the sixteenth century, were such as by its essence could not be local, or confined to the country of its origin.¹⁰⁶ They, Burke made clear, 'are *general* principles, and are as true in England as in any other country'.¹⁰⁷ A revolution based on such principles should therefore become the common concern of all, since the mischief it would produce would likewise admit no territorial limit, and would thus turn out to be a 'general evil'.¹⁰⁸

As the French Revolution assumed a character similar to that of the Reformation,

¹⁰² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 284.

¹⁰³ 'Preface to the Address of M. Brissot to His Constituents', *Burke's Works* iii, 527.

¹⁰⁴ *Corr.*, vii, 191. 'Edmund and Jane Burke to William Burke – 3 Sept. 1793'.

¹⁰⁵ 'Preface to the Address of M. Brissot to His Constituents', *Burke's Works* iii, 526.

¹⁰⁶ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 349–350.

¹⁰⁷ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 219.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 232; *Corr.*, vii, 384. 'To Lieutenant General Edward, Count Dalton – 6 Aug. 1793'.

so the revolutionaries were imbued with the fanaticism of religious bigots and, accordingly, carried with them a spirit of 'proselytism' which, Burke noted, always made an essential part of a religious movement. This spirit of proselytism had the tendency of expanding itself with great elasticity upon all sides; and its effect was to 'introduce other interests into all countries than those which arose from their locality and natural circumstances'.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Burke noticed that French principles had been laboriously spread among 'very many persons, and descriptions of persons' in every country.¹¹⁰ He pointed out that everywhere the revolutionaries were busy in nourishing their faction of 'opinion', 'interest' and 'enthusiasm':¹¹¹

It exists in every country in Europe; and among all orders of men in every country, who look up to France as to a common head. The centre is there. The circumference is the world of Europe wherever the race of Europe may be settled. Everywhere else the faction is militant; in France it is triumphant. In France it is the bank of deposit, and the bank of circulation, of all the pernicious principles that are forming in every state.

Their ambition, Burke warned, was to establish a 'comprehensive system of universal fraternity' or, in other words, to build 'an universal empire, by producing an universal revolution'.¹¹²

Every effort Burke had made was intended to demonstrate that the revolution in France would eventually compromise the common liberty and independence of all nations and all governments.¹¹³ As for the direction, and the order, this predicted universal revolution would start and prevail, he admitted, at the time when he was writing his *Thoughts on French Affairs* (1791), that it was not easy to tell. One thing however was certain: the seeds of convulsion had already been sown here and there; and in many places symptoms of its imminent eruption were discernible:

Many parts of Europe are in open disorder. In many others there is a hollow murmuring under ground; a confused movement is felt, that

¹⁰⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 424; 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 350.

¹¹⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 426.

¹¹¹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 165.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 232, 268, 304-5.

¹¹³ *Corr.*, viii, 134. 'To William Windham - (circa 2 Feb. 1795)'.

threatens a general earthquake in the political world.

Great discontent was found to have been stirred up in the Swiss republic of Berne, 'one of the happiest, the most prosperous, and the best governed countries'; and throughout Germany, Italy and Spain, the revolutionaries were active. Even England, Burke added, was not left out of the 'comprehensive scheme of their malignant charity'.¹¹⁴

According to Burke's observation, on the continent Germany, Switzerland, and then Italy, would be ranked among the first objects for the ambition of the French revolutionaries. The situations of these countries were quite similar. Politically, none of them had been closely unified into a single political entity. They each comprehended respectively under 'some general geographical description' several small member states which were widely diversified in their forms of government and were but 'loosely united by some federal constitution'.¹¹⁵ This ensured their common weakness.

Considering its overall situation, Burke pointed out that Germany was under a 'very critical situation', subject to 'the contagion of the French doctrines and the effect of French intrigues'. Externally, the laws and liberties, the independence and equilibrium, of the German empire had been maintained so far chiefly upon the international order structured by the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 which had been supported by the major European powers, particularly the 'old government' of France.¹¹⁶ But as the Revolution, argued Burke, had in a political sense expunged France out of the old system of Europe,¹¹⁷ the security of Germany was thus jeopardised. Internally, the old basis on which the German states stood was utterly incompatible with the new French principles:

the Germanic body is a vast mass of heterogeneous states, held together by that heterogeneous body of old principles, which formed the public law positive and doctrinal. The modern laws and liberties, which the new power in France proposes to introduce into Germany, and to support with all its force of intrigue and of arms, is of a very different nature, utterly irreconcilable with the first, and indeed fundamentally the reverse of it.

¹¹⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 424-6.

¹¹⁵ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 357.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 357.

¹¹⁷ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works* iii, 270.

It would therefore be impossible for such German principles of feudal tenure and succession to exist side by side with the French rights and liberties of man, the declared enemy to feudalism.¹¹⁸ Indeed, Burke insisted, ever since the first dawning of the Revolution the German empire had been one of the great objects which the French had sought to shatter.¹¹⁹ There, he noticed, the French principles had made 'an amazing progress', especially among the ecclesiastical states whose mild, indulgent and loose reins, Burke believed, had rather afforded their people the facility to lend themselves to any scheme of innovation. And he predicted that it was on these electorates that the 'first impressions of France are likely to be made'. But should they succeed there, he warned, it would be over with the Germanic body as it then stood.¹²⁰

Moreover, even the two leading German powers – Prussia and Austria – had not successfully warded off the penetration of French principles. Prussian ministers, Burke claimed, were deeply infected with the 'distemper of dangerous, because plausible, though trivial and shallow speculation', and generally looked up to the French Revolution as 'a great public good'. Their diplomats in foreign courts talked 'the most democratic language with regard to France, and in the most unmanaged terms'. In Austria, Burke alleged, the advisers of the Emperor had laboriously impressed him with the new philosophy which had destroyed the French monarchy. They were, he believed, persuading him, as a measure to consolidate his royal power, to pursue a most dangerous plan: to cultivate the lower orders in order to weaken the higher. 'The present policy, therefore, of the Austrian politicians,' exclaimed Burke, 'is to recover despotism through democracy'; and in defiance of the freshest experience of France, he was surprised to find, they seemed to think light of the formidable consequences of democracy.¹²¹

In Switzerland, Burke believed, the revolutionaries had entertained 'very sanguine hopes'. Since the Revolution they had already disturbed, as mentioned before, the republic of Berne, and had made, only narrowly failing of success, an attempt on Geneva. Because of its close connection with France, Switzerland, much more than Germany, had always depended on the support of the old French government for its

¹¹⁸ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 357.

¹¹⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 304.

¹²⁰ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 357-8.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 379-80, 382-4.

independence. The Swiss political system was a confederation weakly composed of several democratic and aristocratic republics. To the French, those democratic republics, because of their being democracies, were 'a work half done' for them to aggregate. As for the aristocratic ones, the general clamour and hatred aroused by the revolutionaries against aristocracy, and the want of troops in these republics to suppress insurrections, had made them vulnerable. In fact, Burke contended, these aristocracies had now become so dependent upon the opinion and humour of their multitude that 'the lightest puff of wind is sufficient to blow them down'.¹²²

Italy would be the next country under threat, though the danger there, Burke admitted, did not seem so imminent. In the Lombardy area, Savoy was to bear the brunt of the revolutionary attack. Historically, the French had always regarded this country as an 'old member of the kingdom of France', and had never given up their ambition to reunite it to them. Strategically, Savoy held the key to Italy; and if the French took it, they could easily lay open the 'barrier which hinders the entrance of her present politics into that inviting region'. As for other Lombardic states, Burke noted that Genoa had already established close connections with France, while Milan became increasingly unquiet. In southern Italy, both Naples and Sicily had long nourished 'an old, inveterate disposition to republicanism', which, Burke feared, would be as liable to explosion as Vesuvius. Finally, with regard to the Papal States, notwithstanding the Pope's vigilance against new doctrines, seeds of revolution had not been wanting. There were serious defects in their politics. The administration was, Burke pointed out, hopelessly dominated by nepotism; and their government was 'as blindly attached to old, abusive customs, as others are wildly disposed to all sorts of innovations and experiments'. More alarming, their most influential cardinal had nursed a disposition very 'turbulent, seditious, intriguing, bold, and desperate', and was most likely to conjure up a 'democratic spirit' among the people. Here Burke saw the real danger. If once the people of the Papal States should thereby shake off their blind reverence to the Pope, which was their only bridle, they would naturally become turbulent, ferocious and headlong, while 'the police is defective, and the government feeble and resourceless beyond all imagination'.¹²³

Other countries would also be affected by the Revolution to a greater or lesser degree. In southern Europe, Portugal was considered as 'out of the high road' of the

¹²² *Ibid.*, 361-2.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 362-4.

French politics, but Spain, however, could not be free from its spell, despite the effort of its aged inquisition to try to keep out the revolutionary influence. The people in the provinces of Catalonia and Aragon had, Burke noticed, kept a spirit of republicanism. 'They are more in the way of trade and intercourse with France; and, upon the least internal movement, will disclose and probably let loose a spirit that may throw the whole Spanish monarchy into convulsions.' In the northern part of Europe, Burke's attention was chiefly drawn to Sweden, since Denmark and Norway had shown no sign of a democratic revolution. The new political system of Sweden, which was brought into existence by its recent monarchical revolution, was, in Burke's opinion, too green, and too sore, to be considered as perfectly stabilised. And, he warned, there was a 'great danger that all the republican elements she contains will be animated by the new French spirit'. Among the eastern European countries, the Russian people, Burke remarked, were not great speculators; their governments were more liable to be subverted by military seditions, court conspiracies, or the headlong rebellions of the people, than by a revolution in the French style. None the less, Burke argued, the 'little catechism of the rights of men' was likely to be learned and manipulated, if such internal unrest should arise. As for Poland, it had always been a country of turbulence. Her new constitution of May 1791, in many respects similar to the French constitution of the same year, Burke contended, could but serve to 'supply that restless people with new means, at least new modes, of cherishing their turbulent disposition'.¹²⁴

With regard to the Low Countries, Burke pointed out that the ruling party of Holland was sound. But there had always existed, though suppressed, an anti-Orange party with long and strong French affiliations. This party, he believed, would ever hanker after a French connection, particularly when the French had just instituted a republican government so consonant with the one which these 'immoderate republicans began so very lately to introduce into Holland'. The situation of the Austrian Netherlands was much more serious. Like Savoy in Italy, these provinces were long regarded by the French as the oldest part of the ancient Gallic empire, and were geographically well situated to be reunited to France. The Austrian politics there, moreover, seemed highly imprudent: 'The subordinate court of Brussels talks the language of a club of Feuillans and Jacobins.'¹²⁵ Since the accession of Joseph II, the

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 364-8.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 368-9, 385.

policies of its Austrian rulers had been to destroy the historical Brabant constitution which had conferred the traditional rights of self-government on the provincial corporate bodies of nobility, clergy and guildsmen.¹²⁶ Such an anti-corporate policy, in Burke's opinion, was fundamentally injurious to the monarchical interest, because firstly, by infringing the privileges of its people, it would inevitably alienate their support and, secondly, by shaking these old corporations, it would destroy those ancient land-marks which had been the surest fortifications of the monarchical interest.¹²⁷ Indeed, the Emperor's efforts to 'crush the aristocratic party - and to nourish one in avowed connexion with the most furious democratists in France', it seemed to Burke, had just answered the purpose of the French revolutionaries.¹²⁸

In the survey above, Burke meant to demonstrate the widespread influence the Revolution would produce through Europe. Burke, however, acknowledged that, as regards the great European powers, the French, for all their ambitions, did not aim at making direct conquest, but by 'disturbing them through a propagation of their principles',

they hope to weaken, as they will weaken them, and to keep them in perpetual alarm and agitation, and thus render all their efforts against them utterly impracticable, whilst they extend the dominion of their sovereign anarchy on all sides.¹²⁹

Besides, from the view of geopolitics, he held that the impact of the Revolution on Germany would be the most fatal to the future of Europe. The equilibrium among the European nations had been inseparably associated with the stability and independence of Germany since the days of the Treaty of Westphalia. The old European system would collapse if the peace of Germany should be disturbed. It is from this perspective that Burke, after examining the situation of Germany, declared: 'A great revolution is preparing in Germany; and a revolution, in my opinion, likely to be more decisive upon the general fate of nations than that of France itself; other than as in France is to be found the first source of all the principles which are in any way likely

¹²⁶ Cf. Leonard Krieger, *Kings and Philopfers* (London, 1971), pp. 321-2.

¹²⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 266-8. 'To Claude-Francoise de Rivarol - 1 June 1791'.

¹²⁸ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 369.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 369.

to distinguish the troubles and convulsions of our age.¹³⁰

In addition to its impact on European politics, the French Revolution would at the same time have profound social consequences. Never before had the civil life of mankind been so deeply affected by political change. In the past, Burke observed, the greatest change which could be apprehended would have had little impact on the 'domestick happiness' of the majority of mankind, but now 'no mans Fireside is safe from the Effects of a political Revolution'.¹³¹ In the first place, the tranquillity and security of domestic life was to be undermined, for the Revolution had taught the doctrine of the rights of man which, Burke insisted, would encourage servants to betray their masters and thereby smash the domestic trust and fidelity which formed the 'discipline of social life'. Consequently, the home would be turned into a gloomy place where the father of a family must 'drag out a miserable existence' and feel 'solitary in a crowd of domestics'.¹³² Furthermore, the 'revolution harpies' would also disturb other aspects of social life: 'they are about us', Burke claimed,

They shake the public security; they menace private enjoyment. They dwarf the growth of the young, they break the quiet of the old. If we travel, they stop our way. They infest us in the town; they pursue us to the country. Our business is interrupted; our repose is troubled; our pleasures are saddened; our very studies are poisoned and perverted, and knowledge is rendered worse than ignorance, by the enormous evils of this dreadful innovation.¹³³

The whole system of the French Revolution had turned fundamentally against all laws on which 'civil life has hitherto been upheld'.¹³⁴ If it should prevail, no one, he insisted, could enjoy 'a thing so imperfect and precarious as human happiness must be, even under the very best of governments'.¹³⁵

There remains an important theme which underlies implicitly all Burke's reflections on the French Revolution and must be regarded, above all others, as his ultimate

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 358.

¹³¹ *Corr.*, viii, 45. 'To Loughborough - (19 Oct. 1794)'; *Corr.*, viii, 64. 'Reflections on the Breach in the Ministry'.

¹³² 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 541-2.

¹³³ Edmund Burke, 'A Letter to a Noble Lord' (1796), *Burke's Works*, v, 120, 121.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹³⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 11.

concern: that the ancient European culture was in crisis. In Burke's mind, the Revolution posed a radical challenge to the existence of European civilization. He saw, in the downfall of the ancien regime in France, that 'the very being and principle of the Christian Religion in every Nation, the existence of Monarchy in Every state in the world, and the whole body of the Laws, institutions, manners, and morals. . . as well as all Societies together are all attacked at once'.¹³⁶ Europe was threatened with 'the worst and most degrading barbarism',¹³⁷ which, Burke feared, tended ultimately to disrupt that 'happy Course and order of things' by which Europe had arrived at 'its present State of improvement'.¹³⁸

Burke's anxiety about the crisis of European culture can be detected from his rage against the 'atrocious spectacle' of 6 October 1789. To him, that a noble queen should have fallen so disgracefully 'in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour, and of cavaliers', betokened the passing of that priceless chivalrous ideal which had elevated and beautified modern European society. Modern Europe, Burke argued, had drawn its character from, and distinguished itself by, a 'mixed system of opinion and sentiment' – the social manners of civility and gentility – which had its origins in the 'ancient chivalry', and which, though varied in its appearance, had subsisted and influenced 'through a long succession of generations, even to the time we live in'. But the French Revolution had threatened to change all of this. Burke complained:

All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, 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. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.¹³⁹

In other words, Burke was afraid that a new school of 'murder and barbarism' would

¹³⁶ *Corr.*, vii, 232. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam – 5 Oct. 1792'.

¹³⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 211. 'To the Comtesse de Montrond – 25 Jun. 1791'.

¹³⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 385. 'To John Hely Hutchinson – 6 Sept. 1791'.

¹³⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 348–9. For Burke's view about the relevance of the feudal chivalry and manners to the development of the European civilization, cf. J. G. A. Pocock, 'The Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution', *Historical Journal* xxv (1982), 335–7.

replace that system of ancient 'manners and principles' which had hitherto civilised Europe.¹⁴⁰ And 'never more shall we behold', he lamented,

that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise, is gone. It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.¹⁴¹

Burke's message here is unmistakable. He was anxious that, as a result of the disappearance of such civil manners and moral sentiments, modern European culture would face the danger of being decivilised through a retrogressive process of dehumanisation. In the final analysis, it is this perspective of a deep sense of cultural crisis which sheds light on the ultimate implication of Burke's lamentation that 'the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophists, economists, and calculators, has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever'.¹⁴²

III

About a week before the publication of the *Reflections*, Burke wrote to the exiled French Minister, M. de Calonne, explaining his intention of writing: 'In reality, my Object was not France, in the first instance, but this Country.'¹⁴³ There was no doubt that Burke's mind was solicitous chiefly for the peace of Britain while he was reflecting on the happenings in France,¹⁴⁴ for he discovered that the cause of the French Revolution was being enthusiastically acclaimed among some British people:

Extraordinary things have happend in France; extraordinary things have been said and done here, and publishd with great ostentation, in order to draw us into a connexion and concurrence with that nation upon the principles of its proceedings, and to lead us to an imitation of them.

¹⁴⁰ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 543.

¹⁴¹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 348.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Corr.* vi, 141. 'To Charles-Alexandre De Calonne - 25 Oct. 1790'.

¹⁴⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 284.

Such a disposition, if allowed to run wild, would become 'highly dangerous to the constitution and the prosperity of this Country'.¹⁴⁵ Without an awareness of this relevance to Britain, Burke's fury against the revolution in France would be inexplicable. In his opinion, as long as French affairs affected Britain, they necessarily became part of Britain's concern. Thus, he remarked:

Formerly your affairs were your own concern only. We felt for them as men; but we kept aloof from them, because we were not citizens of France. But when we see the model held up to ourselves, we must feel as Englishmen, and feeling, we must provide as Englishmen. Your affairs, in spite of us, are made a part of our interest.¹⁴⁶

Indeed, he reminded Thomas Mercer, 'What have I to do with France, but as the common interest of humanity, and its example to this country, engages me?'¹⁴⁷

Burke differed widely not only from those in power, but also from those of his own party, in his views about the potential influence of the French Revolution on Britain.¹⁴⁸ Far from being complacent, he had persistently held that the success of the Revolution in France and the safety of Britain were things inseparable: French principles, claimed Burke, 'considering their quality, and the means by which they are supported, cannot possibly be realized in practice in France, without an absolute certainty, and that at no remote period, of overturning the whole fabrick of the British Constitution'.¹⁴⁹ And all his efforts had been to keep the 'distemper' of France from the least countenance in Britain.¹⁵⁰

But how could Burke justify his fear? There were several ways of doing so. First, as mentioned above, Burke believed that the principles of the French Revolution were in their nature contagious and capable of expansion. Their being spread over Britain would therefore be quite natural. Moreover, for centuries, Britain had been the major rival to the ambition of France; and her being the most influential power in Europe would naturally make her the principal object which the French revolutionaries hoped

¹⁴⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 83. 'To Richard Bright - 18 Feb. 1790'.

¹⁴⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 361.

¹⁴⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 97. 'To Captain Thomas Mercer - 26 Feb. 1790'.

¹⁴⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 418. 'To Henry Dundas - 30 Sept. 1791'; *Corr.*, vii, 218. 'To Lord Grenville - 19 Sept. 1792'.

¹⁴⁹ *Corr.*, vii, 219. 'To Lord Grenville - 19 Sept. 1792'.

¹⁵⁰ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 274.

the most to corrupt, since their revolution could be assured of becoming 'general' only if they should take over Britain first.¹⁵¹ Secondly, these two countries were geographically near to each other, and this afforded another good cause for concern. 'France,' Burke wrote, 'by the mere circumstance of its vicinity, had been, and in degree always must be, an object of our vigilance, either with regard to her actual power, or to her influence and example.' And finally, the model of French politics had always become the fashion for other countries. The perfect despotism of Louis XIV, for instance, had in the previous century insinuated itself into every court of Europe, and two British monarchs - Charles II and James II - had been its unfortunate followers. 'This day,' Burke continued,

the evil is totally changed in France: but there is an evil there. The disease is altered; but the vicinity of the two countries remains, and must remain; and the natural mental habits of mankind are such, that the present distemper of France is far more likely to be contagious than the old one; for it is not quite easy to spread a passion for servitude among the people; but in all evils of the opposite kind our natural inclinations are flattered. In the case of despotism there is the *foedum crimen servitutis*, in the last the *falsa species libertatis*, and accordingly, as the historian says, *pronis auribus accipitur*.

Formerly, Britain had been in danger of 'being entangled by the example of France in the net of a relentless despotism'; but now the threat was from the example of anarchy; of a danger of being led to an 'imitation of the excesses of an irrational, unprincipled, proscribing, confiscating, plundering, ferocious, bloody, and tyrannical democracy'.¹⁵² These reasons combined had convinced Burke that, if the revolutionaries were suffered finally to triumph in France, they would need no more than some occasion of domestic trouble or disturbance in Britain to extend themselves over.¹⁵³

What had strained Burke's nerves most, however, was the growth in Britain of a party which had declared its support for the French Revolution. Since the success of the Revolution, Burke had detected that 'the principles of a new, republican, frenchified Whiggism was gaining ground',¹⁵⁴ and that 'some wicked persons had shown a strong

¹⁵¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 96.

¹⁵² 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 271-3.

¹⁵³ *Corr.*, vi, 211, 'To Comtesse de Montrond - 25 Jan. 1791'.

¹⁵⁴ *Corr.*, vii, 52, 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

disposition to recommend an imitation of the French spirit of reform'.¹⁵⁵ The appearance of a 'strong Jacobin faction' on British soil had heightened the ominous bearing of the French Revolution, and hence rendered it an object for particular vigilance.¹⁵⁶

France, in the very plenitude of any power which she possessd in this Century, would be no Object of serious alarm to England, if she had no connexion with parties in this Kingdom: With a connexion here which considers the predominant power in France as their natural friend and ally, I should think Three or four departments in Normandy more formidable than the whole of that once great Monarchy.¹⁵⁷

Radicalism, as Burke pointed out, was indeed not a new thing brought into Britain by the French Revolution. There had long since existed in Britain some radical groups which had employed themselves 'in speculating upon constitutions'. The French Revolution, however, had 'discovered it, increased it, and gave fresh vigour to its operations'.¹⁵⁸ It was the French politics of these domestic radicals which Burke felt obliged to expose: 'I see some people here are willing that we should become their scholars too, and reform our state on the French model. They have begun; and it is high time for those who wish to preserve *morem majorum*, to look about them.'¹⁵⁹

The French Revolution had gained its supporters both in and out of Parliament. Those extra-parliamentary supporters were branded by Burke as 'Jacobins'.¹⁶⁰ But Burke never gave a very clear definition of who these British Jacobins were. He had once described the French party in Britain as comprehending in general

most of the dissenters of the three leading denominations: to these are readily aggregated all who are dissenters in character, temper, and disposition, though not belonging to any of their congregations - that is, all the restless people who resemble them, of all ranks and all parties - Whigs, and even Tories - the whole races of half-bred speculators; - all the Atheists, Deists, and Socinians; - all those who

¹⁵⁵ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 274.

¹⁵⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 396.

¹⁵⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 421. 'To Henry Dundas - 30 Sept. 1791'.

¹⁵⁸ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 396-7.

¹⁵⁹ *Corr.*, vi, 81. 'To Unknown - (Jan. 1790)'.

¹⁶⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 291. For the growth of the British Jacobins, see: H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution, 1789-1815*, pp. 1-24.

hate the clergy, and envy the nobility; – a good many among the monied people; – the East Indians almost to a man, who cannot bear to find that their present importance does not bear a proportion to their wealth.¹⁶¹

In short, Burke seemed to regard all those who, for some reason or other, had become discontented as downright 'Jacobins'.

None the less, in Burke's opinion, the Dissenters undoubtedly composed the main force behind the British Jacobins. The Dissenters, he noticed, were among the 'first and most active' in spreading those French principles,¹⁶² to which the whole body of the Dissenters was, 'at the very least, nine tenths of them entirely devoted'.¹⁶³ Burke's friendship with the Dissenters had been strained since at least the election of 1784 in which the Dissenters had turned their back against the Whig party.¹⁶⁴ This uneasy relationship was at length undermined by the fundamental conflict between their views on the French Revolution, as Burke admitted:

the eager manner in which several dissenting Teachers shewed themselves disposed to connect themselves in Sentiment and by imitation,(and perhaps by something more) with what was done and is doing in France, did very much indispose me to any concurrence with them.¹⁶⁵

Since the French Revolution, he had found some religious activities of the Dissenting ministers 'not so commendable'. They had, he protested, audaciously turned the pulpit, from where 'no sound ought to be heard but the healing voice of Christian charity', into places for political agitation, and for the 'nourishment of a party which seems to have contention and power much more than Piety for its Object'.¹⁶⁶ He indeed felt quite uneasy at seeing their 'most considerable and accredited' ministers being so 'active in spreading mischievous opinions, in giving sanction to seditious writings, in

¹⁶¹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 353-4.

¹⁶² *Corr.* vii, 55. 'To William Weddell – 31 Jan. 1792'.

¹⁶³ *Corr.* vi, 419-20. 'To Henry Dundas – 30 Sept. 1791'.

¹⁶⁴ For Burke's relationship with the Dissenters, cf. D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: the Thought and Works of Richard Price* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 310-13.

¹⁶⁵ *Corr.* vi, 103. 'To John Noble – 14 Mar. 1790'.

¹⁶⁶ *Corr.* vi, 83-4. 'To Richard Bright – 8 Feb. 1790'; 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 286.

promoting seditious anniversaries'.¹⁶⁷ The Dissenters were suspected of meditating wicked designs on the British constitution. Richard Price's Revolution Sermon of 4 November 1789, for example, was accused of containing the 'manifest design of connecting the affairs of France with those of England, by drawing us into an imitation of the conduct of the National Assembly'.¹⁶⁸ From the zealous involvement of the Dissenters in French politics, Burke was convinced that a considerable party was being formed, and was 'proceeding systematically, to the destruction of this Constitution in some of its essential parts'.¹⁶⁹

The main feature of the politics of the British Jacobins was their zealous fraternisation with the French revolutionaries: 'they had opened', Burke wrote, 'a correspondence with a foreign faction, the most wicked the world ever saw, and established anniversaries to commemorate the most monstrous, cruel, and perfidious of all the proceedings of that faction'.¹⁷⁰ And with the French Jacobins they had ever moved 'in strict concert and cooperation'.¹⁷¹ Burke had even suspected that a military deal had been made, by which the British Jacobins, he alleged, had gone the length of giving supplies to the French revolutionaries, and had received in turn 'promises of military assistance to forward their designs in England'.¹⁷² In Burke's opinion, it was such foreign communications which had rendered the British Jacobins formidable: 'As to the growth of this contagion within our walls, as a meer domestick Evil, and unconnected with a dangerous foreign power, I have ever had little comparative apprehension; But combined with the foreign forces - there - there is the danger'.¹⁷³

The tactic of the British Jacobins was first to exalt the glory of the French Revolution, to which, Burke claimed, they had looked with 'an eager and passionate enthusiasm'.¹⁷⁴ In the heat of fervour, the new order of France had been rapturously

¹⁶⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 101.

¹⁶⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 283.

¹⁶⁹ *Corr.* vi, 83. 'To Richard Bright - 18 Feb. 1790'.

¹⁷⁰ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 104.

¹⁷¹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 339.

¹⁷² 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works* iii, 476.

¹⁷³ *Corr.* vii, 317. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 29 Nov. 1792'.

¹⁷⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 331.

praised as a superior system of liberty,¹⁷⁵ while all those evils attending the Revolution had been studiously palliated and deliberately rationalised. 'When the Jacobins of France, by their studied, deliberated, catalogued files of murders . . . have shocked whatever remained of human sensibility in our breasts', Burke wrote, 'then

it was they distinguished the resources of party policy. They did not venture directly to confront the public sentiment. . . They began with a reluctant and sorrowful confession: they deplored the stains which tarnished the lustre of a good cause. After keeping a decent time of retirement, in a few days crept out an apology for the excesses of men cruelly irritated by the attacks of unjust power. Grown bolder, as the first feelings of mankind decayed and the colour of these horrors began to fade upon the imagination, they proceeded from apology to defence. They urged, but still deplored, the absolute necessity of such a proceeding.

After the aroused sentiment of ^{the} British public, against the terror of France, had become somewhat composed in the course of such apology and defence, then, Burke continued, the British Jacobins 'made a bolder stride, and marched from defence to recrimination':

They attempted to assassinate the memory of those whose bodies their friends had massacred, and to consider their murder as a less formal act of justice. . . . They wept over the lot of those who were driven by the crimes of aristocrats to republican vengeance. Every pause of their cruelty they considered as a return of their natural sentiments of benignity and justice. Then they had recourse to history, and found out all the recorded cruelties that deform the annals of the world, in order that the massacres of the regicides might pass for a common event. . . . In order to reconcile us the better to this republican tyranny, they confounded the bloodshed of war with the murders of peace; and they computed how much greater prodigality of blood was exhibited in battles and in the storm of cities, than in the frugal, well-ordered massacres of the revolutionary tribunals of France.¹⁷⁶

Alongside the praise and the justifications of the happenings in France came, secondly, the wilful vilification of the British constitution which the British Jacobins had libelled, Burke noted, as 'illegitimate and usurped, or at best as a vain mockery'.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 96.

¹⁷⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 419-20.

¹⁷⁷ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 330-1

The British constitution had been savagely attacked in all its essential parts;¹⁷⁸ 'What seemed to us to be the best system of liberty that a nation ever enjoyed', Burke complained, 'to them seems the yoke of an intolerable slavery'.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, he lamented, the British Jacobins seemed so preoccupied with the new system of France that they had totally forgotten the practices of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, and the fixed form of a constitution whose merits, Burke contended, had been confirmed by 'the solid test of long experience, and an increasing public strength and national prosperity'.¹⁸⁰

Inside parliament, the French Revolution had, to Burke's dismay, also found its sympathisers among the opposition Whig party.¹⁸¹ The Whig supporters of French principles, Burke had generally denigrated as the 'newmodeld Whiggs' or 'New French Whiggs',¹⁸² though he considered it to be 'irreverent, and half a breach of privilege', to call them 'Jacobins'.¹⁸³

The occasion on which Burke first noticed that his own party was infected by revolution fever was the memorable debate on the Army Estimates of 9 February 1790 when he was surprised by Charles James Fox's support for the French Revolution.¹⁸⁴ Since then Burke had been greatly alarmed at discovering that certain 'mischievous' opinions and principles were gaining ground in the Whig party 'every day, with greater and greater force'.¹⁸⁵ He was particularly appalled that the leaders of the Party had fallen in with the Revolution, and had taken it upon themselves openly to air the principles of 'French Levelling and confusion'.¹⁸⁶ This distemper in the Whig party had

¹⁷⁸ For Burke's analysis of the attacks on the British constitution, see 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 68-75 and 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 328-331. In these places, Burke's attentions were drawn mainly to the attacks made by Paine's *Rights of Man*, and Price's *Revolution Sermon*.

¹⁷⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 396.

¹⁸⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 331.

¹⁸¹ For the impact of the French Revolution on the opposition Whig party, see: Frank O'Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (London, 1967); and John Derry, 'The Opposition Whigs and the French Revolution 1789-1815', in H. T. Dickinson (ed.), *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789-1815* pp. 39-59.

¹⁸² *Corr.*, vi, 452. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 21 Nov. 1791'; *Corr.*, vii, 63. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

¹⁸³ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 292.

¹⁸⁴ For this event, see: O'Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution*, pp. 45-7.

¹⁸⁵ *Corr.*, vii, 57, 63. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

¹⁸⁶ *Corr.*, vi, 451. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 21 Nov. 1791'.

become hopelessly 'incurable', Burke noted, for the Party did not even admit that there was anything dangerous in their enthusiasm for the French Revolution.¹⁸⁷

In Burke's opinion, it was highly imprudent that the Whig party should have declared for the French Revolution, since what had been done in France proved to be 'diametrically opposite to the composition, to the Spirit, to the Temper, to the Character, and to all the Maxims of our old and unregenerated Party'. The Whig party, Burke insisted, had always been reputed to be a party of aristocratic bias, whereas the Revolution was an open war 'against the thing and against the Name'.¹⁸⁸ In their zeal for the Revolution, Burke detected that an 'entire Revolution' was taking place in the Whig party itself which had thus 'wholly changed its Character, its principles, and the foundations on which it stood'.¹⁸⁹ The Whigs had gone astray; they appeared, Burke claimed, rather like the 'followers of Pain and Macintosh, and Freteau and Bouche than of their own Whigg ancestors'.¹⁹⁰

Burke and the Whig party were divided sharply upon their views concerning the implications of the Revolution for Britain. To Burke, there was a real danger that revolution would be imported into Britain, and he had discerned that

considerable number of British subjects, taking a factious interest in the proceedings of France, begin publicly to incorporate themselves for the subversion of nothing short of the *whole* constitution of this kingdom; to incorporate themselves for the utter overthrow of the body of its laws, civil and ecclesiastical, and with them of the whole system of its manners, in favour of the new constitution, and of the modern usages, of the French nation.¹⁹¹

But he failed to persuade the Whig party to accept this precaution: they, Burke was heartbroken to find, were not convinced that 'there is any danger of the prevalence of such doctrines in England, or of their being ever reduced to practice'.¹⁹² To the liberal Whigs, Charles James Fox for instance, the Revolution was not only not an anathema,

¹⁸⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 335. 'Edmund and Jane Burke to Richard Burke, Jr - 10, Aug. (1791)'.

¹⁸⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 52-4. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

¹⁸⁹ *Corr.*, vi, 450. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 21 Nov. 1791'.

¹⁹⁰ *Corr.*, vi, 336. 'Edmund and Jane Burke to Richard Burke, Jr - 10 Aug. (1791)'.

¹⁹¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 7.

¹⁹² *Corr.*, vi, 418. 'To Henry Dundas - 30 Sept. 1791'.

but would be potentially beneficial, to Britain. They had obstinately held, Burke complained, that 'the danger to this country chiefly consisted in the growth of Tory principles, and that what happend in France was likely to be useful to us in keeping alive and invigorating the Spirit of Liberty'.¹⁹³

Burke quitted the Whig party for ever after he had a painful exchange of opinion with Fox during the parliamentary debate on the Quebec Act on 6 May 1791.¹⁹⁴ Thereafter, he became its bitter critic, and he incessantly attacked the principles and politics of the Whig party, especially the Foxites. He accused them of embracing the wild principle of popular sovereignty, and of defiling parliament as no longer being the true representative of the nation.¹⁹⁵ Burke protested that they had always denied the existence of any Jacobin faction in Britain, and that they had attributed the supposition of its existence to be the 'evil design' of the government on the liberties of the people, or the 'forgeries and fictions' which the ministers contrived in order to fix a pretext for destroying freedom. Instead, they insisted strongly that the danger to the nation came from the growth of the power of the Crown.¹⁹⁶ The Foxites were taken to task for having supported French doctrines and for having blackened all those who opposed it as the partisans of despotism. They, Burke pointed out, had persistently palliated all the evils attending the Revolution as 'matter of accident', and had condoned them as 'evil of passage' which would at last lead to a permanently happy state of order and freedom.¹⁹⁷ And finally, Burke remonstrated that the Foxites had viciously disclaimed against all the European powers except Jacobin France: the 'whole college' of the states of Europe were condemned as no better than 'a gang of tyrants', and their league 'a combination of Despots'. Britain was even urged to quit that league, to enter into union with Jacobin France.¹⁹⁸ All these principles and political practices, in Burke's eyes, were fundamentally pernicious:

We have certainly thought the tendency of the principal measures

¹⁹³ *Corr*, vii, 315. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 29 Nov. 1792'.

¹⁹⁴ See: O'Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution*, pp. 65-70.

¹⁹⁵ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works* iii, 497, 501.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 475; 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 292.

¹⁹⁷ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works Works*, iii, 496; 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 269.

¹⁹⁸ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works* iii, 491; 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 269-70.

which Mr Fox has proposed or supported at the present period, detrimental to the interests of Great Britain, according to the views entertained by us of those interests, and that they increase in an eminent degree, the danger with which the independence of Europe, and the happiness of the whole Civilized World are threatened.¹⁹⁹

The Whig party's acceptance of French principles, Burke believed, would have ominous consequences. First, this party, though a minority in number, was full of talent and energy. Moreover, since the minority of today might become the majority of tomorrow, they were possible candidates for office in a future government. Should that happen, Burke implied, the French doctrines would be put into practice.²⁰⁰ Secondly, the Party was an alliance of the social elite, and had among its members people 'high in Character' and of 'Great abilities'. Because of their prominent social positions, their conversion to the French Revolution would inevitably make a most mischievous impression on the whole society.²⁰¹ The influence of persons like Fox, Burke was in no doubt, would certainly be widespread:

Those continual either praises or palliating apologies of everything done in France . . . coming from a man of Mr. Fox's fame and authority, and one who is considered as the person to whom a great party of the wealthiest men of the kingdom look up, have been the cause why the principle of French fraternity formerly gained the ground which at one time it had obtained in this country.²⁰²

In brief, Burke was convinced, French principles would first make progress in the party, 'and thro' the party, in the Nation'.²⁰³

On the whole, Burke admitted that the conversions which the Jacobins had made in Britain were not numerous. The Jacobin interest, he acknowledged, represented but a very small minority in British society; and the 'body of the people is untainted in all Ranks, and it is by far the most sound in the humblest of all'.²⁰⁴ Burke had once

¹⁹⁹ *Corr.*, vii, 354. 'Edmund Burke, Richard Burke, Jr and others to the Whig Club - (28 Feb. 1793)'.

²⁰⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 269.

²⁰¹ *Corr.*, vii, 63. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

²⁰² 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works* iii, 497.

²⁰³ *Corr.*, vi, 451. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 21 Nov. 1791'.

²⁰⁴ *Corr.*, viii, 343. 'To William Windham - 17 Nov. 1795'.

estimated the numbers of the 'pure Jacobins' as about eighty thousand – that is, around one fifth of Britain's 400,000 active political citizens. These were real radicals 'utterly incapable of amendment; objects of eternal vigilance; and, when they break out, of legal constraint. On these, no reason, no argument, no example, no venerable authority, can have the slightest influence'.²⁰⁵ In spite of their small number, however, their tempers, talents, activities, and influence ought not to be slighted. On the one hand, the principles they propagated were capable of extension, and could penetrate any rank or class, 'from the first Nobility of the Kingdom to the meanest Seaman of the Fleet'.²⁰⁶ On the other hand, their small number could prove, in Burke's opinion, to be rather advantageous, because, being small, they could be more easily disciplined and directed than if their number were greater. And by their spirit of intrigue and their restless agitating activity, Burke believed, they could form a force 'far superior to their numbers'. In due course, they could even manage to corrupt those people 'who are now sound', as well as to convert to their force 'large bodies of the more passive part of the nation'. In the final analysis, Burke stressed, the British Jacobins were strong enough to make a mighty call: 'They desire a change; and they will have it if they can.'²⁰⁷

The British Jacobins certainly did not celebrate the French Revolution merely for the sake of it: they had for their object 'the pretended improvement of the British constitution'.²⁰⁸ Burke was persuaded that their 'Alliance with France, and a change in this Constitution are things that always go hand in hand'.²⁰⁹ Moreover, considering their zeal for the new French order, he argued, the change they desired in Britain would also follow the model of France, for,

After all, if the French be a superior system of liberty, why should we not adopt it? To what end are our praises? Is excellence held out to us only that we should not copy after it? And what is there in the manners of the people, or in the climate of France, which renders that species of republic fitted for them, and unsuitable to us?²¹⁰

²⁰⁵ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 190.

²⁰⁶ *Corr.*, viii, 343. 'To William Windham – 17 Nov. 1795'; *Corr.*, ix, 370. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam – 18 Jun. 1797'.

²⁰⁷ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 190.

²⁰⁸ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 476.

²⁰⁹ *Corr.*, ix, 241. 'To William Windham – 12 Feb. 1797'.

²¹⁰ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 96.

That would mean a total and complete revolution. Indeed, as the British Jacobins, in his view, had nursed the same tempers as that of the French Jacobins and had founded their plan on the principles of the French Revolution, their revolution, Burke insisted, would predictably also 'be pursued in the same manner and all its proceedings will be executed by the same necessities.'²¹¹

Burke's reaction to the activities of the British radicals had always been hysterical. His oratory had built up an atmosphere which gave a sense of pressing urgency as if a revolution in Britain were imminent. Nonetheless, his predicted revolution in Britain had never come to pass. Here, a question may be raised about the extent to which Burke thought that there was a genuine threat of revolution in Britain. There can, however, be no doubt that he had always felt, and continued to believe, that there was some danger somewhere:

In my opinion, as long as the desperate System which prevails in France can maintain itself, we shall always find some eruption or other here. The Fire is constantly at work. It sometimes blazes out. - It is sometimes smothered, or rather covered, by the Ashes - but there it is - and there it will be.²¹²

But there is no direct evidence to suggest that Burke's warning was anything but a wise and timely precaution. In fact, he had once admitted: 'I dont much fear from the faction here who correspond with those who resemble them on the other side of the Water.'²¹³ In his *Reflections* he had also recognised that 'the beginnings of confusion with us in England are at present feeble enough'. To Burke, however, the remoteness of the danger at home, at least for the moment, afforded no good reason for relaxation. What had happened in France had indeed taught a good lesson; for with France, Burke reviewed,

we have seen an infancy, still more feeble, growing by moments into a strength to heap mountains upon mountains, and to wage war with heaven itself. Whenever our neighbour's house is on fire, it cannot be amiss for the engines to play a little on our own.

He thought that it would be 'Better to be despised for too anxious apprehensions, than

²¹¹ *Corr.*, viii, 300. 'To Mrs John Crewe - (post 11 Aug. 1795)'.

²¹² *Corr.*, vii, 191. 'Edmund and Jane Burke to William Burke - 3 Sept. 1792'.

²¹³ *Corr.*, vi, 141. 'To Charles-Alexandre De Calonne - 25 Oct. 1790'.

ruined by too confident a security'.²¹⁴ Burke had taken a long-term view concerning the threat of revolution in Britain. It might be true that there was no danger of convulsion at present; but, he warned, 'our danger must be from our not looking beyond the moment'.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 284.

²¹⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 421. 'To Henry Dundas - 30 Sept. 1791'.

CHAPTER 2
JACOBINISM AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

I

The origins of the French Revolution have always perplexed the understanding of historians.¹ To Burke, its contemporary observer, the Revolution at first sight looked 'paradoxical and Mysterious'.² What puzzled him most, however, was the effortless passing of the ancien regime: 'The absolute monarchy was at an end,' he mourned. 'It breathed its last, without a groan, without struggle, without convulsion.'³ Perhaps few people had expected the sudden fall of the French monarchy; that government, in Burke's eyes, had been attacked 'by surprise':

The time of surprise is over. France continues under its first stupefaction and the Terror of its first surprise: for by surprise that great Kingdom was taken, as if it were a little Fort garrisoned by Invalids.⁴

And he was stunned at the 'facility with which government has been overturned in France':⁵ the revolutionaries had met in their process with little opposition, and their whole march, Burke pointed out, looked more like a triumphant procession than the progress of a strenuous struggle.⁶ That a once most powerful monarchy should have collapsed so easily was unfathomable, and the more so if the situation of France on the eve of her catastrophe was taken into account.

The state of the old order in France in Burke's opinion had by no means presaged the storm of a fatal revolution. The fall of the French monarchy was not preceded by exterior symptoms of decline; on the contrary, shortly before this fiasco, there had been a kind of 'exterior splendour' in the Crown, which Burke believed had usually contributed to consolidate the strength and authority of government at home. He

¹ For a recent survey of the scholarship on this topic, see: William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 7-40.

² *Corr.*, vi, 10. 'To Lord Charlemont - 9 August 1789'.

³ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 406.

⁴ *Corr.*, vi, 141. 'To Charles Alexandre De Calonne - 25 Oct. 1790'.

⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 99.

⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 313.



claimed that the national power of France, generally speaking, had been ever on the increase and it was continuing 'not only powerful but formidable' right up to the moment of the Revolution. The monarchy had succeeded in achieving some of the most splendid objects of the nation's ambition; for some time, no country on the continent was her serious rival and even Britain had been once humbled. The prestige which the French monarchy had acquired in ^{the} international arena was high.⁷ Domestically, the kingdom approached the state of prosperity and improvement. On the one hand, Burke pointed out, the population of France had grown substantially: it was estimated to have, in the last sixty years, increased from 22 millions to around 30 millions. On the other hand, the economy of France was thriving. The wealth which she had amassed, though unable perhaps to compete with the riches of Britain, could still constitute a 'very respectable degree of opulence'.⁸

Indeed, Burke held that the French monarchy was fundamentally excellent; it was a government which had brought France 'grown, in extent, compactness, population, and Riches to a greatness even formidable', and which had 'discoverd the Vigour of its principle, even in the many Vices and Errours, both of its own and its peoples, which were not of force enough to hinder it from producing those Effects'.⁹ The scene of the kingdom before the Revolution looked spectacular: the opulent and populous cities; the magnificent high roads and bridges; the extensive canals and navigations; the stupendous ports, harbours and naval apparatus; the masterfully constructed and prodigiously maintained fortifications; the wholly cultivated land; the excellent manufactures and fabrics; the grand foundations of charity; her arts; her brave soldiers, her able statesmen, and the multitude of her lawyers, theologians, philosophers, critics, historians, antiquarians, poets and orators. This view of things, Burke claimed, had revealed 'something which awes and commands the imagination, which checks the mind on the brink of precipitate and indiscriminate censure'.¹⁰

Notwithstanding, in this acme of prosperity and greatness the monarchy had fallen to the ground 'without a struggle', and it fell, Burke emphasised, 'without any of those vices in the monarch, which have sometimes been the causes of the fall of

⁷ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 154-5.

⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 399-401.

⁹ *Corr.*, vii, 54. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

¹⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 402.

kingdoms'.¹¹ What then had happened? If the ancien regime had been so eminent, why this sudden fall?

It has been widely held that Burke explained the downfall of the French monarchy simply in terms of a 'plot' or 'conspiracy' theory.¹² This is a judgment which has done much injustice to Burke, for, because of this, his interpretation of the French Revolution has seldom been taken seriously. Alfred Cobban, for instance, had commented that

In so far as the *Reflections* deals with the causes of the Revolution then, they are not merely inadequate, but misleading . . . As literature, a political theory, as anything but history, his *Reflections* are magnificent. As a study of the causes of the Revolution they amount to little more than an elaboration of the 'plot' theory favoured by the emigres.¹³

He was surprised at the 'superficial manner' with which Burke had accounted for 'such a vast upheaval as the French Revolution'.¹⁴ The reason for this was attributed to Burke's ignorance of the political, social and economic situations of pre-revolutionary France; the 'conspiracy' theory, wrote Cobban, had been 'the common reaction to any great social or political catastrophe that one does not understand'.¹⁵

This, however, is not itself a fair reading resulting from careful or sympathetic study. Recent studies have effectively confuted this conclusion. On the one hand, it has been suggested that though undoubtedly biased against the Revolution, Burke was by no means ignorant of his subject¹⁶; on the other hand, and more important, it has also been pointed out that Burke's views on the origins of the Revolution were as a

¹¹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 155.

¹² See: Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1929. AMS rep., 1978), p. 120; Francis P. Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, North Carolina, 1960), p. 71; B. T. Wilkins, *The Problem of Burke's Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 1967), p. 167.

¹³ Cobban, 'Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution', in his *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London, 1968), pp. 32-3.

¹⁴ Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century*, p. 120.

¹⁵ Cobban, 'Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution', *op. cit.*, p. 32; 'Introduction' to vol. vi of *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (eds.) Alfred Cobban and R. A. Smith, p. xv.

¹⁶ F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 43-6, 101-3.

matter of fact more complicated than merely a 'conspiracy' theory.¹⁷ But the new revision, it must be acknowledged, has not entirely rejected the claim that a 'conspiracy' theory did exist in Burke's writings. Yet, what Burke really meant by it, has, it seems, usually been neglected.

On various occasions Burke did insinuate that some sort of dark design had been at work behind the Revolution. He once argued that in the Revolution 'nothing has been done that has not been contrived from the beginning, even before the states had assembled'.¹⁸ In another place, he asserted: 'All has been the result of design; all has been matter of institution.'¹⁹ And later in his life, in a letter to the French priest, Augustin Barruel, in which he commended the latter's *Memoirs of Jacobinism* (1797), Burke was more articulate:

I can undertake to say from my certain knowledge, that so far back as the year 1773 they were busy in the Plot you have so well described and in the manner and on the Principle which you have so truly presented.²⁰

Thus, not only had a 'plot' existed, but it had been long planned. The important thing here however is to understand what the nature of this long-contrived plot was. The volume of Barruel's *Memoirs* which impressed Burke is a work devoted to exposing the 'anti-Christian conspiracy' of the Jacobins, which the author has defined as the 'Philosophers conspired against the God of the Gospel', or, 'the conspiracy of the Sophisters of Impiety'.²¹ This is obviously that kind of dark design which Burke had referred to in his own *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

The literary cabal had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion. This object they pursued with a degree of zeal . . . What was not to be done towards

¹⁷ This has been mainly the contribution of Michael Freeman. See his: 'Edmund Burke and the Sociology of Revolution', *Political Studies*, xxv (1977), 459-73; 'Edmund Burke and the Theory of Revolution', *Political Theory*, vi (1978), 277-99; *Edmund Burke and the Critique of the Political Radicalism* (Oxford, 1980), chaps. 9-12. But Freeman's interest is chiefly theoretical; his task is intended, it seems, to build up Burke's 'theory', or 'sociology', of 'revolution', rather than specifically to analyse Burke's interpretation of the 'French Revolution' *per se*.

¹⁸ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 522.

¹⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 208.

²⁰ *Corr.*, x, 39. 'To Abbe Augustin Barruel - 1 May 1797'.

²¹ *Memoirs, illustrating the History of Jacobinism. A Translation From the French of the Abbe Barruel* (London, 1797), i, xxii.

their great end by any direct or immediate act, might be wrought by a longer process through the medium of opinion.²²

The notorious 'conspiracy' theory for which Burke was discredited was therefore not in fact a common plot; it seems to imply something of an intellectual movement for it was associated with a 'literary cabal', with the attack on the 'Christian religion', and with the 'medium of opinion'. In reality, it may not be unreasonable to infer that what the 'conspiracy' theory in Burke's language amounts to is, in academic terms, an intellectual or ideological revolution.

'What has happened in France teaches us, with many other things, that there are more causes than have commonly been taken into our consideration, by which government may be subverted.'²³ To Burke, the fall of the ancien regime in France was unusual. It was not simply occasioned by political grievances: the French had not destroyed their monarchy 'from any dread of arbitrary power that lay heavily on the minds of the people'. Their case, he wrote, was 'wholly foreign to the question of monarchy or aristocracy'.²⁴ Indeed, the ancien regime of France, in Burke's opinion, was 'what was next to freedom, a mild paternal monarchy'.²⁵ Though an unqualified or ill qualified government, it had been long mitigated by religion, laws, manners, and opinions, so as to become a 'despotism rather in appearance than in reality'.²⁶ Nor could the Revolution be, as it has so often been in later scholarship, imputed to social or economic stress, for Burke was convinced that the condition of the country, as indicated above, was basically sound. Even the notorious financial difficulties, which have so often been blamed for the disaster, were, to Burke, 'only pretexts and instruments of those who accomplished the ruin of that monarchy'. 'They were not the causes of it,' he insisted.²⁷ A fuller and profounder explanation, therefore, must be looked for somewhere else.

An ancient edifice such as the French monarchy, it can be readily asserted, could not have collapsed suddenly without some profound reasons; and part of the

²² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 382.

²³ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', iii, *Burke's Works* iii, 354.

²⁴ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 35.

²⁵ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 555.

²⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 397-9.

²⁷ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 155.

explanation, in Burke's opinion, could be traced to the defect which existed inside the socio-political structure of the ancien regime. According to Burke's enquiry, the monarchy of France, in spite of its apparent prosperity, had in reality stood in want of sound support: 'Its chief supports, the Nobility and the Clergy, are extinguished.'²⁸ And this outcome, he believed, had resulted from the jealousies and conflicts that had long existed between the French crown and its aristocracy. Kings were always suspicious of the higher orders of their subjects, since, Burke explained,

It is from them that they generally experience opposition to their will. It is with *their* pride and impracticability, that princes are most hurt; it is with *their* servility and baseness, that they are most commonly disgusted; it is from their humours and cabals, that they find their affairs most frequently troubled and distracted.

The king of France, being absolute monarch, had ever nursed 'a strong dislike to his nobility, his clergy, and the corps of his magistracy', regarding them as all intractable. To sustain his clear and permanent authority, it became his long-standing policy to weaken his aristocracy.²⁹ The nobility of France had been deliberately obstructed from cultivating provincial interests and were, as a result, rendered alienated and powerless. They had enjoyed, Burke pointed out, no manner of power in cities and very little in the country; the civil government, the police, and the administration of revenue, were mostly not under their control.³⁰ Aristocracy, however, was the cornerstone of monarchy; when therefore the king of France weakened his aristocratic orders, he had virtually 'pulled down the pillars which upheld his throne'. Referring to Louis XVI's clash with his nobility previous to the Revolution, Burke thus wrote: 'This unfortunate king. . . was deluded to his ruin by a desire to humble and reduce his nobility, clergy, and his corporate magistracy.'³¹ And he further remarked:

To strengthen itself the Monarchy had weekend every other force: To unite the Nation to itself, it had dissolved all other ties. When the chain, which held the people to the Prince was once broken, the whole frame of the commonwealth was found in a State of disconnection. There was neither force nor union any where to sustain, the Monarchy,

²⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 36. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 12 Nov. 1789'.

²⁹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 380-1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 374; 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 408-9.

³¹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 381-2.

or the Nobility, or the Church.³²

This was, in his mind, one potential cause which could help to explain the speedy dissolution of the ancien regime in France.

Burke's approach to the French Revolution, however, was principally cultural. He had acutely detected a profound moral dimension behind this apparent political change: the Revolution in France was, he declared, a '*complete* revolution' which seemed to have 'extended even to the constitution of the mind of man'.³³ Everything in it, he added, supposed 'a total revolution in all the principles of reason, prudence, and moral feeling'.³⁴ This concept of an essential 'moral' revolution is a key category of analysis in Burke's account of the French Revolution.

The revolutionary movement had not emerged in France overnight, though the fall of its monarchy was a surprise. Long before the outburst of 1789, Burke observed, profound changes had already been taking place quietly in French society: 'A silent revolution in the moral world preceded the political, and prepared it.'³⁵ Paradoxically, this moral revolution had happened in the affluence, rather than the distress, of pre-revolutionary society; its course thus ran:

In the long series of ages which have furnished the matter of history, never was so beautiful and so august a spectacle presented to the moral eye, as Europe afforded the day before the Revolution in France. I know indeed that this prosperity contained in itself the seeds of its own danger. In one part of the society it caused laxity and debility; in the other it produced bold spirits and dark designs. A false philosophy passed from academies into courts; and the great themselves were infected with theories which conducted to their ruin. Knowledge, which in the two last centuries either did not exist at all, or existed solidly on right principles and in chosen hands, was now diffused, weakened, and perverted. General wealth loosened morals, relaxed vigilance, and increased presumption.

It turned out to be an intellectual movement revitalised as a result of the relaxation of moral discipline which was itself effected by the opulence of French society. In this

³² *Corr.*, vi, 242, 'To the Chevalier de la Bintinaye - (March 1791)'.

³³ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 111.

³⁴ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 415.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 258.

intellectual movement, Burke noticed, religion had borne the first brunt: 'Religion, that held the materials of the fabric together, was first systematically loosened. All other opinions, under the name of prejudices, must fall along with it.'³⁶ Here can be discerned the relevance of Burke's 'conspiracy' theory.

The political consequence which this moral and intellectual revolution had brought about was vital. In Burke's view, a system of traditional values was indispensable for the maintenance of political order. He held that the 'Empire of Opinion' was the 'cementing principle in the Fabrick of Government',³⁷ and he pointed out that 'prejudices' had been the surest support of government and the firmest 'dykes and barriers' in favour of kings.³⁸ And religion, he added, had contributed a good deal in giving conscience 'coactive or coercive force in the most material of all the social ties, the principle of our obligations to government'.³⁹ If these values were attacked, political authority would be endangered by being left naked without proper protection. In the final analysis, it seems that the unusual fall of the French ancien regime, in Burke's mind, ought to be grasped in this context. After all, Burke had asserted, a body politic had its deep cultural foundations, based on humanity, manners, morals, and religion; the constitution, he emphasised, 'is made by those things, and for those things: without them it cannot exist; and without them it is no matter whether it exists or not'.⁴⁰

Burke regarded the revolution in 'sentiments, manners, and moral opinions' as the most important of all revolutions.⁴¹ Indeed, a profound cultural revolution had, in his opinion, underlain the whole course of the French Revolution. He had discovered that a moral revolution had not only paved the way for the political changes, but was continued as a policy of the Revolution in order to restructure the moral constitution of the French people. Its goal was twofold. On the one hand, it was intended that by means of a moral revolution those old values could be wiped out which had attached the French people to the old order:

³⁶ 'Letter to William Elliot, Esq.', *Burke's Works* v, 76-7.

³⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 459. 'To the Archbishop of Nisibis - 14 Dec. 1791'.

³⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 267. 'To Claude-Francois de Rivarol - 1 June 1791'.

³⁹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 106.

⁴⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 421.

⁴¹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 352.

They have made the priests and people formally abjure the Divinity; they have estranged them from every civil, moral, and social, or even natural and instinctive, sentiment, habit, and practice, and have rendered them systematically savages, to make it impossible for them to be the instruments of any sober and virtuous arrangement, or to be reconciled to any state of order, under any name whatsoever.⁴²

On the other hand, new moral principles would at the same time be inculcated so that the French people could be accommodated to the new regime. To the leaders of the Revolution, Burke remarked, the great problem

is to find a substitute for all the principles which hitherto have been employed to regulate the human will and action. They find dispositions in the mind of such force and quality as may fit men, far better than the old morality, for the purposes of such a state as theirs, and may go much further in supporting their power, and destroying their enemies.⁴³

Moreover, they had attempted to temper and harden the breast of the people, in order to prepare them for the desperate strokes in extreme situations.⁴⁴ As a consequence, the people of France, Burke protested, were filled with a black and savage atrocity of mind, losing all their 'common feelings of nature, as well as all sentiments of morality and religion'.⁴⁵

Several measures had been taken to carry out this work of moral renovation. First of all, Burke pointed out, a new scheme of moral education was planned for the instruction of the rising generation; for this, books by authors of 'mixed or ambiguous morality', or by writers of 'deranged understanding', were recommended for study. It was intended that by means of this scheme young minds would imbibe the 'ethics of vanity' taught by Rousseau. Everything which advanced the evil dispositions of pride, petulance and self-conceit, Burke complained, had been deliberately cultivated:

True humility, the basis of the Christian system, is the low, but deep and firm, foundation of all real virtue. But this, as very painful in the practice, and little imposing in the appearance, they have totally discarded. Their object is to merge all natural and all social sentiment

⁴² 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 420.

⁴³ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 536 7.

⁴⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 337.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 424.

in inordinate vanity.

In Burke's eyes, vanity was the worst of vices, and the 'occasional mimic of them all': 'It makes the whole man false. It leaves nothing sincere or trustworthy about him. His best qualities are poisoned and perverted by it.'⁴⁶ And it, Burke contended, had totally changed the national character of Frenchmen.⁴⁷

Secondly, efforts had been made to transform the social manners of the French society. The Revolution had witnessed the passing of those ancient manners which encouraged the 'Chivalrous Spirit which dictated a veneration for Women of condition and of Beauty, without any consideration whatsoever of enjoying them'.⁴⁸ In its place, new manners were introduced, which, Burke noted, taught a love without gallantry, a love without that 'fine flower of youthfulness and gentility'. Those passions which usually had been allied to grace and manner had been discarded in favour of an indelicate medley of pedantry and lewdness, of 'metaphysical speculations blended with the coarsest sensuality'.⁴⁹ Further, the state had even made it its policy to increase every means of seduction in order to corrupt young minds through pleasure. 'Every idea of corporal gratification is carried to the highest excess, and wooed with all the elegance that belongs to the senses. All elegance of mind and manners is banished.'⁵⁰ To the revolutionaries, Burke claimed, all refinements had an aristocratic character, and therefore had to be destroyed.⁵¹

Thirdly, the revolutionaries had sought to replace traditional social relations with the new ethics of the Revolution. Burke pointed out that the leaders of the Revolution had condemned the traditional relations between parents and their children, which he held to be the 'first amongst the elements of vulgar, natural morality'. This natural relationship was deprecated by the revolutionaries

as contrary to liberty; as not founded in the social compact; and not binding according to the rights of men; because the relation is not,

⁴⁶ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 534-7.

⁴⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 213. 'To the Comtesse de Montrond - 25 Jan. 1791'.

⁴⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 90-1. 'To Philip Francis - 20 Feb. (1790)'.

⁴⁹ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 539-40.

⁵⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 428.

⁵¹ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 539.

of course, the result of *free-election*, never so on the side of the children, not always on the part of the parents.⁵²

Marriage, being the origin of all relations and the first element of all duties, used to be made sacred and honourable through religious confirmation. The Constituent Assembly, instead, had instituted civil registration of marriage, treating it as no more than a common 'civil contract'. In the same spirit, divorce was declared lawful, to be granted loosely at the mere pleasure of either party, and at a month's notice. Such measures tended to desecrate the matrimonial connection: 'With the Jacobins of France', he wrote, 'vague intercourse is without reproach; marriage is reduced to the vilest concubinage.' Ultimately, he feared that all these attempts to destroy old familial relationships would result in the utter corruption of all morals and the total disconnection of social life.⁵³

Finally, a regular church of 'avowed atheism' was seen to have been instituted, at the public charge, in every part of the country, in the hope that these novel values and eccentric manners could be provided with a suitable religious justification. In Burke's opinion, however, after every effort had been made to prepare the body to debauch and the mind to crime, this new atheistic religion was to prevent the French people from seeking any amendment or from having any remorse.⁵⁴ To Burke, atheism was a foul and unnatural vice and would be certain to corrupt 'all the dignity and consolation of mankind'.⁵⁵ And with atheism established as its religious basis, the whole work of moral reorientation would be complete.

There was nevertheless an alarming aspect in this radical cultural policy. It was true that this moral venture had indeed served to sap the moral bases of the old order; but at the same time, Burke indicated, it had also vitiated unwittingly all intrinsic moral values, social manners and religious opinions, leaving France without sound values for a rational government:

All other nations have begun the fabric of a new government, or the reformation of an old, by establishing originally or by enforcing with greater exactness, some rites or other of religion. All other people have

⁵² *Ibid.*, 538-9.

⁵³ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 209-11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 429.

⁵⁵ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works* iii, 273.

laid the foundations of civil freedom in severer manners, and a system of a more austere and masculine morality. France, when she let loose the reins of regal authority, doubled the licence of a ferocious dissoluteness in manners, and of an insolent irreligion in opinions and practices; and has extended through all ranks of life. . . all the unhappy corruptions that usually were the disease of wealth and power.⁵⁶

Wise legislators, Burke insisted, had always sought to improve instincts into morals, and to graft virtues on the stocks of the natural affections; in contrast, the leaders of the French Revolution had omitted no pains to 'eradicate every benevolent and noble propensity in the mind of men'.⁵⁷ They had 'slain the *mind*' in their country, stamping out all the conscious dignity, all the noble pride and all the generous sense of glory and emulation among the French people.⁵⁸

At last, Burke came to the conclusion that the new order of France was in reality founded upon 'moral paradoxes' which tended to distort the whole drift of its proclaimed principles: 'Their liberty is not liberal. Their science is presumptuous ignorance. Their humanity is savage and brutal.' In that system, he continued,

Humanity and compassion are ridiculed as the fruits of superstition and ignorance. Tenderness to individuals is considered as treason to the public. Liberty is always to be estimated perfect as property is rendered insecure.⁵⁹

It was, in short, a system of 'wickedness and vice', and was, Burke insisted, in itself 'at war with all orderly and moral society'.⁶⁰

II

It has been pointed out above that Burke regarded the revitalised intellectual movement as the driving force behind the French Revolution. Indeed, he had more than once called, in a vein satiric, the French Revolution a 'philosophic revolution'.⁶¹ 'It

⁵⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 311.

⁵⁷ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 209.

⁵⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 322.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 341, 352.

⁶⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 208, 213.

⁶¹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 403; 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 138.

is, he claimed, 'a revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogmas.'⁶² And the doctrine, or to couch it in modern language, the ideology, which played a major role in this Revolution was generally referred to as 'Jacobinism'.

What, then, is Jacobinism? 'It is an attempt', Burke explained when discussing its leading principles,

to eradicate prejudice out of the minds of men, for the purpose of putting all power and authority into the hands of the persons capable of occasionally enlightening the minds of the people. For this purpose the Jacobins have resolved to destroy the whole frame and fabrick of the old Societies of the world, and to regenerate them after their fashion: To obtain an army for this purpose, they every where engage the poor by holding out to them as a bribe, the spoils of the Rich. . . As the grand prejudice, and that which holds all the other prejudices together, the first, last, and middle Object of their Hostility, is Religion.⁶³

According to Burke, therefore, the nature of Jacobinism was to root out ancient values; but to accomplish this, the Jacobins had managed to undermine those institutions which had usually embodied these values: they included, as Burke pointed out to Sir Hercules Langrishe, the religion, the property, and lastly, the old traditional constitution.⁶⁴ These themes constituted the main subjects in Burke's interpretation of the French Revolution.

The foremost feature of Jacobinism, and indeed of the French Revolution, was its persistent war against religion. 'Look at all the proceedings of the National Assembly,' Burke wrote in 1793, 'and you will find full half of their business to be directly on this subject.' This anti-clerical bias, he claimed, formed the spirit of the whole revolution politics:

It includes in its object undoubtedly every other interest of society as well as this; but this is the principal and leading feature. It is through this destruction of religion that our enemies propose the accomplishment of all their views.⁶⁵

⁶² 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 350.

⁶³ *Corr.*, viii, 129-30. 'To William Smith - 29 Jan. 1795'.

⁶⁴ *Corr.*, x, 33-4. 'To Sir Hercules Langrishe - 26 May 1795'.

⁶⁵ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 442-3.

The Jacobins had avowed it as their great object to break up the church.⁶⁶ It was attempted totally to 'get rid of the clergy, and indeed of any form of religion'.⁶⁷

Burke noticed that the French Jacobins had developed a secular view of civil society, which held that a state could subsist 'without any religion better than with one'.⁶⁸ Naturally, they became enemies to religion;⁶⁹ and their religious war, Burke stressed, came to be not a controversy between different sects as formerly, but a war against all sects.⁷⁰ It had been waged not in favour of any 'better mode of professing the Gospel':

We know that it is the whole Christian religion which these Blasphemous persecutors treat with every mark their malice can devise of indignity and contempt in all their publick discourses orders and proceedings. They shew as little reverence or rather less for the Scripture as for the Massbook.⁷¹

In Burke's opinion, Jacobinism carried both the sentiments of intolerance and of indifference. It declared not against a variety in conscience, but against all conscience; under that system, he insisted, people would be driven from their religion without being provided with another in which 'men might take refuge and expect consolation'.⁷²

The most notorious measure the Revolution had taken against religion was the confiscation of church property. It had been enforced on the pretext of safeguarding the financial credibility of the old government; that is, for keeping the king's engagements with the public creditor. To justify this act, it was argued

that ecclesiastics are fictitious persons, creatures of the state, whom at pleasure they may destroy, and of course limit and modify in every particular; that the goods they possess are not properly theirs, but belong to the state which created the fiction.

⁶⁶ *Corr.*, vi, 103. 'To John Noble - 14 March 1790'.

⁶⁷ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 371.

⁶⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 419.

⁶⁹ *Corr.*, viii, 248. 'To the Rev. Thomas Hussey - 18 May 1795'.

⁷⁰ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 443.

⁷¹ *Corr.*, vii, 220. 'To Walker King - (ante 20 Sept. 1792)'.

⁷² 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 9.

This justification, however, had run counter to Burke's idea of the nature of church property, which he declared to be a legal possession because it was held 'under law, usage, the decisions of courts, and the accumulated prescription of a thousand years'. Burke contended that church property ought not to be pledged arbitrarily as public estate, which, he pointed out, could only be derived from a fair imposition upon all citizens. Furthermore, it was also against natural and legal equity to force the clergy to answer a public debt in which they 'neither were lenders nor borrowers, mortgagers nor mortgagees'.⁷³

Burke was convinced that the seizure of church property had in fact been prompted rather by the essentially anti-clerical spirit of the Revolution than by the financial difficulties of the state. '[W]as the state of France so wretched and undone, that no other resource but rapine remained to preserve its existence? He claimed that an examination of its financial situation could by no means warrant this necessity. According to the former French minister, M. Necker, the late financial crisis of France could in reality have been solved by some measures of 'savings and improvements of revenues', and by a plan of 'very moderate and proportioned assessment on the citizens without distinction'. Even supposing that the situation might have necessitated the seizure, still, Burke continued, a deficit of 2,200,000 pounds sterling would not have justified a confiscation of 'five millions'. To force the Church to bear the whole burden would have been partial, oppressive, and unjust, but it would not have totally ruined the order of clergy. Their openly declared reason for the confiscation therefore was suspect: 'There was no desire,' Burke believed, 'that the church should be brought to serve the state. The service of the state was made a pretext to destroy the church.'⁷⁴

Indeed, according to Burke, the whole religious policy of the Revolution had been deliberately contrived in order to discredit the church and thus to prepare for its utter destruction. The proposal to reorganize the Gallican Church in terms of the newly legislated *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*, the spirit of which was to bring the Church back to the primitive condition of Christianity, was, in Burke's opinion, a wilful attempt to sink the clergy into a miserable state of poverty and persecution.⁷⁵ In particular, he claimed, the plan to salary all the clerics as the paid officials of the state had

⁷³ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 378-9, 385.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 389-92.

⁷⁵ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 527-8.

impoverished virtually all the higher clergy who had been maintained before by their own landed property. It had driven the clergy from independence to live on alms, bringing them down from the highest situation in the country to a 'state of indigence, depression, and contempt'.⁷⁶ A long-standing consequence of such a policy to impoverish the clergy would be the vulgarization of the Church. Once the church was turned into a 'degrading pensionary establishment', Burke's argument ran, men of liberal ideas and liberal condition would be reluctant to destine their children for a career in the Church, which would, as a result, be serviced by the lowest classes of the people. And he added: 'as you have left no middle classes of clergy at their ease, in future nothing of science or erudition can exist in the Gallican church.'⁷⁷

The plan to render the clergy elective was no less destructive. All kinds of elections in Burke's view tended to be corrupting; and in a large organization like the Gallican Church, where it would be impossible for the ruling minds to put the whole in order, its introduction could only be pestiferous.⁷⁸ If elections were admitted in the church, all clerical offices would have to be filled through electioneering acts, which, Burke believed, must necessarily turn out of the clerical profession 'all men of sobriety; all who can pretend to independence in their function or their conduct', thus putting all the holy work into the hands of those 'licentious, bold, crafty, factious, flattering wretches' whose low conditions had tempted them to intrigue for the 'contemptible pensions' of the church.⁷⁹ Should this be the case, then it would not be long before the church was debased utterly. Therefore, Burke concluded: 'They who would destroy it in our time acted wisely when they proposed to make the Bishops elective. The Christian religion did not in France survive this arrangement for a year.'⁸⁰

It could be asserted that the Jacobins had instituted a new constitutional church. The substance of this new religious establishment, however, appeared dubious. Burke had noticed that within this church no care had been taken about the qualifications of its clergy, relative either to doctrine or to morals. The priests of the constitutional church, he complained, had been allowed to preach at their discretion any mode of

⁷⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 377.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 418.

⁷⁸ *Corr.*, viii, 204-5. 'To the Rev. Thomas Hussey - 17 March 1795'.

⁷⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 418-9.

⁸⁰ *Corr.*, viii, 204. 'To the Rev. Thomas Hussey - 17 March 1795'.

religion or irreligion that they would please.⁸¹ Moreover, people had been made bishops for no other merits than

having acted as instruments of atheists; for no other merits than having thrown the children's bread to dogs; and in order to gorge the whole gang of usurers, pedlars, and itinerant Jew-discounters at the corners of streets, starved the poor of their Christian flocks, and their own brother pastors.⁸²

The constitutional clergy, in Burke's eyes, seemed to act not as the ministers of any religion, but as the agents and instruments of the Jacobin conspiracy against all morals. Ultimately, he was persuaded that this new constitutional church had indeed been founded for nothing but a mere temporary amusement to the people before it should be able to 'cast off the very appearance of all religion whatsoever'.⁸³ It had been intended, he insisted,

to be temporary, and preparatory to the utter abolition, under any of its forms, of the Christian religion, whenever the minds of men are prepared for this last stroke against it, by the accomplishment of the plan for bringing its ministers into universal contempt.

And this, Burke claimed, had been the long entertained design of the French Jacobins.⁸⁴

The assault on property was the second major feature of the Jacobin politics. 'Jacobinism,' wrote Burke, 'is the revolt of the enterprising talents of a country against its property.'⁸⁵ He observed that the National Assembly, in order to shatter the foundation of property, had openly denounced the doctrine of 'prescription'. With them, he complained, 'possession is nothing, law and usage are nothing'.⁸⁶ For the Jacobins, an 'immemorial possession' amounted to no more than a 'long-continued, and therefore an aggravated injustice'; they accordingly regarded prescription not as 'a

⁸¹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 419.

⁸² 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 528.

⁸³ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 443.

⁸⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 419.

⁸⁵ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 207.

⁸⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 422.

title to bar all claim, set up against all possession', but as itself 'a bar against the possessor and proprietor'.⁸⁷ However, Burke argued, property could never be secure without the rule of prescription, which in his view was the very 'rule and maxim which can give it stability'.⁸⁸ And he insisted that property, when left undefended by such principles, would become but a repository of spoils to tempt cupidity, not a magazine to furnish arms for defence.⁸⁹ 'It is a vain conceit,' he believed, 'that property can stand against it, alone and unsupported, under any general popular discontent. Part of the property will be debauched; a part frightend; the rest subdued.'⁹⁰

From this perspective, the seizure of the church's possessions assumed a specific implication: it symbolised the violation of property. Burke was of the opinion that, in confiscating the possessions of the church, the National Assembly had instantly 'laid the axe to the root of all property, and consequently of all national prosperity, by the principles they established, and the example they set'.⁹¹ According to Burke, all property held under the laws ought to be equally respected without regard to the description of the persons who held it; therefore, the despoiling a minister of religion was no less a defiance of the principle of property than the pillage of other men had been.⁹² In other words, the danger implied in the seizure of church land lay in the principle of injustice it had established, rather than in the description of persons robbed.⁹³

Burke discerned that a general crisis of property had been implied in the attack on church land, which he believed could not be dispersed without 'leaving the Monarchy and aristocracy nothing upon which they *can* stand'.⁹⁴ Its reason was clear: once the confiscation had become a standing policy, no property could be guaranteed. 'I see the confiscators begin with bishops, and chapters, and monasteries; but I do not see

⁸⁷ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 137.

⁸⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 422-3.

⁸⁹ 'Letter to William Elliot, Esq.', *Burke's Works*, v, 77.

⁹⁰ *Corr.*, viii, 243. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 15 May 1795'.

⁹¹ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 275.

⁹² *Corr.*, vii, 389. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

⁹³ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 422.

⁹⁴ *Corr.*, vi, 334. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 9 Aug. 1791'.

them end there.⁹⁵ And he beheld:

The spoil of the Royal Domaine soon followed the seizure of the Estates of the Church. The appenages of the Kings Brothers immediately came on the heels of the usurpation of the Royal Domaine; The property of the Nobility survived but a short time the appenages of the Princes of the Blood Royal. At length the monied and the moveable property tumbled on the ruin of the immoveable property.

All kinds of properties in France had fallen like dominoes, without the smallest degree of safety.⁹⁶ The Revolution had started as a revolt against landed property, but ended ironically with the ultimate subversion of the monied interest, whose actions, Burke pointed out, had been of absolute necessity at the beginning of this Revolution.⁹⁷ As a matter of fact, he noted, even the plunderers themselves in the end were to have their own fingers burned. When the disposition to pillage prevailed, those who had just robbed others would themselves be vulnerable to still newer waves of robbers. It was from the apprehensions of this threat, he believed, that the new regime was forced to declare itself in favour of property, promising to 'secure all their brother plunderers in their share of the common plunder':

The fear of being robbed by every new succession of robbers, who do not keep even the faith of that kind of society, absolutely required that they should give security to the dividends of spoil; else they could not exist a moment.

It was paradoxical, however. This newly pledged security of property, Burke made it clear, would become in reality a 'seal put upon its destruction', for it was to secure, he asserted, the confiscators against those innocent former proprietors.⁹⁸

The attack on property also had its social connotations. If the French Revolution, as Burke insisted, had been a struggle mainly against the owners of 'landed property',⁹⁹ it would inevitably mean a war on the aristocratic classes of nobility and gentry, for the possession of land was particularly associated with them under the old

⁹⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 422.

⁹⁶ *Corr.*, vii, 389-90. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

⁹⁷ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 372.

⁹⁸ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 415-6.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 342.

order. Burke was convinced that the Jacobins had taken it as their great object to destroy the gentry of France: it was the 'condition of a Gentleman', he claimed, which was under attack. For this, they had shattered 'all the effect of those relations which may render considerable men powerful, or even safe'.¹⁰⁰

Moreover, it appeared that a potential class conflict was being incited. Burke pointed out that the Jacobins had appealed to the weak and indigent part of society against their superiors. Discord had been sown among different social interests and the lowest description of the people had been stirred up to pillage the more eminent orders and classes of the community.¹⁰¹ The Jacobins were accused of having bought the lower class to form a body of 'Janizaries' to 'over-rule and awe property':¹⁰² they had, wrote Burke, secured to themselves a force by dividing among the people of no property the estates of the ancient and lawful proprietors.¹⁰³ The French Revolution in his view was the first time in history that the frame and order of a well-constructed state had been overturned by corrupting the common people with the spoil of the superior classes.¹⁰⁴

It is significant that, though the Jacobins had brought down the French monarchy, their aim, in Burke's opinion, had not chiefly been to destroy absolute monarchy, but fundamentally to smash the aristocracy, the pillar of the old order. Their main concern, he argued, had been 'totally to root out that thing called an *Aristocrate* or Nobleman and Gentleman':¹⁰⁵

It is against them, as a part of an Aristocracy, that the nefarious principles of that groveling Rebellion and Tyranny, strike, and not at Monarchy, further than as it is supposed to be built upon an Aristocratick Basis.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 541; *Corr.* vii, 62. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1791'.

¹⁰¹ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works* iii, 493-4.

¹⁰² 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 419.

¹⁰³ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 207.

¹⁰⁴ *Corr.* vii, 388. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (circa 6 Aug. 1793)'; *Corr.* vii, 383. 'To Lieutenant General Edward, Count Dalton - 6 Aug. 1793'.

¹⁰⁵ *Corr.* vi, 451. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 21 Nov. 1791'.

¹⁰⁶ *Corr.* vii, 60. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

The Jacobins were extremely hostile to the aristocracy; and because of this animosity, they crushed 'everything respectable and virtuous in their nation', disgracing 'almost every name, by which we formerly knew there was such a country in the world as France'.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the French Revolution had witnessed the entire destruction of 'all the Gentlemen of a great Country, the utter ruin of their property, and the servitude of their persons'.¹⁰⁸

The French Revolution, in short, was essentially against property. It had ushered in, Burke held, a new order in which the property had nothing to do with the government.¹⁰⁹ He commented that '*the political and civil power of France is wholly separated from its property of every description*: neither the landed interest nor the monied interest had been allowed the smallest weight or consideration in the direction of any public concern'.¹¹⁰

The last important aspect of Jacobinism to be considered was its relentless attack on the ancient constitution. It had endeavoured, Burke remarked, to set aside all the ancient corporate capacities and distinctions of France and to subvert the whole fabric of its ancient laws and usages.¹¹¹ The Jacobins, he pointed out, had always made it their business, and often their public profession, to demolish all traces of ancient establishment; for this, every 'hereditary name and office' had been abolished, all 'conditions of men' had been levelled, the 'connexion between territory and dignity' had been broken, and every 'species of nobility, gentry, and church establishments' had been eliminated.¹¹²

To Burke, the Jacobins were self-assertive anti-traditionalists. 'They have no respect for the wisdom of others; but they pay it off by a very full measure of confidence in their own.' With these people, he complained,

it is a sufficient motive to destroy an old scheme of things, because it is an old one. As to the new, they are in no sort of fear with

¹⁰⁷ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 277.

¹⁰⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 179. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 29 Nov. 1790'.

¹⁰⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 256.

¹¹⁰ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 372.

¹¹¹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 416.

¹¹² 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 353.

regard to the duration of a building run up in haste; because duration is no object to those who think little or nothing has been done before their time, and who place all their hopes in discovery.¹¹³

When historical experience was thrown away in favour of the temporary and voluntary will of their own, it was natural that they would treat in an easy manner the arduous work of setting up a constitution for a great kingdom, which in Burke's opinion had been the most difficult of all subjects. It was thought that a constitution could be made by 'any adventurers in speculation in a small given time, and for any country', and that what had been brought to perfection 'for six or seven centuries' could by them be achieved 'in six or seven days, at the leisure hours'. But, Burke argued, baleful consequences would ensue from thus treating the constitution lightly: it must, he believed, conduce to loosen all the ties, which, whether of reason or prejudice, had attached mankind to their old, habitual, domestic government.¹¹⁴ All establishments in the eyes of the Jacobins tended to be mischievous, because they entailed 'perpetuity'. They treated governments like 'modeş of dress' which could be changed at will without any reference to the 'principle of attachment, except a sense of present conveniency, to any constitution of the state'.¹¹⁵

The ancient polity of France, according to Burke, was an historical entity which had developed over a long period through various accidents at different times, and the ebb and flow of various property and jurisdiction.¹¹⁶ 'It grew out of the habitual conditions, relations, and reciprocal claims of men. It grew out of the circumstances of the country, and out of the state of property'.¹¹⁷ To break this complicated ancient edifice, the Jacobins appealed to simple abstract principles. They, Burke discovered, had cleared away as rubbish whatever they had found, intending to reduce everything into an 'exact level'. Mathematic mensuration had been adopted to make old feudal provinces 'regularly square', thus transforming the historical map of ancient France into a 'new pavement of square within square'.¹¹⁸ The intention behind this abstract policy of geometrical distribution was but too clear: it was meant, Burke believed,

¹¹³ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 360.

¹¹⁴ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 395-6.

¹¹⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 360.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹¹⁷ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 554.

¹¹⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 443-4.

to destroy all vestiges of the ancient country, in religion, in polity, in laws, and in manners; to confound all territorial limits; . . . to lay low everything which had lifted its head above the level, or which could serve to combine or rally. . . the disbanded people, under the standard of old opinion.¹¹⁹

Indeed, the whole spirit of Jacobin politics, Burke insisted, had been to demolish the old bonds of provinces and jurisdictions and to dissolve the ancient combinations of things, in order that all local ideas could be sunk, and that in the end all people of France would 'no longer be Gascons, Picards, Bretons, Normans; but Frenchmen, with one country, one heart, and one assembly'.¹²⁰

It must be pointed out that the attack on the ancient constitution had been made so that the ground could be cleared for a new construction. The aim of the Revolution had been to found, in Burke's words, a 'Jacobin republic', based on the 'supposed *rights of man, and the absolute equality of the human race*'.¹²¹ Jacobinism, Burke noted, recognized the 'rights of man' as the only title to government:

They have 'the rights of men.' Against these there can be no prescription; against these no agreement is binding. . . Against these their rights of men let no government look for security in the length of its continuance, or in the justice and lenity of its administration.

This principle had been uniformly stuck to, admitting no temperament and no compromise. Any government, if not quadrated with the rights of man, would be denounced as fraud and injustice, no matter whether it was an old benevolent government, a violent tyranny, or a green usurpation.¹²²

Upon the principle of the rights of man, the Jacobins had developed a theory of social contract which was unilaterally in favour of the people's sovereignty. 'They always speak,' Burke wrote,

as if they were of opinion that there is a singular species of compact between them and their magistrates, which binds the

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 453.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 466-7.

¹²¹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 416; 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 353.

¹²² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 331.

magistrate, but which has nothing reciprocal in it, but that the majesty of the people has a right to dissolve it without any reason, but its will.¹²³

The consequence was that only a pure democracy would be accepted as the legitimate form of government.¹²⁴ The French constitution, Burke argued, must always be a government wholly by popular representation: 'It must be this or nothing. The French faction considers as a usurpation, as an atrocious violation of the indefeasible rights of man, every other description of government. Take it or leave it; there is no medium.'¹²⁵

Two features were prominent in this popular democracy. On the one hand, the individual would become the basic unit of a political society, since a democracy entailed a government by the delegates of the people who must be represented as 'equal individuals, without any corporate name or description, without attention to property, without division of powers'.¹²⁶ On the other hand, it was to be a rule by numbers, which would establish that

the majority, told by the head, of the taxable people in every country, is the perpetual, natural, unceasing, indefeasible sovereign; that this majority is perfectly master of the form, as well as the administration, of the state; and that the magistrates, under whatever names they are called, are only functionaries to obey the orders. . . which that majority may make.

To the Jacobins, claimed Burke, there was no other natural government than this.¹²⁷

In fine, Burke concluded that these anti-traditionalistic Jacobins were merely speculative theorists who wanted to built their politics, 'not on convenience, but on truth'.¹²⁸ Their new system had been established, Burke satirised, upon the abstract system of 'Empedocles and Buffon', rather than on any political principle: 'It is remarkable,' he was surprised to find, 'that, in a great arrangement of mankind, not

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 360.

¹²⁴ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 207.

¹²⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 17.

¹²⁶ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 416.

¹²⁷ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 352.

¹²⁸ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 109.

one reference whatsoever is to be found to anything moral or anything politic; nothing that relates to the concerns, the actions, the passions, the interests of men.¹²⁹ In Jacobin politics, Burke insisted, efforts had been made, not to fit the constitution to the situation of the people; but, on the contrary, it had endeavoured utterly 'to destroy conditions, to dissolve relations, to change the state of the nation, and to subvert property, in order to fit their country to their theory of a constitution'.¹³⁰

III

Having discussed in some detail Burke's concept of Jacobinism, it is now proper to examine further his perception of the composition, and the social origins, of the leading French revolutionaries: the Jacobins. A proper investigation of this subject should help to reveal the social dimension in Burke's interpretation of the French Revolution.

Burke had always shown his contempt for the origins of those who made the French Revolution. 'The Jacobin Revolution,' he declared, 'is carried on by men of no rank, of no consideration, of wild, savage minds.'¹³¹ The revolutionary politics of France was totally directed by 'the *refuse of its chicane*':¹³² it had placed, he claimed,

the highest powers of the state in churchwardens and constables, and other such officers, guided by the prudence of litigious attorneys and Jew brokers, and set in action by shameless women of the lowest condition, by keepers of hotels, taverns, and brothels, by pert apprentices, by clerks, shop-boys, hairdressers, fiddlers, dancers on the stage.¹³³

Most of the revolutionaries in his eyes were merely 'a desperate set of obscure adventurers',¹³⁴ who were drawn out of the dregs of society, exalted to the evil eminence by their enormities, and wholly destitute of any distinguished qualifications

¹²⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 444, 452.

¹³⁰ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 554-5.

¹³¹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 437.

¹³² 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 372-3.

¹³³ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 520.

¹³⁴ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 417.

able to command respect.¹³⁵

Contemptible though the Jacobins were thought to be, their vigour and their formidableness should nevertheless not be underestimated. First of all, the Jacobins were by no means men without calibre. Burke never suppressed his good opinion of the general abilities of the Jacobins:

It is a dreadful truth, but it is a truth that cannot be concealed; in ability, in dexterity, in the distinctness of their views, the Jacobins are our superiors.¹³⁶

Burke believed that Jacobinism was a vice belonging especially to men of parts.¹³⁷ Talents, he emphasised, naturally gravitated to Jacobinism: 'Whatever ill Humours are afloat in the State, they will be sure to discharge themselves in a mingled Torrent in the *Cloaca maxima* of Jacobinism'.¹³⁸

Further, the Jacobins were found to be possessed of enormous energy. What had made the Jacobins 'terrible even to the firmest minds'? Burke answered: '*One* thing, and *one* thing only – but that one thing is worth a thousand – they have *energy*.' It was, he added, a dreadful and portentous energy which was not restrained by any consideration of God or man and which was 'always vigilant, always on the attack'. This distempered energy had been brewed out of the anarchical situation created when the Revolution engulfed France:

In France, all things being put into a universal ferment, in the decomposition of society, no man comes forward but by his spirit of enterprise and the vigour of his mind.¹³⁹

The spirit of adventure had animated the Jacobins to the full use of all their native energies.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 443. 'To the Empress of Russia – 1 Nov. 1791'.

¹³⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 191, 233.

¹³⁷ *Corr.*, viii, 242-3. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam – 15 May 1795'.

¹³⁸ *Corr.*, x, 32. 'To Sir Hercules Langrishe – 26 May 1795'.

¹³⁹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 437-8.

¹⁴⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 191.

It was noted, in addition, that the Jacobins were, generally speaking, young and inexperienced. In the new government of France, or in its army officers, Burke was surprised to find, there was not a man who was above five and thirty.¹⁴¹ He also pointed out that among the delegates of the Third Estate no one could be found to have any practical experience in the state: the best of them, he wrote, were but men of theory.¹⁴² Young and inexperienced men could not be expected to cherish those virtues of caution and self-distrust. They, guided by heated imagination and the wild spirit of adventure, had always entertained a dangerous vision, imagining themselves as having been chosen to 'new-model the state, and even the whole order of civil society itself'.¹⁴³ It would then be hazardous to trust the public good to such visionaries, because they, Burke feared, would commit the whole to the mercy of their untried speculation:

they abandon the dearest interests of the public to those loose theories, to which none of them would choose to trust the slightest of his private concerns. . . The public interests, because about them they have no real solicitude, they abandon wholly to chance: I say to chance, because their schemes have nothing in experience to prove their tendency beneficial.¹⁴⁴

At this point, a question naturally arises: who, in Burke's view, were these contemptible, yet formidable, Jacobins? A specific account was given in his analysis of the composition of the National Assembly. Among the active members of the Assembly he noticed a number of radical noblemen who, he claimed, had dishonourably levelled themselves with the populace.¹⁴⁵ These turbulent and discontented 'men of quality', degrading their own status and dignity, had come to support the cause of the Revolution and had taken part in the spoil and humiliation of their own peers.¹⁴⁶ They were deprecated as aristocratic 'Renegadoes' who, though their fortunes had been created by the favour of the Crown, had themselves

¹⁴¹ *Corr.*, viii, 149. 'To John Wilmot - 12 Feb. 1795'.

¹⁴² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 314.

¹⁴³ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 547.

¹⁴⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 436.

¹⁴⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 212. 'To the Comtesse de Montrond - 25 Jan. 1791'.

¹⁴⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 319-20.

perfidiously betrayed and robbed not only the Crown but their own order.¹⁴⁷

It was clear however that the control of the Revolution had mainly rested with the delegates of the Third Estate, who, joined by the defected representatives of the clergy, according to Burke, had formed that 'momentum of ignorance, rashness, presumption, and lust of plunder, which nothing has been able to resist'. The delegates of the Third Estate, Burke asserted, had included a handful of 'country clowns', not a greater number of 'traders', a pretty considerable proportion of the 'faculty of medicine', some 'dealers in stocks and funds', and other descriptions of men 'from whom as little knowledge of, or attention to, the interests of a great state was to be expected'. What had dominated the National Assembly, however, were the 'practitioners in the law'; but, instead of being distinguished lawyers, they were mostly the inferior, unlearned, mechanical and merely instrumental part of that profession, including the obscure provincial advocates, the stewards of petty local jurisdictions, the country attornies, the notaries, and the whole train of 'the ministers of municipal litigation, the fomenters and conductors of the petty war of village vexation'. As for the delegates of the clergy, a very large part of them, according to Burke, had been merely 'country curates', who were too poor to respect property and too ignorant to direct the affairs of the state. This is Burke's portrayal of the National Assembly; on the whole, he discovered that the respectable part of French society had not taken a leading part in the politics of the Revolution.¹⁴⁸

In this account, Burke obviously tended rather to besmirch the leaders of the Revolution, but he was not unaware of their social consequence. He had hit upon an important point when he completed his analysis of the representation of the Third Estate: among its delegates, he was impressed to find, there 'was scarcely to be perceived the slightest traces of what we call the natural landed interest of the country'.¹⁴⁹ This is a significant comment, which reflects Burke's view that the French Revolution was basically anti-aristocratic. Indeed, he later pointed out that the revolutionaries were mostly men without property. The National Assembly, according to Burke's estimation,

has not fifty men in it. . . who are possesssd of an hundred pound

¹⁴⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 235. 'To the Duchess de Biron - 20 March 1791'.

¹⁴⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 315-7, 319.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 317.

a year in any description of property whatsoever. About six individuals of enormous wealth, and thereby sworn Enemies to the prejudice which affixes a dignity to virtuous well born poverty, are in the Number of the fifty. The rest are, what might be supposed, men whose names never were before heard of beyond their Market Town.¹⁵⁰

But, if the Revolution had nothing to do with the propertied classes, then for what social interest did Burke think it stood?

With regard to its social origins, Burke admitted that the French Revolution was unprecedented: it was not actuated as was usually the case by the ambitious aristocracy or by the indigent populace, both of which, Burke claimed, had been feared in the past as 'instruments in revolutions'.¹⁵¹ This conclusion implied that a new social force was assumed to have been at work in this great change. To understand the rise of this new force, it is necessary to relate the whole event back to a broad social and historical context.

It has been mentioned above that Burke looked upon the French Revolution as a change produced in a society of profound prosperity. A consequence of this general affluence was that it had given rise to a new social class which had expanded rapidly to destabilise the old society. When society grew in such a fashion, Burke analysed, opportunities would naturally arise to tempt the ambitions of the talented. 'This was not long undiscovered,' he explained,

Views of ambition were in France, for the first time, presented to these classes of men. Objects in the state, in the army, in the system of civil offices of every kind. Their eyes were dazzled with this new prospect. They were, as it were, electrified and made to lose the natural spirit of their situation.¹⁵²

As men acquired great fortunes, they would be impelled to 'compare, in the partition of the common stock of public prosperity, the proportions of the dividends with the merits of the claimants'. These *nouveaux riches* were frustrated when they found that their social standing was not commensurate with their own estimate of their worth.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ *Corr.*, vii, 61. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

¹⁵¹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 354.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 354.

¹⁵³ 'Letter to William Elliot, Esq.', *Burke's Works*, v, 76-7.

They hated being barred from the status which, Burke admitted, wealth, in reason and good policy, ought to bestow, and they felt 'with resentment an inferiority, the grounds of which they did not acknowledge'.¹⁵⁴ Thus was the awakening, and the ultimate alienation, of this new social force.

These upstarts had soon found their way, however. To fight for a just share of social estimation, Burke observed, they managed to associate among themselves, forming new interests, new dependencies, new connections, and new communications, which gave them great strength. 'They were no longer to be controlled by the force and influence of the *grandees*', while 'the influence on the lower classes was with them'. Here Burke obviously identified this new social force with the middle class: 'These descriptions,' he asserted further, 'had got between the great and the populace.' As for the relevance of the rising middle class to the politics of the Revolution, Burke explained:

The middle classes had swelled far beyond their former proportion. Like whatever is the most effectively rich and great in society, these classes became the seat of all the active politics; and the preponderating weight to decide on them. There were all the energies by which fortune is acquired; there the consequence of their success. There were all the talents which assert their pretensions, and are impatient of the place which settled society prescribes to them. . . . The spirit of ambition had taken possession of this class as violently as ever it had done of any other. They felt the importance of this situation.

The Revolution in France therefore emerged as a socio-political movement of the ambitious middle classes striving for social recognition. And they carried on their campaign openly, no longer lurking in 'the recesses of cabinets, or in the private conspiracies of the factious'.¹⁵⁵

Several types of men were found to lead the way in this great change; among them, Burke observed, the 'monied interest' and the 'men of letters' had been among the most active.¹⁵⁶ 'The monied men, merchants, principal tradesmen, and men of letters,' he noted, 'are the chief actors in the French Revolution.' This was an outcome ensuing from the expansion of wealth and the diffusion of information in the

¹⁵⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 409, 381.

¹⁵⁵ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 258-9.

¹⁵⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 382-4.

pre-revolutionary society:

as money increases and circulates, and as the circulation of news, in politics, and letters, becomes more and more diffused, the persons who diffuse this money, and this intelligence, become more and more important.¹⁵⁷

Their animated activities had made a stirring impact: 'The correspondence of the monied and the mercantile world, the literary intercourse of academies, but, above all, the press, of which they had in a manner entire possession, made a kind of electric communication everywhere.'¹⁵⁸

The growth of the monied interest in France was closely connected with the expansion of their credit to the old government. With the vast debt of that government, Burke wrote, a great monied interest had insensibly grown up, and with it a great power. Notwithstanding, their riches and strength, owing to the laws and customs of France, had not secured to them their deserved social recognition. 'By the ancient usages which prevailed in that kingdom,' Burke pointed out,

the general circulation of property, and in particular the mutual convertibility of land into money, and of money into land, had always been a matter of difficulty. Family settlements, rather more general and more strict than they are in England, the *jus retractus*, the great mass of landed property held by the crown, and, by a maxim of the French law, held unalienably, the vast estates of the ecclesiastic corporations, – all these had kept the landed, and monied interests more separated in France, less miscible, and the owners of the two distinct species of property not so well disposed to each other.

The superiority of the monied interest in riches and of the landed interest in social status therefore caused jealousy and conflict between them. On the one hand, the old landed interest hated the monied men, not being able to bear that their 'unendowed pedigrees and naked titles' had been eclipsed by the splendour of 'an ostentatious luxury', while, on the other hand, the pride of the monied men had swollen with their wealth, and was ready to take revenge on the 'outrages of this rival pride, and to exalt their wealth to what they considered as its natural rank and estimation'. From this angle, the French Revolution, Burke asserted, became virtually a 'real, though not

¹⁵⁷ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 354.

¹⁵⁸ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 259.

always perceived, warfare between the noble ancient landed interest and the new monied interest'.¹⁵⁹

The monied interest had triumphed and the Revolution had been carried through clearly in their favour. Burke noticed, for instance, that the financial contracts which the monied men had made with the old government had been the only acts which the new regime had observed:

No acts of the old government of the kings of France are held valid in the National Assembly, except his pecuniary engagements. . . The rest of the acts of that royal government are considered in so odious a light, that to have a claim under its authority is looked on as a sort of crime.

Similarly, the decision to confiscate the property of the church had also reflected their interest. In Burke's opinion, if anyone should be responsible for the debt of the old government, it must be those who had managed the agreement; so he asked,

Why therefore are not the estates of all the comptrollers-general confiscated? Why not those of the long succession of ministers, financiers, and bankers who have been enriched whilst the nation was impoverished by their dealings and their counsels?

Instead, it was the innocent church which had become the scapegoat. The tendency of the Revolution was hence unmistakable.¹⁶⁰

There are several causes which account for the domination of the monied interest. In the first place, the monied men, Burke observed, were by nature more dynamic and innovative. These men had secured their fortunes principally by speculation in money. Without fixed habits and local predilections, which belonged particularly to men of landed property, they were mostly habitual adventurers: 'The monied interest,' Burke argued, 'is in its nature more ready for any adventure; and its possessors more disposed to new enterprises of any kind.' Moreover, he pointed out, the fortunes of the monied interest were, comparatively speaking, of a recent acquisition. Being new, it would also fall in 'more naturally with any novelties'.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 380-2.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 379, 385.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 462, 382.

Next, Burke discovered that monied men were chiefly townsfolk, not interested in the 'innocent and unprofitable delights of a pastoral life'. Their gathering together in cities in his opinion had given them great geographical advantages for establishing associations. In cities, Burke claimed, everything which conspired against the country gentlemen had combined 'in favour of the money manager and director':

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 military action.

In other words, city life had enabled the monied men to develop a kind of *esprit de corps*. In contrast, among the country gentlemen, Burke contended, anything in the nature of incorporation was almost impracticable. The nature of country life and of landed property, he wrote, was not suitable for combination. 'Combine them by all the art you can, and all the industry, they are always dissolving into individuality.' Without the capacity of acting in concert, the country gentlemen would unavoidably be overwhelmed by the united force of the monied men. And the Revolution was seen to have favoured the demands of the insolent burghers rather than the desires of the laborious husbandman.¹⁶² Here again, the Revolution in France turned out to be a conflict between the interests of the cities and the concerns of the countryside: its aim, Burke insisted, was to reduce the 'permanent landed interest' to a 'mere peasantry, for the sustenance of the towns, and to place the true effective government in cities'.¹⁶³

The overwhelming power of the monied men, however, came chiefly from their control over money, especially their domination over the circulation of the newly issued paper currency. Burke believed that

A paper circulation, not founded on any real money deposited or engaged for, amounting already to four-and-forty millions of English money, and this currency by force substituted in the place of the coin of the kingdom, becoming thereby the substance of its revenue, as well as the medium of all its commercial and civil intercourse, must put the whole of what power, authority, and influence is left, in any form

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 462, 464-5, 494.

¹⁶³ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 353.

whatsoever it may assume, into the hands of the managers and conductors of this circulation.

The management of money always brought forth enormous power; and its influence in revolutionary France was even more extensive, for there the operation of money, Burke noted, was entangled with the sale of confiscated property. The money dealers were keen to speculate as 'the market of paper, or of money, or of land, shall present an advantage'. They were therefore able to buy or sell portions of confiscated land at opportune moments, thus carrying on a continual process of 'transmutation of paper into land, and land into paper'. By such operations, the spirit of speculation would steal from money into the mass of land, thus rendering volatilised the function of money itself:

it assumes an unnatural and monstrous activity, and thereby throws into the hands of the several managers. . . all the representative of money, and perhaps a full tenth part of all the land in France.

Those, whose operations can take from, or add ten per cent. to, the possessions of every man in France,' Burke insisted, 'must be the masters of every man in France.' Then, the Revolution would most certainly settle all the powers obtained in the towns among the burghers and the monied directors who led them. At length, he was convinced, France would be governed completely by an 'ignoble oligarchy' formed of 'the directors of assignats, and trustees for the sale of church lands, attornies, agents, money-jobbers, speculators, and adventurers'.¹⁶⁴

Another kind of revolutionary force in society was the men of letters who had grown up along with the monied interest, and who had, with them, formed a close and marked union.¹⁶⁵ This radical intelligentsia had been referred to in Burke's writings variously as 'men of letters', 'political men of letters', 'philosophers', 'literary cabals', or 'sophisters'. The literary men were active internal agitators; their principal task, Burke emphasised, was to provide 'spirit and principles' for the Revolution.¹⁶⁶

I hear on all hands that a cabal, calling itself philosophic, receives the glory of many of the late proceedings; and that their opinions and

¹⁶⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 461-2, 464-5.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 382.

¹⁶⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 246.

systems are the true actuating spirit of the whole of them.¹⁶⁷

The men of letters had in the past usually been regarded as a peaceable and even timid part of society;¹⁶⁸ their rise in France as the leaders of the Revolution was a surprise: 'How many,' Burke asked, 'could have thought, that the most complete and formidable revolution in a great empire should be made by men of letters, not as subordinate instruments and trumpeters of sedition, but as the chief contrivers and managers, and in a short time as the open administrators and sovereign rulers?'¹⁶⁹

The history of the gradual radicalization of French literary men could be traced back to the later years of the reign of Louis XIV, when they began to lose the protection and patronage of the court. Thus, Burke wrote:

Since the decline of the life and greatness of Louis the Fourteenth, they were not so much cultivated either by him, or by the regent, or the successors to the crown; nor were they engaged to the court by favours and emoluments so systematically as during the splendid period of that ostentatious and not impolitic reign.

Aggrieved at the loss of their social prestige, these men of letters, typical of the middle class, had strived for a recovery by combining themselves into an incorporation which was to produce great effect: 'Writers, especially when they act in a body, and with one direction', Burke contended, 'have great influence on the public mind.'¹⁷⁰ He was persuaded that should the literary men come to understand one another and to act in^a corps, 'a more dreadful calamity cannot arise out of hell to scourge mankind'.¹⁷¹

The men of letters had exerted their influence chiefly through their control of the press, particularly the newspapers. The impact the newspapers could make was tremendous, because information could thereby be circulated more efficaciously and extensively: 'They are a part of the reading of all, they are the whole of the reading of the far greater number.'¹⁷² In reality, Burke pointed out, the press had virtually made

¹⁶⁷ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 361.

¹⁶⁸ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 354.

¹⁶⁹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 456-7.

¹⁷⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 382, 384.

¹⁷¹ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 141.

¹⁷² 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 356.

every government in its spirit 'almost democratic'. Without the agitation of the press, he believed, the first movements in this Revolution perhaps could not have been given.¹⁷³ The writers of the newspapers were compared to a battery, in which 'the stroke of any one ball produces no great effect, but the amount of continual repetition is decisive'.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, with pens and tongues, these writers had by every exaggeration rendered hateful all the faults of courts, of nobility, and of priesthood.¹⁷⁵

The principal object of the radical men of letters was to harass religion: 'They worked themselves up to a perfect phrenzy against religion and all its professors,' said Burke. 'They tore the reputation of the clergy to pieces by their infuriated declamations and invectives, before they lacerated their bodies by their massacres.' In opposition to religion, a system of 'fanatical atheism' was spread.¹⁷⁶ In Burke's eyes, these literary men were all warm, hot-heated and zealous atheists.¹⁷⁷ Their minds were intoxicated with a violent zeal, and their thoughts and actions were pervaded by a spirit of 'cabal, intrigue, and proselytism'. These atheistical fathers, Burke contended, had their own bigotry, inclining 'to talk against monks with the spirit of a monk'; it was, he added, a proselytism of the most rabid kind.¹⁷⁸ Here, the extraordinary thing was that the atheism, which was professed against religion, should have nursed up the 'most violently operative principles of fanaticism', discovered so far only in the propagators of religious opinions.¹⁷⁹ Of this, Burke had given an illuminating explanation, based on considerable knowledge of social psychology:

They, who had made but superficial studies in the natural history of the human mind, have been taught to look on religious opinions as the only cause of enthusiastic zeal and sectarian propagation. But there is no doctrine whatever, on which men can warm, that is not capable of the very same effect. The social nature of man impels him to propagate his principles, as much as physical impulses urge him to propagate his kind. The passions give zeal and vehemence. The understanding bestows design and system. The whole man moves under the discipline

¹⁷³ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 259.

¹⁷⁴ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 356.

¹⁷⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 384.

¹⁷⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 245-6.

¹⁷⁷ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 377.

¹⁷⁸ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 382-3.

¹⁷⁹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 457; 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 382.

of his opinions.¹⁸⁰

Religion, it was true, had previously been the most powerful cause of fanaticism, but the French Revolution had since exemplified that even^a political doctrine could become as much a cause of fanaticism as a dogma in religion.¹⁸¹

On the whole, Burke was of the opinion that 'Men of letters, fond of distinguishing themselves, are rarely averse to innovation'.¹⁸² These people, he did not deny, were the 'first gifts of Providence to the world', but they chiefly depended for their fame and fortune on their knowledge and talent. To Burke, they were all metaphysicians of callous hearts. Like geometricians or chemists, he claimed, they would treat men in their political experiments as they did 'mice in an air pump', without the least regard to the feelings and habitudes of a moral man. In short, Burke concluded:

These philosophers are fanatics; independent of any interest, which if it operated alone would make them much more tractable, they are carried with such a headlong rage towards every desperate trial, that they would sacrifice the whole human race to the slightest of their experiments.¹⁸³

Apart from the monied interest and the men of letters, Burke also attended to a further corps of dissidents: this was a group of discontented politicians, whose role in the French Revolution was to give it a 'character and determination'. These politicians, Burke pointed out, had shared with the radical literary men thoroughly all the objects of ambition and irreligion, and substantially all the means of promoting these ends. Indeed, while the literary men provided theoretical principles for the Revolution, it was these politicians who actually gave them a practical direction.¹⁸⁴ These gentlemen, Burke thus ridiculed them, took up naively those speculative paradoxes which eloquent writers had brought forth purely as 'a sport of fancy', to try their talents and to excite surprise: 'These paradoxes become with them serious grounds of action, upon which

¹⁸⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 245.

¹⁸¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 98.

¹⁸² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 382.

¹⁸³ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 141-2.

¹⁸⁴ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 245, 246-7.

they proceed in regulating the most important concerns of the state.¹⁸⁵

According to Burke, these discontented politicians had existed extensively throughout the official ranks of the civil government and particularly in the diplomatic part. They did not include however those regular diplomats serving the government, but a column of secret agents commissioned by the king to spy on the regular diplomats ever since the reign of Louis XV. Like the monied interest or the men of letters, these politicians were also discontented, but for different reasons: they dissented from the ministry over the foreign policy of France. These people, Burke noted, were zealous French imperialists, always looking upon the exterior aggrandizement of France as their ultimate end. They were distressed at experiencing the recent decline of France as the most influential power in Europe; its cause was imputed to the mistaken policy of their government which had been diverted from a more aggressive continental policy, and instead began pursuing a pacific policy for keeping peace on the continent, particularly with Austria, in order to be able to rival Britain at sea. But, according to these politicians, the circumstance of France could by no means support an advantageous maritime adventure. Its result had proved disastrous, since as a consequence not only had France lost ground herself, but, owing to her neglect of her European interests, three great powers on the continent, each strong enough to balance France, had been suffered to arise: 'Russia and Prussia had been created almost within memory; and Austria, though not a new power, and even curtailed in territory, was. . . greatly improved in her military discipline and force.' In short, France was said to have been overshadowed.¹⁸⁶

It was this national failure which frustrated these patriotic politicians and which utterly alienated them from the government. They were thus always at odds with the government, and for this reason they had been, Burke pointed out, 'continually going from their function to the Bastille, and from the Bastille to employment, and favour again'. In this way, the number of frustrated politicians had increased considerably, and the whole, Burke noted,

formed a body of active, adventuring, ambitious, discontented people, despising the regular ministry, despising the courts at which they were employed, despising the court which employed them.

¹⁸⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 441.

¹⁸⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 247-8, 250.

From their disappointment at the poor performance of French ministries in international politics, these politicians started to criticise their government and they were even driven to question the suitability of monarchy for their imperial dream:

There was no point on which the discontented diplomatic politicians so bitterly arraigned their cabinet, as for the decay of French influence in all others. From quarrelling with the court, they began to complain of monarchy itself, as a system of government too variable for any regular plan of national aggrandizement.

They appealed to history, and compared the systematic proceeding of a Roman senate with the fluctuation of a monarchy. It was thus discovered that the politics of monarchy had hinged too much upon the personal character of the prince, and that

the vicissitudes produced by the succession of princes of a different character, and even the vicissitudes produced in the same man, by the different views and inclinations belonging to youth, manhood, and age, disturbed and distracted the policy of a country made by nature for extensive empire, or. . . for that sort of general over-ruling influence which prepared empire or supplied the place of it.

These politicians, Burke observed, were deeply impressed by the fact that the Roman republic had often conquered more 'in a single year' than all that the whole power of France, driven by all her ambition, had acquired 'in two centuries'.¹⁸⁷

The ability of a great military and ambitious republic to achieve national greatness was therefore superior, and this had effectively converted these politicians into republicans. They accepted, Burke remarked, that only in a republic could they look for a

cure for the radical weakness of the French monarchy, to which all the means which wit could devise, or nature and fortune could bestow towards universal empire, was not of force to give life, or vigour, or consistency.

But, 'Out the word came; and it never went back'. Republicanism in their hands had been turned into an active principle ready to operate when opportunities should offer. It was this republican imperialism, Burke believed, which not long before had prompted this diplomatic corps to contrive the revival in Holland of an old republican

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 248-50.

party and to make a revolution there. And the late intervention of France in the American Revolution, Burke contended, had also proceeded from the working of their republican principles and republican policy. Unfortunately, this American alliance produced ominous consequences: 'This new relation undoubtedly did much,' he continued,

The discourses and cabals that it produced, the intercourse that it established, and, above all, the example, which made it seem practicable to establish a republic in a great extent of country, finished the work, and gave to that part of the revolutionary faction a degree of strength, which required other energies than the late king possessed, to resist, or even to restrain. It spread everywhere; but it was nowhere more prevalent than in the heart of the court. The palace of Versailles, by its language, seemed a forum of democracy.

This had been the contribution which the discontented politicians had given to the Revolution. In that great turmoil, Burke concluded, they had succeeded not only in destroying their monarchy, but in 'all the objects of ambition that they proposed from that destruction'.¹⁸⁸

The interpretation which Burke had given of the origins, the dynamics and the nature of the French Revolution, it becomes now clear, has been much more complicated, and much profounder still, than historians have been so far prepared to acknowledge. Generally speaking, Burke had properly placed his interpretation in an historical context of social change which had occurred long before 1789, as a result of economic progress within French society. This change, according to Burke, had its influence on the development of the French Revolution in two prominent aspects. There is, on the one hand, a profound cultural dimension. The growing affluence of French society prior to the Revolution had gradually led to the relaxation of its moral vigilance and had thus supplied an appropriate environment for the French to reanimate their intellectual life. Owing to this intellectual revival, a cultural revolution took place silently, challenging and then undermining the system of ancient values which used to shield the old order. And, in Burke's view, it was this moral shake-up that was ultimately to account for the seemingly sudden collapse of the ancien regime in France. Meanwhile, the social and economic advance had also given rise to a new

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 251-3.

social force, the middle class. This new social class became discontented because their wealth had not received the proper social recognition they thought it deserved. They were for this reason driven determinedly to attack the anachronistic aristocratic ascendancy existing under the ancien regime. From this angle, the French Revolution was deemed as a typical middle-class revolution. There remains, above all, a broad historical significance in Burke's view of the French Revolution. There can be no doubt that in his interpretation particular emphasis had been laid on the moral and intellectual dynamics of the Revolution. It was also true that, to him, the Revolution, as its Jacobin ideology had revealed, was fundamentally anti-clerical, anti-aristocratic and anti-traditionalistic. Viewed from the vista of the eighteenth-century history, therefore, it seems that Burke had utterly linked the French Revolution to the main driving force of the Enlightenment.

CHAPTER 3
THE CRUSADE

Burke devoted the last eight years of his life (1790–97) to a holy mission against Jacobinism. His concern in this crusade had two dimensions: it was both national and universal. In its immediate sense, Burke's effort was by every means to call forth the British people to support a 'just and necessary war' on Jacobin France in order

to save my country from the iron yoke of its power, and from the more dreadful contagion of its principles; to preserve, while they can be preserved, pure and untainted, the ancient, inbred integrity, piety, good nature, and good humour of the people of England, from [its] dreadful pestilence.

But his ultimate concern was more than European: he declared it to be his calling to 'animate Europe to eternal battle, against a tyranny that threatens to overwhelm all Europe and, all the human race'.¹ This anti-Jacobin crusade, he claimed, would be a campaign for

not the Cause of a King, but of Kings; not the Interest of the French Nation but of all nations; Not the Business of this time, but what must decide on the Character and of course on the happiness of many Generations.²

At length, Burke proclaimed the whole campaign as being a great struggle for the 'Interest of mankind at large in the highest and most important of its Concerns'.³ It was a cause which, he thought, would prove favourable to humanity, to rational freedom, to all morals, and to all the elegancies, ornaments and decencies of life.⁴

Burke's move for a holy war was based on the belief that a general crisis, as a consequence of the fall of the ancien régime in France, was facing the whole^{of} Europe. Burke had never localised the influence of the French Revolution, believing that it had universal implications.⁵ The event had caused a great crisis to the French monarchy

¹ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 111, 133.

² *Corr.*, vi, 353. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 18 Aug. 1791'.

³ *Corr.*, ix, 321. 'To John Gifford - 1 May 1797'.

⁴ *Corr.*, vi, 205. 'To Edward Jerningham - 18 Jan. 1791'.

⁵ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 232.

and to all monarchies.⁶ Furthermore, he insisted, not only the cause of all monarchies, but the banner of 'all Republicks' that were constituted upon 'antient models', were in France similarly on their trial.⁷ In Burke's opinion, what the great revolution of France had brought in was not simply a political change: 'It is a destruction and decomposition of the whole society.'⁸ Here the challenge to the existing order was general; hence Burke concluded 'that in the Case of the Sovereign of France the Cause of all Sovereigns is tried; that in the Case of its Church is tried the Cause of all Churches; and that in the Case of its Nobility is tried the Cause of all the respectable orders of all Society'. It was even a trial of civil society itself.⁹

The foundation for this worry was Burke's conviction that the Jacobin system was utterly inimical to the ancient governments of Europe. The French Revolution, he claimed, had introduced principles contrary to the 'well-being of men and of citizens, and to the safety and prosperity of every just commonwealth'.¹⁰ The Jacobin republic which the Revolution set up was founded virtually on the principles of 'anarchy': the whole amounted to no more than 'a college of armed fanatics, for the propagation of the principles of assassination, robbery, rebellion, fraud, faction, oppression, and impiety'.¹¹ Burke contended that this wild and enthusiastic regime, if once established in the centre of Europe, would not tolerate any other form of government to stand, be it a monarchy – limited or unlimited – or an old republic.¹² All parts of Europe would be similarly endangered while 'any power, under any Name exists in France, professing the principles, and executing the Views, and actuated by the policy, which has made the predominant Faction there so mischievous to Religion, Laws, manners, Commerce and the common Liberty and independence of all Nations and all Governments'.¹³

Burke had never looked upon Jacobin France as a system of the usual kind; consequently, he did not perceive its strength and formidableness in an ordinary light.

⁶ *Corr.*, vi, 290. 'To the Marquis de Bouille – 13 July 1791'.

⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 419. 'To Henry Dundas – 30 Sept. 1791'.

⁸ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 219.

⁹ *Corr.*, vi, 442–3. 'To the Empress of Russia – 1 Nov. 1791'.

¹⁰ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 11.

¹¹ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 529.

¹² *Corr.*, vi, 218. 'To John Trevor – (Jan. 1791)'.

¹³ *Corr.*, viii, 134. 'To William Windham – (Circa 2 Feb. 1795)'.

According to his observation, the vigour of France rested not principally on her physical resources:

The vast territorial extent of that country, its immense population, its riches of production, its riches of commerce and convention – the whole aggregate mass of what, in ordinary cases, constitutes the force of a state, to me were but objects of secondary consideration. . . . Great as these things are, they are not what make the faction formidable.¹⁴

If France was terrible, it was not merely because 'she is France', but because 'she is Jacobin France':¹⁵ that is, her manners, her maxims and her politics were the elements which rendered her 'so dreadful to the world'.¹⁶ Burke obviously related the power of France to the system of Jacobinism, which he believed was the 'evil spirit'

that possesses the body of France; that informs it as a soul; that stamps upon its ambition, and upon all its pursuits, a characteristic mark, which strongly distinguishes them from the same general passions, and the same general views, in other men and in other communities.

By this spirit, France was inspired into a new, pernicious and desolating activity.¹⁷ A system like that of Jacobin France, even with the worst and least exertion of the natural force of the country, would in Burke's opinion still be formidable:¹⁸

Were France but half of what it is in population, in compactness, in applicability of its force, situated as it is, and being what it is, it would be too strong for most of the states of Europe, constituted as they are, and proceeding as they proceed.¹⁹

He admitted that he would dread 'more from one or two maritime provinces in France, in which the spirit and principles of that Revolution were established, than from the

¹⁴ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 231.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁶ *Corr.*, ix, 99. 'To William Lushington – 26 Oct. 1796'.

¹⁷ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 231.

¹⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 333. 'To Richard Burke, Jr – 9 Aug. 1791'.

¹⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 256.

old French monarchy possessed of all that its Ambition ever aspired to'.²⁰

The disposition of the Jacobin system to spread, increased further the danger of revolutionary France, whose contact, whose example, and the infection of whose doctrines, Burke warned, were the most dreadful of her arms.²¹ Burke contended that the Jacobin system must diffuse rapidly, because it was founded on principles 'the most delusive indeed, but the most flattering to the natural propensities of the unthinking multitude, and to the speculations of all those who think, without thinking very profoundly'.²² The 'moral scheme' of France, he pointed out, had furnished the only pattern ever known which 'they who admire will *instantly* resemble'. It formed an 'inexhaustible repertory of one kind of examples'.²³ But it was an example the most uncomfortable, since it exemplified that

The royal family perished because it was royal. The nobles perished because they are noble. The men, women, and children, who had property because they had property to be robbed of. The priests were punished after they had been robbed of their all, not for their vices, but for their virtues and their piety.

Such an example was by itself ruinous in every point of view: religious, moral, civil and political. When supported by force, Burke added, its impact would be even more overwhelming: 'The example of what is done by France is too important not to have a vast and extensive influence; and that example, backed with its power, must bear with great force on those who are near it'.²⁴

Considering the nature of the Jacobin system, the danger thus apprehended from France would become not a mere presumption, but real and determinate. That regime, Burke wrote, had persistently harboured malicious designs towards her neighbours: 'Enmity to us and to all civilized nations is wrought into the very stamina of its constitution'.²⁵ Far from spreading peace and goodwill, it had 'meditated war against all other governments; and proposed systematically to excite in them all the very

²⁰ *Corr.*, ix, 333. 'To French Laurence - 12 May 1797'.

²¹ *Corr.*, vii, 176. 'To Lord Grenville - 18 Aug. 1792'.

²² 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 376.

²³ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 111.

²⁴ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 219, 382-3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 418.

worst kind of seditions, in order to lead to their common destruction'.²⁶ Meanwhile, the Jacobin republic was also active and dynamic. Burke claimed that revolutionary France was a power that was always vigilant, that was always on the attack, and that would allow itself no repose and suffer none to rest an hour with impunity.²⁷ It had been ever 'on the watch, qualified and disposed to profit of every conjuncture, to establish its own principles and modes of mischief, wherever it can hope for success'.²⁸ In sum, Burke warned, the Jacobin regime had always intended wilfully to disturb and distract other governments.²⁹ He felt it to be far better to be conquered by any other nation than to have such a regime as a neighbour:

They, who are to live in the vicinity of this new fabric, are to prepare to live in perpetual conspiracies and seditions; and to end at last, in being conquered, if not to her dominion, to her resemblance. But when we talk of conquest by other nations, it is only to put a case. This is the only power in Europe by which it is *possible* we should be conquered. To live under the continual dread of such immeasurable evils is itself a grievous calamity.³⁰

It would be mischievous to Europe if such a public enemy was suffered there to contrive directly or indirectly against its peace.³¹

Further, Burke discovered that an imperial ambition had in fact played an essential role in the politics of the Jacobin revolution. The Jacobins had seized the 'most important part of Europe, and ^[were] struggling for the rest'.³² They had planned, he noted, seditions and wars against neighbouring nations, aiming at transforming Europe into a 'confederation of republics' with France at its head.³³ The intention of the Jacobins, in other words, was meant to 'form an universal empire, by producing an universal revolution'. The process of this empire-building, however, could be gradual and circuitous: some old states, if they could not be taken at one swallow, would probably

²⁶ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 10.

²⁷ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 437-8.

²⁸ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 530.

²⁹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 376.

³⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 205.

³¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 11.

³² 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 162.

³³ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 10.

be allowed a temporary existence. Yet, Burke believed,

whilst they give to these tolerated states this temporary respite in order to secure them in a condition of real dependence on themselves, they invest them on every side by a body of republics, formed on the model, and dependent ostensibly, as well as substantially, on the will, of the mother republic, to which they owe their origin. These are to be so many garrisons to check and control the states, which are to be permitted to remain on the old model, until they are ripe for a change.³⁴

In this manner, a Jacobin empire would be accomplished. And this plan of empire, Burke asserted, had long been projected 'from the very first revolt of the faction against their monarchy', and had been ever since 'uniformly pursued, as a standing maxim of national policy, from that time to this'.³⁵

Apprehensions about the fate of Europe had thus embarked Burke on his mission to rescue the 'Remains of the civilized World from impiety and barbarism'.³⁶ He always tied the fate of the whole of Europe to the settlement of the internal affairs of France: the liberty and the safety of European nations, he argued, could only be ensured by restoring order, law and true freedom to that country.³⁷ The evil of Jacobinism must be rectified right there, or else great mischief would radiate from it, spreading 'circle beyond circle, in spite of all the little defensive precautions which can be employed against it'.³⁸ In short, to preserve Europe from being barbarized, it was necessary firstly to 'civilize' France.³⁹

The task of de-Jacobinising France would be onerous however. 'Nothing internal in France can of itself produce any change.'⁴⁰ Burke had never expected that the malady of France could be cured through internal remedies:⁴¹ 'I am very sorry to say,' he insisted, 'that the Evil in France does not promise to administer any thing towards its

³⁴ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 304-5.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 168.

³⁶ *Corr*, vii, 382. 'To Lieutenant General Edward, Count Dalton - 6 Aug. 1793'.

³⁷ *Corr*, vi, 290. 'To the Marquis de Bouille - 13 July 1791'.

³⁸ 'Heads for Consideration on the Present State of Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 409.

³⁹ *Corr*, vii, 498. 'To the Marquess of Buckingham - 1 Dec. 1793'.

⁴⁰ *Corr*, vi, 419. 'To Henry Dundas - 30 Sept. 1791'.

⁴¹ *Corr*, vi, 217. 'To John Trevor - (Jan. 1791)'.

Own Cure.⁴² On the one hand, there was little hope that any substantial change would happen spontaneously among the Jacobins themselves so that the disorder in France could be redressed automatically:

As to a change of mind in these men, who consider infamy as honour, degradation as preferment, bondage to low tyrants as liberty, and the practical scorn and contumely of their upstart masters as marks of respect and homage, I look upon it as absolutely impracticable.

'These madmen,' Burke claimed, 'to be cured, must first, like other madmen, be subdued.'⁴³ On this point, Burke had shown his realism, accepting that the struggle against Jacobinism would have to rely more on real force than on theoretical argument. A monstrous thing like the Jacobin revolution was not to be argued out of existence by the mere force of reasoning; and those who combatted with it would need to use their 'military and financial Strength':⁴⁴

Nothing more can be said. Something must be done. You have an armed Tyranny to deal with; and nothing but arms can pull it down. Aided by these, reason may resume its natural authority: without them, by frequent repetition it loses its force; by frequent failure, it loses its credit.⁴⁵

It was swords, not pens, that could ultimately be relied on to reduce the Jacobins to reason.⁴⁶

On the other hand, Burke also gave up the hope that any action against the Jacobins could be fostered within the French territory. The domestic situation of France, he claimed, had indicated the utter impossibility of a counter revolution from any internal cause.⁴⁷ First of all, there was nothing which could be depended upon to sustain any anti-Jacobin attempt. Under the new regime, discontents had indeed everywhere prevailed, but these distressed people could do nothing for themselves

⁴² *Corr.*, vi, 263. 'To the Abbe Honore-Charles-Ignace Foulon - 1 June 1791'.

⁴³ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 529; 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 422.

⁴⁴ *Corr.*, ix, 321. 'To John Gifford - 1 May 1797'.

⁴⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 211. 'To the Comtesse de Montrond - 25 Jan. 1791'.

⁴⁶ *Corr.*, ix, 99-100. 'To William Lushington - 26 Oct. 1796'.

⁴⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 241. 'To the Chevalier de la Bintinaye - (March 1791)'.

because, Burke pointed out, they had 'no arms, nor magazines, nor chiefs, nor union, nor the possibility of these things within themselves'.⁴⁸ More particularly, the anti-Jacobin forces were seriously in want of competent leadership. Effective action could only be launched under a resolute, vigorous, zealous, and enterprising leader, who, in this case, should properly be King Louis XVI himself; unfortunately, a man of his personality, though well-intentioned and virtuous, did not possess that kind of mind which was made for 'breaking their prisons, terrifying their Enemies, and animating their friends'. Nor could strong leadership be looked for in the numerous nobility of France, among whom, Burke lamented, not one man could be found 'who to great military Talents adds any sort of lead, consideration, or following, in the Country, or in the Army'.⁴⁹ These aristocratic classes, despite their incompetence for leadership, would surely still be the true and sole supporters of the anti-Jacobin cause.⁵⁰ But Burke took notice that after the Declaration of Pilnitz (27 August 1791) large numbers of the leading aristocratic families had in fact fled the kingdom because of the hope of support held out to them by the Emperor of Austria and the King of Prussia. Without the support of these noblesse, even if a counter revolution could have been started, he insisted, there was not likely to have been anything to feed it.⁵¹ On the whole, Burke despaired: 'There seems no Energy in the French Monarchy able to revive the Royal Authority. Its chief supports, the Nobility and the Clergy, are extinguished. . . The King is heavy, inert, inexperienced, timid, without resources.'⁵² His opinion was essentially pessimistic.

The second obstacle to anti-Jacobin activities was that the Jacobin regime had exerted an absolute rule which placed all transactions in the country, from the capital down to the municipalities, under close surveillance and firm control. Burke pointed out that the internal governments of the French municipalities were the strongest that had ever been seen:

Each municipal republic has a committee, or something in the nature of a *committee of Research*. In these petty republics the tyranny

⁴⁸ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 422.

⁴⁹ *Corr*, vi, 241-2. 'To the Chevalier de La Bintinaye - (March 1791)'.

⁵⁰ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 412.

⁵¹ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 375; *Corr*, vi, 443-4. 'To the Empress of Russia - 1 Nov. 1791'.

⁵² *Corr*, vi, 36. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 12 Nov. 1789'.

is so near its object, that it becomes instantly acquainted with every act of every man. It stifles conspiracy in its very first movements. Their power is absolute and uncontrollable. No stand can be made against it.

Furthermore, every municipality had been kept in complete isolation so that between them no intelligence of any kind could possibly be communicated. Under such circumstances, should any sporadic local discontents arise, they could not be channelled into coordinated actions strong enough to produce great effect. Paris was the capital of the Revolution, and was in Burke's opinion the only place where any rebellion that could arise against the present system must begin. In that city, Burke agreed, some freedom of communication had indeed existed; but even there any anti-Jacobin attempt would be easily frustrated, as there had been installed 'so many servants as any man has, so many spies and irreconcilable domestic enemies'.⁵³ In reality, he believed, as the Jacobins had completely achieved their ends, they would have the determination and the means to preserve quiet: for this, he noted, a police was established; an army was apparently under their command; and an unfixed number of militia too was in almost constant service.⁵⁴ After all, Burke could not but acknowledge that the Jacobins were tough enemies, not to be dealt with easily:

The predominant Faction is the strongest as I conceive, without comparison. They are armed. Their Enemies are disarmed and dispersed. . . . But the grand point against all internal attempts, is that the faction are in possession. Unless it be taken by surprize, as the late French Monarchy was, it is not easy by conspiracy or insurrection to overturn any Government.

And a republican government could certainly not, like a monarchy, be 'taken by a Coup de main; or put an end to by the seizure of one Person'.⁵⁵ Indeed, under the tyrannical rule of the Jacobins, Burke feared, any internal attempt would be doomed to fail, only to produce misery to those who nursed them.⁵⁶

Besides, Burke also discovered that the notorious financial policy often predicted to be bankrupting, and hence undermining, the Jacobin regime had in effect paradoxically contributed a great deal to save it from the threat of any counter

⁵³ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 374-5.

⁵⁴ *Corr.*, vi, 79. 'To Unknown - (Jan. 1790)'.

⁵⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 217. 'To John Trevor - (Jan. 1791)'.

⁵⁶ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 374.

revolution. It was well known that the Jacobin regime, in order to solve the financial problem, had forced the assignats, its newly issued paper currency, upon the French people as legal tender in every transaction of life. One perhaps unexpected effect of this measure had been that it had thus compelled every one in France virtually to have a share in, and as a consequence to have his fortune unwittingly tied up with, the future of the new order. Not surprisingly, therefore, they became reluctant to support any action calculated to destabilise the new regime, upon whose existence their fortunes must hinge. Hence, Burke concluded, as the assignats had in a manner become the 'only visible maintenance' of the whole people, their dread of a bankruptcy in the new government thus helped considerably to hold up the occurrence of a counter-revolution. '[I]n my opinion,' he wrote, 'the counter-revolution cannot exist along with it.'⁵⁷

After surveying the entire situation, Burke acknowledged that no opportunity existed inside France by which 'a second revolution can be accomplished'.⁵⁸ Despairing of any internal rectification, his thoughts quite naturally reverted to the possibility of foreign intervention, and he was convinced at last that, if any force was to be relied upon to destroy the Jacobin revolution, it 'must come from *without*,' and especially from those neighbouring countries that were alarmed about the potential threat of the Revolution to their own safety.⁵⁹ Indeed, Burke had not hesitated to declare that 'Arms, and I am sorry to say, foreign Arms, must decide your fate':⁶⁰ the only hope of restoring monarchy to France, he asserted, must rest with the neighbouring powers and in their ability to render assistance.⁶¹ Moreover, the force required not only must come from abroad but had to be substantial: 'Nothing else but a foreign force can or will do. . . Nor is it a small military force that can do the business. It is a serious design, and must be done with combined strength.'⁶²

Burke was fully convinced of the necessity of foreign intervention if order was to be restored to France; but one question remains: on what ground could a nation be

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 370-1.

⁵⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 79. 'To Unknown - (Jan. 1790)'.

⁵⁹ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 529.

⁶⁰ *Corr.*, vii, 167. 'To the Abbe de La Bintinaye - 3 Aug. 1792'.

⁶¹ *Corr.*, vi, 242. 'To the Chevalier de La Bintinaye - (March 1791)'.

⁶² *Corr.*, vi, 217-8. 'To John Trevor - (Jan. 1791)'.

entitled to interfere, according to its own discretion, in the interior affairs of another? Burke justified his stand, first by appealing to the law of nations. According to the authority of Emmerich von Vattel, there was a rule in the law of nations which established that whenever 'a civil war is kindled in a state, foreign powers may assist that party which appears to them to have justice on their side'.⁶³ In Burke's eyes, France under the Revolution was without doubt a kingdom divided for the moment between the revolutionaries and the royalists; by the law above mentioned, therefore, every other nation could freely choose to 'take any part she pleases'.⁶⁴ Burke insisted that an act of intervention in such a situation was justifiable by all means provided its motive was noble:

This interference must indeed always be a right, whilst the privilege of doing good to others, and of averting from them every sort of evil, is a right: circumstances may render that right a duty. It depends wholly on this, whether it be a *bona fide* charity to a party, and a prudent precaution with regard to yourself, or whether, under the pretence of aiding one of the parties in a nation, you act in such a manner 'as to aggravate its calamities, and accomplish its final destruction. In truth, it is not the interfering or keeping aloof, but iniquitous intermeddling, or treacherous inaction, which is praised or blamed by the decision of an equitable judge.⁶⁵

He distinguished carefully the case of 'taking a part in the divisions of a Country', which was justifiable, from that of 'promoting Rebellion and sedition in a neighbouring Country', which was not. It was true that to intervene in a civil dissension would require indeed great prudence and circumspection, and a serious attention to justice and to the policy of one's own country, as well as to that of Europe; but, he insisted, a public law forbidding such action would not be supported by the 'reason of that law, nor by the Authorities on the Subject, nor by the practice of this Kingdom, nor by that of any civilized Nation in the World'. This principle of interference, he believed, had in a sense already been written into the basis of the 'public Law of Europe'.⁶⁶

The right to intervene could also be vindicated upon the universal 'right of

⁶³ 'Appendix to "Remarks on the Policy of the Allies"', *Burke's Works* iii, 459.

⁶⁴ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 348-9; *Corr*, vi, 317. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 5 Aug. 1791'.

⁶⁵ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 431-2.

⁶⁶ *Corr*, vii, 176. 'To Lord Grenville - 18 Aug. 1792'; 'Heads for Consideration on the Present State of Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 400.

vicinage', which had developed analogously out of the 'law of civil vicinity' that prevailed in a civil community. Burke remarked that it had been customary for international jurists to seek to regulate relationships between nations via principles elicited from those civil codes which were the conclusions of 'legal reason' and which were hence of 'universal equity'. Among civil laws, he noted,

There is a *Law of Neighbourhood* which does not leave a man perfectly master on his own ground. When a neighbour sees a *new erection*, in the nature of a nuisance, set up at his door, he has a right to represent it to the judge; who, on his part, has a right to order the work to be stayed; or, if established, to be removed.

From this parent '*Law of Neighbourhood*' was derived a 'right of *vicinage*' which empowered public authority in certain circumstances to, 'without destroying, regulate and restrain the right of *ownership*'. According to this rule, Burke explained,

No *innovation* is permitted that may redound, even secondarily, to the prejudice of a neighbour. The whole doctrine. . . is founded on the principle, that no *new* use should be made of a man's private liberty of operating upon his private property, from whence a detriment may be justly apprehended by his neighbour.

And this 'law of denunciation', he added, was by nature prospective: 'It is to anticipate what is called *damnum infectum*, or *damnum nondum factum*, that is, a damage justly apprehended, but not actually done.' When a case of this nature arose, the judge could issue a prohibition to innovate, even before the damage caused by the innovation at issue was clearly demonstrated, until the point could be determined. To Burke, this rule of vicinity was no doubt internationally applicable; but he stressed that when it was thus enforced, as between nations no judge had been constituted, the 'vicinage' could therefore become the natural judge: that is, the neighbour itself could assume the role of being 'preventively, the assessor of its own rights, or remedially, their avenger'. Thus defined, this rule of vicinity, Burke wrote,

has bestowed on the grand vicinage of Europe a duty to know, and a right to prevent, any capital innovation which may amount to the erection of a dangerous nuisance. Of the importance of that innovation, and the mischief of that nuisance, they are, to be sure, bound to judge, not litigiously; but it is in their competence to judge. They have uniformly acted on this right. What in civil society is a ground of action, in politic society is a ground of war.

In the present case, the French Revolution had unquestionably constituted a pestilential 'nuisance' to Europe; therefore, the neighbours of France had 'not only a

right, but an indispensable duty, and an exigent interest', to denounce this new work before it would produce the danger which Europe had sorely felt and would long feel. Though the competence to judge in such cases must always be a matter of moral prudence, and though the act of war should ever be conducted with great deliberation, when dangers impended, Burke contended, 'the duty of the vicinity calls for the exercise of its competence; and the rules of prudence do not restrain, but demand it'.⁶⁷

Finally, Burke defended the propriety of the European nations to interfere upon a specific 'civil war' theory, which held that the contest ushered in by the Revolution in France would come to be not so much a domestic dissension in a single nation as a great internal conflict of the European community at large, engulfing every member state in it. 'If I understand at all the true Spirit of the present contest,' he remarked, 'We are engaged *in a Civil War*, but on a larger Scale, and on far more important objects, than civil wars have generally extended themselves to, or comprehended'.⁶⁸ This theory of a general 'civil war' in Europe had developed from the idea that none of the European nations, because of their common cultural heritage, could escape the challenge posed by the Jacobin revolution. In Burke's mind, all the European nations, despite their national boundaries, had formed virtually an enlarged community: 'The writers on public law have often called this *aggregate* of nations a commonwealth', with essential correspondence in religions, laws, manners, governments, and so on. 'They had reason,' he explained:

It is virtually one great state having the same basis of general law, with some diversity of provincial customs and local establishments. The nations of Europe have had the very same Christian religion, agreeing in the fundamental parts, varying a little in the ceremonies and in the subordinate doctrines. The whole of the polity and economy of every country in Europe has been derived from the same sources. It was drawn from the old Germanic or Gothic customary, from the feudal institutions, which must be considered as an emanation from that customary; and the whole has been improved and digested into system and discipline by the Roman law. From hence arose the several orders, with or without a monarch. . . in every European country. . . From all those sources arose a system of manners and education which was nearly similar in all this quarter of the globe; and which softened, blended, and harmonized the colours of the whole.

⁶⁷ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 216-8.

⁶⁸ *Corr*, vii, 432. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 22 Sept. 1793'.

The Jacobin revolution, by destroying the old France, had made a 'violent breach of the community of Europe'; and the challenge it posed to that community was universal, for the system it set up, Burke claimed, had nursed determined ambition and systematic hostility towards all those ideas and usages, religious, legal, moral, or social, of this civilised world.⁶⁹ The conflict which thus ensued was therefore not just a narrow civil dissension limited particularly to France herself: 'It is a war,' Burke declared, 'between the partisans of the ancient, civil, moral, and political order of Europe, against a sect of fanatical and ambitious atheists which means to change them all.'⁷⁰ Consequently, the efforts which the European powers were persuaded to make for crushing the Revolution in France should not be deemed as malicious meddling with the interior affairs of another country: it was a just campaign for the common safety of Europe. At any rate, Burke maintained, the anti-Jacobin war turned out to be not an ordinary local and domestic dispute in which there could be no general concern. It was, on the contrary, to champion a cause 'which we have in common'.⁷¹ And, he stressed: 'We are, as I think, fighting for our *all*'⁷²

The case for foreign intervention was thus justified; for Burke, indeed, an anti-Jacobin crusade was not simply just but necessary.⁷³ Before this war could be carried out properly, however, one needed to be acquainted with the 'true knowledge of its specifick Nature'.⁷⁴ Burke acutely discerned that a war against Jacobinism would certainly be different since the enemy to be met with was unusual. 'We are in a war of a *peculiar* nature,' he explained:

It is not with an ordinary community, which is hostile or friendly as passion or as interest may veer about: not with a state which makes war through wantonness, and abandons it through lassitude. We are at war with a system, which, by its essence, is inimical to all other governments, and which makes peace or war, as peace and war may best contribute to their subversion. It is with an *armed doctrine* that we are at war.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 214-5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 233-4.

⁷¹ *Corr.*, vii, 392. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (Circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

⁷² *Corr.*, vii, 522. 'To Captain Emperor John Alexander Woodford - 13 Jan. 1794'.

⁷³ *Corr.*, viii, 232. 'To William Pitt - 28 Oct. 1795'.

⁷⁴ *Corr.*, vii, 489. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 19 Nov. 1793'.

⁷⁵ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 164.

A campaign against a hostile system, which was set in motion by a militant ideology, could not be conducted as if it was a 'common War about Trade, or Territorial Boundaries, or about a political Balance of power, among Rival or jealous States'.⁷⁶ It should be, Burke insisted, a 'War of Principle' rather than a 'War of Ambition',⁷⁷ as

the present Evil of our time, though in a great measure an Evil of ambition, is not one of common political ambition; but in many respects entirely different. It is not the Cause of Nation as against nation, but as you well observe, the cause of mankind against those who have projected the subversion of that order of things under which our part of the world has so long flourished. . .⁷⁸

Indeed, he admonished the European powers to take the flames that were consuming France seriously as a warning to protect their own buildings, instead of regarding the situation avariciously as 'a happy occasion for pillaging the goods, and for carrying off the materials, of their neighbour's house'.⁷⁹ The purpose of the crusade was to preserve the ancient system of Europe. It was 'not at all a foreign war of empire, but as much for our liberties, properties, laws, and religion, and even more so, than we had ever been engaged in'.⁸⁰

Quite naturally, a mission for such a purpose ought to be politically, or ideologically, oriented. Burke indeed preferred to call it a 'political war',⁸¹ and had persistently contended that a wise military plan in this campaign must proceed from proper political principles.⁸² And to him, the principles here referred to were unequivocal: 'Our principles are antijacobin,' he declared.⁸³ 'I had but one single principle to guide me - namely that the extinction of Jacobinism in France, was the sole worthy object of the Arms and politicks of this time.'⁸⁴ The aim of the crusade

⁷⁶ *Corr.*, vii, 438. 'To the Duke of Portland - 29 Sep. 1793'.

⁷⁷ *Corr.*, vii, 380-1. 'To the Duke of Portland - 1 Aug. 1793'.

⁷⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 387. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (Circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

⁷⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 235.

⁸⁰ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 488-9.

⁸¹ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 492; *Corr.*, viii, 332. 'To William Pitt - 28 Oct. 1795'.

⁸² *Corr.*, vii, 460. 'To William Windham - (24 Oct. 1793)'; *Corr.*, vii, 517. 'To Lord Loughborough - 12 Jan. 1794'.

⁸³ *Corr.*, vii, 461. 'To William Windham - (24 Oct. 1793)'.

⁸⁴ *Corr.*, vii, 517-8. 'To Lord Loughborough - 12 Jan. 1794'.

should be to root out the doctrines and the examples of the French Revolution,⁸⁵ and its military operations, accordingly, had to be destined 'not for Dunkirk, or this or t'other Town - but to drive Jacobinism out of the World'.⁸⁶ He believed that so long as Jacobinism subsisted in France

it is not, in my opinion, the gaining a fortified place or two, more or less, or the annexing to the Dominion of the allied powers this or that Territorial district, that can save Europe, or any of its Members. We are at war with a principle, and an example, which there is not shutting out by Fortresses or excluding by Territorial Limits.

'No lines of demarcation can bound the Jacobin Empire,' he argued: 'It must be extirpated in the place of its origin, or it will not be confined to that place.'⁸⁷ If the evils of Jacobinism were not destroyed in the seminary from whence they were propagated, their prevalence over Europe, Burke warned, would be a matter not of contingency or speculation, but of absolute certainty.⁸⁸

A political war, it can be certain, could not be conducted purely as an operation of arms; it would require, Burke pointed out, as much political arrangement as military skill.⁸⁹ The plan he proposed for the war was indeed distinctly based on political and ideological considerations. He deliberately distinguished the French nation from the Jacobin regime, claiming that the enemy to be dealt with was not the France seeking a foreign empire: 'it is a sect aiming at universal empire, and beginning with the conquest of France.' With this in mind, he contended that the crusade must be directed at 'France as a faction' rather than at 'France as a state'.⁹⁰ The spirit of the whole effort was not at war with France but with Jacobinism.⁹¹ 'The diminution of the power of France, as a State, is pursued as an Object, as well as its reformation, as a distempred State; but the latter is, in my opinion, much the more important object of

⁸⁵ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 383.

⁸⁶ *Corr.*, vii, 422. 'To Dr Charles Burney - 14, 15 Sept. 1793'.

⁸⁷ *Corr.*, vii, 387. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (Circa 6 May 1793)'.

⁸⁸ *Corr.*, vi, 416. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 28 Sept. 1791'.

⁸⁹ *Corr.*, vi, 218. 'To John Trevor - (Jan. 1791)'.

⁹⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 234-5.

⁹¹ *Corr.*, vii, 387. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (Circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

the two.⁹² In short, the destruction of Jacobinism should be always held as the guideline of the anti-Jacobin war.⁹³ All the efforts in this crusade would be futile if this principle was lost sight of:

Jacobinism. . . *must* stand as long as the powers think its extirpation but a *secondary* object, and think of taking advantage under the name of *indemnity* and *security* to make war upon the whole nation of France, royal and Jacobin, for the aggrandizement of the allies on the ordinary principles of interest, as if no Jacobinism existed in the world.⁹⁴

In Burke's eyes, Jacobinism was the most dreadful evil that had ever afflicted mankind, 'a thing which goes beyond the power of all calculation in its mischief'.⁹⁵ It could not be reduced safely by any act; it must be destroyed, or it would destroy all Europe. Indeed, the crusade, with regard to Jacobinism, he maintained, ought to be a war of extermination, believing that there was nothing independent which could co-exist with the Jacobin regime.⁹⁶

you are enemies, that must subdue or be subdued, on the one side or the other. If *your* hands are not on your swords, their knives will be at your throats. There is no medium, - there is no temperament, - there is no compromise with Jacobinism.⁹⁷

Burke repulsed any move for a peace with the Jacobin republic. The struggle with Jacobinism, he contended, was not a race for any trivial object: it was with the system itself that they were at war. Thus, he concluded: 'As I understood the matter, we were at war not with its conduct, but with its existence; convinced that its existence and its hostility were the same.'⁹⁸

It must be noticed, however, that, though Burke would have liked to have seen the Jacobin system destroyed, he had by no means desired France to be ruined as a

⁹² *Corr.*, vii, 498. 'To the Marquess of Buckingham - 1 Dec. 1793'.

⁹³ *Corr.*, vii, 480-1. 'To William Windham - (Circa 10 Nov. 1793)'.

⁹⁴ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 448-9.

⁹⁵ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 509.

⁹⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 257.

⁹⁷ *Corr.*, viii, 104. 'To William Windham - 30 Dec. 1794'.

⁹⁸ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works* v, 232.

nation. As this issue touched the critical problem concerning the balance of power in Europe, it therefore had to be considered carefully. Bearing in mind the principle of a European equilibrium, Burke argued that the sinking of France as a member state of the European community, by whatever causes, could do nothing good to the security of Europe as a whole. It could not be right that

a second Kingdom should be struck out of the System of Europe, either by destroying its independence, or by suffering it to have such a form in its independence, as to keep it as a perpetual Fund of Revolutions, in the very center of Europe; in that Region, which alone touches almost every other, and must influence even where she does not come in contact.⁹⁹

Burke admitted indeed that, for the general interest of Europe, France might need to be circumscribed within moderate bounds, lest she should be able to overpower her neighbours; none the less, he was more concerned about the great inconveniences that might accrue from the 'total political extinction of a great civilized Nation situated in the heart of our Western System'.¹⁰⁰ It would be unwise, he contended, to suffer France to be sunk into a 'lower condition than is good for the total balance of Europe, and consequently for our welfare':¹⁰¹

I do not conceive that the total annihilation of France. . . is a desirable thing to Europe; or even to this its rival nation. Provident patriots did not think it good for Rome that even Carthage should be quite destroyed; and he was a wise Greek, wise for the general Grecian interests, as well as a brave Lacedaemonian enemy, and generous conqueror, who did not wish, by the destruction of Athens, to pluck out the other eye of Greece.¹⁰²

The main object of this crusade, as Burke insisted, was to root out Jacobinism. When this danger was removed, it would be a serious matter to consider how far a further reduction of France would secure the general safety of Europe. Indeed, Burke was convinced that in the end it might be necessary for the European powers to 'nurse France, not to exhaust it', for even France herself had not been spared from the severe devastation caused by the Revolution. Never had a country been so completely

⁹⁹ *Corr.*, vii, 387. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (Circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

¹⁰⁰ *Corr.*, vi, 36. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 12 Nov. 1789'.

¹⁰¹ *Corr.*, vi, 106. 'To Adrien-Jean-Francois Duport - (Post 29 March 1790)'.

¹⁰² 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 531.

ruined, an appalled Burke noted. They who enter into France do not succeed to *their* resources. They have not a system to reform, but a system to begin.¹⁰³

As for the conduct of this war, Burke had constantly urged the anti-Jacobin powers to undertake effective action. Generally speaking, Burke recognised that in order to launch a successful war against the Jacobins the force opposed to it 'should be made to bear some analogy and resemblance to the force and spirit which that system exerts'. With regard to the dynamics of the Jacobin regime, Burke perceived that a jacobinised France belonged to a kind of power totally different from that of the ancien regime. 'It is not the ancient France with ordinary ambition and ordinary means,' Burke pointed out: 'It is not a new power of an old kind. It is a new power of a new species.' Thus, he explained:

France differs essentially from all those governments, which are formed without system, which exist by habit, and which are confused with the multitude, and with the complexity of their pursuits. What now stands as government in France is struck out at a heat. The design is wicked, immoral, impious, oppressive; but it is spirited and daring; it is systematic; it is simple in its principle; it has unity and consistency in perfection.

It came near to a totalitarian system in which the sole will of the state prevailed:

To them the will, the wish, the want, the liberty, the toil, the blood of individuals, is as nothing. Individuality is left out of their scheme of government. The state is all in all. Everything is referred to the production of force; afterwards, everything is trusted to the use of it. It is military in its principle, in its maxims, in its spirit, and in all its movements. The state has dominion and conquest for its sole objects; dominion over minds by proselytism, over body by arms.

The Jacobin regime, in short, emerged as a 'martial republic': a republic made up of 'intriguers' and 'warriors', and with a character 'the most restless, the most enterprising, the most imperious, the most fierce and bloody, the most hypocritical and perfidious, the most bold and daring, that ever has been seen, or indeed that can be conceived to exist'.¹⁰⁴

This anatomy suggests that the anti-Jacobin campaign would need to be carried

¹⁰³ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 448-9.

¹⁰⁴ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 244, 255, 257, 259-60.

on with a spirit of unusual force. 'Republican spirit,' Burke contended, 'can only be combatted by a spirit of the same nature; of the same nature, but informed with another principle, and pointing to another end.' First, the anti-Jacobin crusade should be pursued with enormous zeal. In Burke's opinion, a crusade, though fighting for an ancient cause, should be able to animate as ardent a spirit, as 'novelty' had inspired innovators 'to destroy the monuments of the piety and the glory of ancient ages'.¹⁰⁵ Without such enthusiasm, the struggle would be doomed ^{to} frustration:

There must be zeal. Universal zeal in such a cause, and at such a time as this is, cannot be looked for; neither is it necessary. Zeal in the larger part carries the force of the whole. Without this, no government, certainly not our government, is capable of a great war.¹⁰⁶

Secondly, this mission needed desperately to be imbued with a spirit of adventure. In wars, Burke noted, something always had to be risked; and in the contest with Jacobinism, he stressed, it was not precautions, but the having used too many of them, that was to be apprehended:¹⁰⁷

We are to break in upon a power in possession; we are to carry everything by storm, or by surprise, or by intelligence, or by all. Adventure, therefore, and not caution, is our policy. Here to be too presuming is the better error.¹⁰⁸

Thirdly, this campaign ought to be fought with all possible vigour.¹⁰⁹ To subdue a vicious and distempered energy would need a manly and rational vigour. '[I]f we meet this energy,' Burke wrote,

. . .with doubts, fears, and suspicions, with a languid, uncertain hesitation, with a formal, official spirit, which is turned aside by every obstacle from its purpose, and which never sees a difficulty but to yield to it, or at best to evade it; down we go to the bottom of the abyss - and nothing short of Omnipotence can save us.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ 'Letter to William Elliot, Esq.', *Burke's Works*, v, 79.

¹⁰⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 189.

¹⁰⁷ *Corr.*, vii, 517-8. 'To Lord Loughborough - 12 Jan. 1794'.

¹⁰⁸ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 438.

¹⁰⁹ *Corr.*, vii, 521. 'To Captain Emperor John Alexander Woodford - 13 Jan. 1794'.

¹¹⁰ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 438.

Lastly, and most important, this war must be launched at once. To Burke, the more permanent the Jacobin system promised to be, the more alarming it would become.¹¹¹ The Jacobin system, he believed, would gather strength by continuance and increase its credit by success; and it would hence gradually, he feared, gain the confidence of the people to join, or at least to accommodate themselves, to it:¹¹²

Every hour any system of Government continues, be that system what it will, the more it attains consistency, and the better it will be able to provide for its own support, and the less the People who always look to settlement of one kind or other, will be disposed to any enterprizes for overturning it.¹¹³

Worse still, when the present system grew stronger because of longer existence, it would have the power utterly 'to destroy discontents at home, and to resist all foreign attempts in favour of these discontents'.¹¹⁴ After all, Burke believed that a 'speedy determination' was indispensable for this anti-Jacobin crusade.¹¹⁵ Of course, he did not mean to prompt the anti-Jacobin powers to any precipitate action: 'I am far indeed from recommending rash enterprises with inadequate force.'¹¹⁶ None the less, he warned, every instant would give the enemy time to strengthen itself.¹¹⁷

Meanwhile, the tactics to be adopted in this war should also be specific. Burke made it clear that the present war would not bear the least resemblance to any that had ever happened before. Accordingly, the anti-Jacobin forces ought not to draw on the examples and reasonings taken from the former wars for their guidance.¹¹⁸ It would be inadequate for them to follow the 'old, worn out principles and Topics of Policy', because the enemy they were to face was a 'new Evil' which no 'antient Maxims' were able to destroy.¹¹⁹ Neither the present politics, nor the present war,

¹¹¹ *Corr.*, vii, 522. 'To Captain Emperor John Alexander Woodford - 13 Jan. 1794'.

¹¹² *Corr.*, vi, 242. 'To the Chevalier de La Bintinaye - (March 1791)'.

¹¹³ *Corr.*, vi, 218. 'To John Trevor - (Jan. 1791)'. Burke was not entirely coherent on this point, for, if he held on to this supposition, he would find it hard to explain why the ancien regime collapsed in France.

¹¹⁴ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 375-6.

¹¹⁵ *Corr.*, vii, 452. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (6 Oct. 1793)'.

¹¹⁶ *Corr.*, vi, 291. 'To the Marquis de Bouille - 13 July 1791'.

¹¹⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 333. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 9 Aug. 1791'.

¹¹⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 521. 'To Captain Emperor John Alexander Woodford - 13 Jan. 1794'.

¹¹⁹ *Corr.*, vi, 242. 'To the Chevalier de La Bintinaye - (March 1791)'.

Burke claimed, belonged to war and politics of past experience; therefore, all the ordinary political and military procedures would prove ultimately unavailing.¹²⁰ 'Never did an attempt require more a sort of conduct out of the common Routine, or more belonging to the specifick occasion.'¹²¹ Here, he declared, the beaten path might become the very reverse of the safe road.¹²²

Two points have figured particularly in the proposal which Burke made for the crusade. In the first place, an offensive strategy had to be adopted. Burke pointed out that what the European nations had to apprehend from France was not so much a direct invasion as her exportation of revolution: the danger would come mainly not from external attack, but from 'internal corruption'. A threat of this nature was not to be effectively guarded against by a merely defensive resistance.¹²³ It would be absurd, he wrote, that a 'defensive alliance' should be meditated to prevent the 'operation of intrigue, mischievous doctrine, and evil example, in the success of unprovoked rebellion, regicide, and systematic assassination and massacre'.¹²⁴ As noted above, Burke had not grasped the power of Jacobin France purely in terms of its physical strength: that regime was a kind of power 'which was not so truly dangerous in its fortresses nor in its territories, as in its spirit and its principles'. It thus became a danger against which not even armies and fortresses could form the least effective defence.¹²⁵

We are at War with that principle and that Example and not with an ordinary power. In the whole Circle of political Expedients I am afraid that there is no sort of *merely defensive plan*, of the least force, against the Effect of the *Example* given in France, subversive of every regular form of Government, and every one of those regular intermediate Bodies which support the Governments.¹²⁶

He ridiculed the prospect of composing a defensive alliance to hinder the propagation of Jacobin principles as being an effort to 'form a Cordon to hedge in the Cuckoo'.

¹²⁰ *Corr*, vii, 413. 'To William Windham - 18 Aug. 1793'.

¹²¹ *Corr*, vi, 333. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 9 Aug. 1791'.

¹²² 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 232.

¹²³ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 376.

¹²⁴ 'Hears for Consideration on the Present State of Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 409.

¹²⁵ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 235.

¹²⁶ *Corr*, vii, 383. 'To Lieutenant General Edward, Count Dalton - 6 Aug. 1793'.

That would be like a 'League of Princes against bad Syllogisms': 'An alliance of which the *Casus foederis* is sophistic Maxims'.¹²⁷

There would still be practical difficulties in the effort to concert the but too dissonant European powers. Burke believed it to be a mere chimera to hope that a lasting alliance for defence could possibly be formed among a number of nations, who were 'of long discordant interests, with innumerable discussions existing, having no one pointed object to which it is directed', and who had to be held together 'with an unremitting vigilance, as watchful in peace as in war'. In contrast, an offensive alliance would be more feasible. Burke believed that if European powers would form an offensive alliance, their union could be more successfully maintained as a result of their 'common efforts in common dangers, against a common active enemy'. It would be able to preserve its unity, and produce for a given time some considerable effect.¹²⁸

Indeed, an alliance for offensive operations not only would be more practicable, but it could serve better the aim of the anti-Jacobin crusade. If the crusade, as Burke pointed out, was to extinguish the Jacobin system, the surest way for it to do so was to destroy it in the place from where it was spread; and this could not be done through a mere defensive strategy. A war to destroy a whole system must be very much a war of extermination; therefore, not only was an offensive strategy necessary, but it had to be directed at the 'heart of affairs'. It had to be a 'centrifugal war' which, Burke insisted, could not be effectively carried on by always keeping on the circumference around the enemy.¹²⁹ In effect, great advantages could ensue from tackling France directly from within. According to his analysis, France, though most formidable abroad, was essentially weak at home. It was terrible on its frontiers, because the vices of the French system at home had tended paradoxically to give force to her foreign exertions: 'The generals *must* join the armies. They must lead them to enterprise, or they are likely to perish by their hands.' In contrast, its interior seemed feeble, as the internal disorders resulting from the Revolution were ever ready to shatter the Jacobin regime.¹³⁰ 'France is strong at arm's length,' Burke thus commented:

¹²⁷ *Corr.*, vii, 272. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 17 Oct 1792'.

¹²⁸ 'Heads for Consideration on the Present State of Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 408.

¹²⁹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 235.

¹³⁰ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 240; 'Heads for Consideration on the Present State of Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 399. Here, however, Burke apparently contradicted his own earlier claim about the internal strength of the Jacobin regime. Cf. above, pp. 99-100.

She is, I am convinced, weakness itself, if you can get to grapple with her internally. If you keep on the frontier – if you should even gain all the frontier – she may, if you are resolved to give her time, (which is giving her everything,) make another frontier.¹³¹

It would be, he warned, ten times more easy totally to destroy the system itself, than, when established, it would be to reduce its power.¹³²

Nevertheless, whereas Burke tenaciously pressed for offensive actions, he did not mean to pursue the war unrelentingly in the form of indiscriminate hostility to the French Nation without distinction of persons, parties, or principles.¹³³ Sticking to his *anti-Jacobin* principles, he solicited the foreign powers, in their attack, to stand as 'the Enemy only of a pernicious faction Tyrannizing in that Country', and not to fall on 'the Nation universally'.¹³⁴ He invoked precedents from history and argued that on similar occasions foreign powers had approached such a war in the manner of giving aid to one party in a civil contest rather than of launching a hostile invasion:

When the Spaniards, in the sixteenth century, sent aids to the chiefs of the league, they appeared as allies to that league, and to the imprisoned king (the Cardinal de Bourbon) which that league had set up. When the Germans came to the aid of the Protestant princes, in the same series of civil wars, they came as allies. When the English came to the aid of Henry the Fourth, they appeared as allies to that prince. So did the French always when they intermeddled in the affairs of Germany. They came to aid a party there.¹³⁵

Burke exhorted foreign nations to act as friendly powers applied to for counsel and assistance in the settlement of a distracted country. They should deem it as their primary object, he stressed, to help 'the dignity, the religion, and the property' of France to 'repossess themselves of the means of their natural influence', thus paving the way for the final resettlement of the country.¹³⁶

In support of this principle comes Burke's other major tactic for the anti-Jacobin

¹³¹ *Corr.*, vii, 413. 'To William Windham – 18 Aug. 1793'.

¹³² 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 240.

¹³³ *Corr.*, vii, 445. 'To Henry Dundas – 8 Oct. 1793'.

¹³⁴ *Corr.*, vii, 391. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau – (Circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

¹³⁵ 'Heads for Consideration on the Present State fo Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 401.

¹³⁶ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 414, 425.

crusade: his unremitting call for collaboration with the French royalists. If the restoration of the old order to France was the main object of the crusade, it would be politic for foreign powers to recruit the service of the remnants of the French anti-Jacobins and to make common cause with them. Burke claimed that

if I could command the whole military arm of Europe, I am sure, that a bribe of the best province in that kingdom would not tempt me to intermeddle in their affairs, except in perfect concurrence and concert with the natural, legal interest of the country. . .¹³⁷

The French royalists, of course, would be the sole and natural party with whom foreign powers ought to concert their actions in this contest.¹³⁸ Though the French royalists were in general disarray, the anti-Jacobin powers could still manage to reintegrate these forces and provide them with an effective leadership. Burke pleaded that protection and succour should be promised to these 'unfortunate people' who had bravely endeavoured the restoration of monarchy to their country.¹³⁹ It was them, he insisted, that 'we are to use as our instruments in the reduction, in the pacification, and in the settlement of France'.¹⁴⁰

The French royalists included those numerous resisters who still remained in their homeland and a corps of emigres who had, since the Revolution, taken refuge abroad. According to Burke, the resisters inside France could be of great value if the intervening powers would employ them as their internal collaborators. They could form, he pointed out,

an ally in the heart of the country, who, to our hundred thousand, would at one time have added eighty thousand men at the least, and all animated by principle, by enthusiasm, and by vengeance; motives which secured them to the cause in a very different manner from some of those allies whom we subsidized with millions.

And this internal ally, Burke added, was potentially more formidable to the Jacobin regime than 'all his other foes united'.¹⁴¹ As for the emigres, Burke requested the

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 430.

¹³⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 432. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 22 Sept. 1793'.

¹³⁹ *Corr.*, vii, 481. 'To William Windham - (Circa 10 Nov. 1793)'.

¹⁴⁰ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 422.

¹⁴¹ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 240-1.

intervening powers to consult, and as much as possible to use, them in affairs of their own concern.¹⁴² These people, he pointed out, were the natural, legal and constitutional representatives of ancient France; they therefore ought to be taken counsel with on the important interests in which they had a major stake: those interests concerned their king, their country, their laws, their religion, and their property.¹⁴³ Indeed, the emigres, because of their knowledge of, and their interests in, their country, could perhaps be dispatched most effectively as a column of the 'advanced guard' in the crusade, while the grand, well-disciplined army of the European powers 'proceeded leisurely, and in close connexion with all its stores, provisions, and heavy cannon, to support the expedite body in case of misadventure, or to improve and complete its success'.¹⁴⁴

Several justifications could be assigned for the wisdom of the policy of collaborating with the French royalists. First of all, Burke argued, the French people would be more eligible to manage their own concerns: 'I have a strong opinion,' he claimed, 'that Frenchmen are best for French affairs.'¹⁴⁵ This reason was readily comprehensible. No foreigner whatsoever would be either in interest so engaged, or in judgement and local knowledge so competent, as the natives of the country could be, for taking up such^a task:

The affair of the establishment of a government is a very difficult undertaking for foreign powers to act in as *principals*; though as *auxiliaries and mediators*, it has been not at all unusual, and may be a measure full of policy and humanity, and true dignity.

And Burke specified that the most serious endeavours to restore royalty would be made by royalists and that property could be most energetically restored by the ancient proprietors of that kingdom. Secondly, a noble cause that conjoined the French royalist force would make it more appealing to the sentiments of the French people and it would thus be easier to secure their indispensable support:

If we wish to make an impression on the minds of any persons in France, or to persuade them to join our standard, it is impossible that

¹⁴² *Corr.*, vii, 514. 'To William Windham - 8 Jan. 1794'.

¹⁴³ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 412.

¹⁴⁴ 'Hears for the Consideration on the Present State of Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 402-3.

¹⁴⁵ *Corr.*, vii, 514. 'To William Windham - 8 Jan. 1794'.

they should not be more easily led, and more readily formed and disciplined . . . by those who speak their language, who are acquainted with their manners, who are conversant with their usages and habits of thinking, and who have a local knowledge of their country, and some remains of ancient credit and consideration, than with a body congregated from all tongues and tribes.

Moreover, the presence of these 'respectable native interests' in their actions would help to dispel any suspicion, which might arise in the minds of the French people, of ill-designing motives on the part of the intervening powers. It would indeed convince the French people that the European nations had no intention of entering France in the style of conquerors, but had only come to 'maintain their legitimate monarchy in a truly paternal French government, to protect their privilege, their laws, their religion, and their property'.¹⁴⁶

The most valuable role which the French royalists could play, however, was to perform as special instruments to de-Jacobinise France. To restore France back to normal, Burke claimed, it would not be enough merely to break her power. Ultimately, it would need to re-civilise it; and for this task, he wrote, some descriptions of people of their own race, but 'better in rank, superior in property and decorum, of honourable, decent, and orderly habits', would become absolutely necessary. The Jacobins, in Burke's eyes, were 'ferocious savages' who, to be civilised, ought to be put under the direction and the government of better Frenchmen than themselves; otherwise, they would soon relapse into another fever of aggravated Jacobinism.¹⁴⁷ Among the French royalists, the Gallican clergy were reckoned as the most operative instrument of civilisation. Burke contended that 'if we can make any serious impression upon France by Arms in the beginning, the Clergy will be of more effect in the progress of this Business, than an hundred thousand Soldiers'.¹⁴⁸ This corps of priests in his eyes were discreet, gentle, well-tempered, conciliatory, virtuous, and pious; and they could practise, on the heel of military operations, most suitably the works of the 'physicians and magistrates of the mind'. To the clergy would be added an army of French gentlemen who, according to Burke's observations, were well-informed, sensible, ingenious, high-principled, and spirited. These gentlemen stood for the expatriated, landed interest of France; and they, when restored to their own lands, could join the

¹⁴⁶ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, 414, 422-4.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 425-6.

¹⁴⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 498. 'To the Marquess of Buckingham - 1 Dec. 1793'.

clergy in reanimating the French people to their loyalty, their fidelity, and their religion. And because of their familiarity with their own country, they would then be able to sort out their people and thus to arm the 'honest and well-affected' against the 'factious and ill-disposed'.¹⁴⁹

Burke proclaimed again and again that the contribution of the French royalists was utterly essential in the effort for the final pacification of France. 'We are convinced,' he wrote,

that a number of persons so disposed and so qualified as they are, if restored to their Country their property, and the influence which property in good hands carries with it, would be a necessary supplement to the use of arms; and that, under a Wise administration, they might do great things indeed for restoring France to the civilized World. Without this help such a deplorable Havock is made in the minds of men (in both sexes) in France, still more than in the external order of things, and the Evil is so great and spreading, that a remedy is impossible on any other Terms.¹⁵⁰

He reiterated his suspicion about the fitness of foreigners to carry out such a sophisticated task. France would be gained and settled, but it ought to be gained and settled 'by *itself*, and through the medium of its *own* native dignity and property'. 'It is not honest,' he concluded, 'it is not decent, still less is it politic, for foreign powers themselves to attempt anything in this minute, internal, local detail, in which they could show nothing but ignorance, imbecility, confusion, and oppression.'¹⁵¹

Any discussion of Burke's anti-Jacobin crusade must at last focus on his proposals for the post-war order in France. To resettle France with good judgment would require wise policy. Generally speaking, Burke's approach to this issue seemed fairly open-minded: he favoured a plan which would temperately secure as its basis some general principles of religion, loyalty, and civil order, while leaving 'every thing else to be discussed'.¹⁵² Indeed, he would rather see reestablished in post-war France an order in which everything was settled upon its old foundation, but with an 'improved

¹⁴⁹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 426-7.

¹⁵⁰ *Corr.*, vii, 390. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (Circa 6 Aug. 1793)'.

¹⁵¹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 427.

¹⁵² *Corr.*, vii, 435. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 22 Sept. 1793'.

and permanent superstructure'.¹⁵³

This prospect suggests that Burke would prefer a policy which might compromise subtly between different principles of restoration and reform. There can be no doubt that in Burke's mind a programme of restoration should be made the foundation for the future settlement of France. They who wanted to reform a state, he pointed out, ought to assume some actual constitution of government which was to be reformed. It was necessary, therefore, to commence the resettlement of France by the 're-establishment of order and property of *every* kind, and, through the re-establishment of their monarchy, of every one of the old habitual distinctions and classes of the state'.¹⁵⁴ When things were returned to their old grounds, it might then be realistic to talk with safety, upon some practical principles, of reforming what had been amiss:¹⁵⁵ 'I am satisfied,' Burke declared, 'that nothing can possibly do it any real service, but to establish it upon all its *antient Bases* Till that is done, one Man's speculation will appear as good as anothers.'¹⁵⁶

The general principle which underlines Burke's policy of restoration was perspicuous. Essentially, he called for France to be reinstated 'without exception as nearly as possible upon its former Basis'.¹⁵⁷ In his vision, every man in every denomination should be restored afterwards 'to his own House and to his own Altar, from the palace of the Prince and the Bishop, and the Castle of the Noble, to the parsonage House of the Curate and the Cottage of the peasant'.¹⁵⁸ To provide a basic political framework for France, Burke, appealing to the international law of Europe, argued strongly for the restitution of a fundamentally monarchical government:¹⁵⁹

In all our transactions with France, and at all periods, we have treated with that state on the footing of a monarchy. Monarchy was considered in all the external relations of that kingdom with every

¹⁵³ *Corr.*, vii, 452. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - 16 Oct. 1793'.

¹⁵⁴ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 547-8.

¹⁵⁵ *Corr.*, vii, 389. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (circa 6 Aug. 1793)'; *Corr.*, vii, 384. 'To Lieutenant General Edward, Count Dalton - 6 Aug. 1793'.

¹⁵⁶ *Corr.*, vi, 219. 'To John Trevor - (Jan. 1791)'.

¹⁵⁷ *Corr.*, vii, 389. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (circa 2 Aug. 1793)'.

¹⁵⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 384-5. 'To Lieutenant General Edward, Count Dalton - 6 Aug. 1793'.

¹⁵⁹ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works* iii, 431.

power in Europe as its legal and constitutional government.¹⁶⁰

Indeed, he had not only contended that the French monarchy needed to be reinstated, but insisted that the restored monarch had to remain a very strong one.¹⁶¹ To meet the exigencies of a nation so situated and so related as that of France, its king must wield a real, solid and extensive power: what a king of France in common sense had to possess, according to Burke, should include

Every degree of power necessary to the state, and not destructive to the rational and moral freedom of individuals, to that personal liberty, and personal security, which contribute so much to the vigour, the prosperity, the happiness, and the dignity of a nation – every degree of power which does not suppose the total absence of all control and all responsibility on the part of ministers.

At any rate, he should be made powerful enough, alone and by himself, to hold a just balance between different orders and, at the same time, to effect the interior and exterior purposes of a protecting government.¹⁶²

It must be pointed out, however, that when Burke pressed for restoring the French monarchy, his object was to rebuild the entire monarchical order, including its kingship and its aristocratic bases. He had more than once warned that, to campaign for the monarchy of France, it would be impolitic to consider its monarch as everything and to ignore the intermediate orders which supported it as nothing.¹⁶³ The aristocratic principle was essential to a viable monarchical system. On the one hand, aristocracy was the strongest pillar that propped up the monarchy. No permanent and hereditary royalty, Burke claimed, could survive '*where nothing else is hereditary or permanent in point either of personal or corporate dignity*'; and it would be unimaginable, he continued,

that monarchy can be acknowledged and supported in France upon any other basis than that of its property, *corporate and individual*, or that it can enjoy a moment's permanence or security upon any scheme of things, which sets aside all the ancient corporate capacities and

¹⁶⁰ 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 347.

¹⁶¹ *Corr.* vi, 480. 'To unknown - (1791)'.

¹⁶² 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 553-4.

¹⁶³ 'Heads for Consideration on the Present State of Affairs', *Burke's Works* iii, 400.

distinctions of the kingdom, and subverts the whole fabric of its ancient laws and usages.

Monarchy and property, Burke insisted, must also go together, or neither could exist.¹⁶⁴ Before a government could be firmly reinstated in France, therefore, it would be of absolute necessity to have all the property faithfully restored.¹⁶⁵ On the other hand, the aristocratic orders would also form a natural bulwark to guard against the excess of monarchical authority. Burke contended that the future government of France must be founded upon property and 'regulated by it'.¹⁶⁶ It would be wise, he suggested, if the programme of resettlement would declare clearly and distinctly in favour of the restoration of property, and then to 'confide to the hereditary property of the kingdom, the limitation and qualifications of its hereditary monarchy'.¹⁶⁷ Without an aristocracy to be its brake, Burke was convinced, 'every Dominion must become a mere despotism of the Prince, or the brutal Tyranny of a ferocious and atheistical populace'.¹⁶⁸

Burke's eagerness for restoration, nevertheless, had not driven him to espouse any programme which would seek to revive every bit of the ancien regime without distinction. The discussion above has obviously indicated that, though Burke pressed hard for restoration, what he insisted upon in fact was the general framework, rather than the specific details, of the coming settlement. Indeed, he was ready to admit that any attempt for a total restoration in the case of France would be virtually out of the question. He had not been blind to the great muddle that the Revolution had produced in France and he argued that, after such a violent and total shake-up, no effort would be able to bring France back to her ancient state intact:

When such a complete convulsion has shaken the State, and hardly left any thing whatsoever, either in civil arrangements, or in the Characters and disposition of mens minds, exactly where it was, whatever shall be settled although in the former persons and upon old forms, will be in some measure a new thing.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁴ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 416-7.

¹⁶⁵ *Corr.*, vii, 384. 'To Lieutenant General Edward, Count Dalton - 6 Aug. 1793'.

¹⁶⁶ *Corr.*, vii, 521. 'To Captain Emperor John Alexander Woodford - 13 Jan. 1794'.

¹⁶⁷ 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 416.

¹⁶⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 160. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 29 July 1792'.

¹⁶⁹ *Corr.*, vi, 479. 'To Unknown - (1791)'.

Any resettlement afterwards, even when based on old foundations, would unavoidably have to undergo some degree of change.

In truth, any idea of an indiscriminate restoration would be quite undesirable. First, Burke had entertained no doubt that the French people, after having a taste of freedom, would not like to see the coming back of their old monarchical despotism: 'after having changed a sort of despotism for a sort of Anarchy, they should not change back from anarchy to despotism'.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, neither was Burke himself, despite his hatred for the Jacobin revolution, a friend of any arbitrary power:

For my part for one, though I make no doubt of preferring the antient Course, or almost any other to this vile chimera, and sick mans dream of Government yet I could not actively, or with a good heart, and clear conscience, go to the establishment of a monarchical despotism in the place of this system of Anarchy.¹⁷¹

He had explicitly disclaimed supporting any motion which would seek to restore 'L'ancien Regime' in the sense of reviving 'that system of Court Intrigue miscalled a Government as it stood, at Versailles before the present confusions'. That had been a state no less chaotic than that of the Jacobin system and therefore it could only be untenable. Thus, Burke wrote: 'If it were even possible to lay things down exactly as they stood, before the series of experimental politicks began, I am quite sure that they could not long continue in that situation.'¹⁷²

At any rate, Burke accepted that some modifications would need to be made so that the old order of France could be rationalised and hence revitalised. To lay down a proper basis for such a change, Burke had alluded to the 'Business of June 1789' for a blueprint. Here, he clearly referred to that reform proposal which Louis XVI presented before the States General on the 23 June 1789 and which promised a moderate reform without impairing the fundamental social fabric of the ancien regime.¹⁷³ Burke himself also had once sketched out a memorandum which epitomised plainly his general prospect of the future settlement of France: 1st, it was fundamental primarily

¹⁷⁰ *Corr.*, vi, 423. 'To the Chevalier de La Bintinaye - (27 Oct. 1791)'.

¹⁷¹ *Corr.*, vi, 414. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 26 Sept. 1791'.

¹⁷² *Corr.*, vi, 479-80. 'To Unknown - (1790)'.

¹⁷³ *Corr.*, vi, 423. 'To the Chevalier de la Bintinaye - (27 Oct. 1791)'. For a brief discussion of the 'Business of June 1789', cf. A. Goodwin, *The French Revolution* (London, 1953. 5th ed. 1970), pp. 56-64.

to restore the monarchy as the basis, and then to secure with it a free constitution; 2nd, for this purpose, it was necessary to cause a meeting of the States General, freely chosen according to the ancient legal order and voting by order; 3rd, to secure personal freedom, all Letters de Cachet and other means of arbitrary imprisonment had to be abolished; 4th, all taxation must be raised by the States General in conjunction with the King; 5th, ministerial responsibility ought to be established, and public revenue put out of the power of abuse and malversation; and lastly, a synod of the Gallican Church had to be convened to reform all its abuses.¹⁷⁴ These guidelines reveal Burke's view of reform. He favoured a moderate approach and he hoped to transform the old order of France into a free system: 'I must think,' he had once declared, 'such a government well deserved to have its excellencies heightened, its faults corrected, and its capacities improved into a British constitution.'¹⁷⁵ After all, his aim was to reconstruct in France a 'Government under a Monarchy acting by fixed Law'.¹⁷⁶ It ought to be a system which would incorporate into monarchy the sober liberty of the subjects and hold out some security to the people.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ *Corr.*, vi, 414. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 26 Sept. 1791'.

¹⁷⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 402.

¹⁷⁶ *Corr.*, vi, 317. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 5 Aug. 1791'.

¹⁷⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 423. 'To the Chevalier de La Bintinaye - (27 Oct. 1791)'.

CHAPTER 4
THE OLD WHIG

The *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, according to Burke's own account, had been published because of his apprehension that 'the principles of a new, republican, frenchified Whiggism was gaining ground in this Country'.¹ Indeed, the cause which chiefly motivated Burke to pronounce on French affairs was his solicitude for the portentous influence which the French Revolution would exert on Britain rather than his concern over the fate of France.² The coming of the French Revolution had been acclaimed with great zeal in Britain among the radicals who, not slow in appreciating its universal implication, had earnestly welcomed it as a timely encouragement to their own dormant cause of reform. The spirit and determination of the French people to struggle for liberty had been much admired. It was the enthusiasm of the British radicals for the French Revolution that aroused Burke:

When I saw all this mingled Scene of Crime, of Vice, of disorder, of folly, and of madness, receivd by very many here, not with the Horrour and disgust, which it ought to have produced, but with rapture and exultation, as some almost supernatural Benefit showed down upon the Race of mankind; and when I saw, that arrangements were publickly made for communicating to these Islands their full share of these blessings, I thought myself bound to stand out and by every means in my power to distinguish the Ideas of a sober and virtuous Liberty. . . . from that profligate, immoral, impious, and rebellious Licence, which, through the medium of every sort of disorder and calamity, conducts to some kind or other of Tyrannick domination.³

The *Reflections* was thus written with a view to exposing the 'English friends of French liberty', intending, of course, to caution the British public against the penetration of French principles.⁴

This principal preoccupation is clearly revealed by the fact that the *Reflections*, though mainly dealing with the French Revolution, starts with a precursory attack on a sermon entitled *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, which Dr. Richard Price, a

¹ *Corr.*, vii, 52. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 284.

³ *Corr.*, vii, 55. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

⁴ Cf. A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution*, pp. 99-135.

celebrated Dissenting minister, had been invited to preach before the meeting of the Revolution Society on 4 November 1789 to commemorate the anniversary of the Glorious Revolution.⁵ The striking feature of Price's Sermon consists in its bold republican tone, inspired obviously by what was then going on across the Channel. Price, in the course of his preaching, had openly declared that the British monarch was 'almost the only lawful King in the world, because the only one who owes his crown to the choice of his people'. This assertion had been grounded, there can be no doubt, on the view that the Revolution of 1688 had been achieved as a result of the triumph of the people: 'By a bloodless victory,' Price claimed, 'the fetters which despotism had been long preparing for us were broken; the rights of the people were asserted, a tyrant expelled, and a Sovereign of our own choice appointed in his room.' And to elucidate the heritage of 1688, Price went on to impress upon his audience that by the Revolution the British people had secured the right to liberty of conscience, the right to resist power when abused, and, more especially, 'The right to chuse our own governors; to cashier them for misconduct; and to frame a government for ourselves'. However, he reminded them, the achievement of 1688, great as it had been, was by no means perfect: religious toleration in Britain remained limited and the defect of representation had yet to be corrected. The people of Britain therefore must continue their efforts to reform the constitution until they were put 'in the secure and complete possession of the blessings of liberty'. The sermon ended with an enthusiastic panegyric for the French Revolution, which insinuated that the French people were but following the step which the British had taken in 1688.⁶

Price of course was not here to preach revolution for Britain; to be sure, his call for complete toleration and his pressing for parliamentary reform could by no means be deemed revolutionary. However, his eagerness to cast the Revolution of 1688 in republican colours, and particularly to view it from the angle of the French Revolution, proved only too provocative: the sermon, claimed Burke, had contained 'shocking Sentiments, and seditious principles'.⁷ The principle which undoubtedly aroused Burke

⁵ Indeed, Burke's initial plan might have been only to refute Price's Sermon. His decision to compose a longer pamphlet could have been a rather later development, probably after his clash with the Foxites in the parliamentary debate of 9 Feb. 1790 when he discovered that the Foxites appeared to welcome and admire the French Revolution, see: *Corr.*, vii, 56-8. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'. For the relevance of Price to the genesis of the *Reflections*, see: Frederick Dreyer, 'The Genesis of Burke's *Reflections*', *Journal of Modern History*, I (1978), 462-79. See also: D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind: The Thought and Works of Richard Price* pp. 310-17.

⁶ Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (London, 1790), pp. 19-21, 26-42. For an analysis of this sermon, see: D. O. Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 293-308.

⁷ *Corr.*, vii, 56. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

most was the theory of popular sovereignty, which Price had audaciously broached in his sermon. In fact, Price's principles had been readily linked to a prevailing radical ideology which Burke had contemptuously branded as new Whiggism whose leading principles were understood to be included in the republican idea

that the sovereignty. . . did not only originate *from* the people, . . . but that in the people the same sovereignty constantly and unalienably resides; that the people may lawfully depose kings, not only for misconduct, but without any misconduct at all; that they may set up any new fashion of government for themselves, or continue without any government at their pleasure; that the people are essentially their own rule, and their will the measure of their conduct; that the tenure of magistracy is not a proper subject of contract, because magistrates have duties, but no rights; and that if a contract *de facto* is made with them in one age, allowing that it binds at all, it only binds those who are immediately concerned in it, but does not pass to posterity. . .⁸

Meanwhile, a concomitant ideological confusion had also distressed Burke: there was a general tendency in the nation indiscriminately to associate 'this strange thing, called a Revolution in France' with 'the glorious event commonly called the Revolution in England'.⁹ Indeed, he was much surprised when he discovered that members of the Whig party were similarly nursing certain radical opinions. These radical Whigs, it was noticed, had been so imprudent as to preach up the perilous doctrine of 'resistance and revolution' and had even gone so far as to assert 'that our last Revolution of 1688 stands on the same or similar principles with that of France'.¹⁰

Burke had always reckoned himself as among the most forward in the zeal to maintain the principles of the Glorious Revolution, and of the British constitution, in their 'utmost purity and vigour'.¹¹ When therefore such a challenge arose, he naturally felt it incumbent upon himself to bring out the truth of the 1688 Revolution, in order on the one hand to cleanse it from a republican taint and on the other to absolve it from being associated with the French Revolution. Moreover, it also became necessary for efforts to be made to restate the 'true principles of our constitution in Church and state'.¹² The publication of Burke's *Reflections*, however, had failed to settle the

⁸ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 44-5.

⁹ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 278.

¹⁰ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 498.

¹¹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 278-9.

¹² *Corr.*, vi, 92. 'To Philip Francis - 20 Feb. (1790)'.

problem, but had sparked off an unpleasant dispute which led to the irrevocable split of the opposition Whig party.¹³ His friend, Charles James Fox, had, much to his chagrin, publicly declared his 'entire disapprobation' of the book in the 'most unqualified Terms', while another colleague, Richard Sheridan, threatened to write against it.¹⁴ Consequently, Burke was 'disowned' by the Whig party, to which he had been so much attached.¹⁵ It was then indeed generally held that Burke had wandered from the principles of the Whig tradition and had betrayed his long-cherished cause of reform. To vindicate himself and, indeed, further to reinforce the principles which he laid down in the *Reflections*, appeal was made to history.¹⁶ In his *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), Burke drew upon the Whig arguments of Queen Anne's reign, endeavouring to prove that his *Reflections* had 'stated the Revolution and the Settlement upon their true principles of legal reason and constitutional policy' and that his interpretation of the 1688 Revolution was 'in perfect harmony with that of the ancient Whigs'.¹⁷

The controversy here occasioned undoubtedly had immediate political relevance, but the debate proceeded, as was usual at the time, around the historical question concerning the nature of the Revolution in 1688.¹⁸ Naturally, Burke chose to establish his own view through controverting Price's theory that the 1688 Revolution had mandated the people to choose their rulers, to cashier them for misconduct, and to form a new government. Price's claim was apparently based on the allegation that the British people had deposed King James II and replaced him with King William III in 1688. The fundamental task falling on Burke, therefore, was to prove that Price's interpretation of the 1688 Revolution was historically untenable. The first issue here to be tackled touches the question about the nature of the British kingship: had the British nation set up the 'choice of his people' as the foundation of 'the king's exclusive legal title' in 1688? To elucidate this question, Burke had, at the outset,

¹³ *Corr.*, vi, 308. 'To the Bishop of Salisbury - 31 July 1791'.

¹⁴ *Corr.*, vi, 178. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 29 Nov. 1790'.

¹⁵ *Corr.*, vi, 331. 'To the Earl of Charlemont - 8 Aug. 1791'.

¹⁶ *Corr.*, vi, 309. 'To the Bishop of Salisbury - 31 July 1791'.

¹⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 41-2.

¹⁸ The nature of the 1688 Revolution had been involved in most of the major political debates of the 18th-Century Britain. For a general survey of this topic, see: H. T. Dickinson, 'The Eighteenth-Century Debate on the "Glorious Revolution"', *History*, lxi (1976), 28-45. Cf. Gerald M. Straka, 'Sixteen Eighty-eight as the Year One: Eighteenth-Century Attitudes Towards the Glorious Revolution', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* i (1971), 143-67.

readily pointed to a plain fact that the present king of Britain was not called to the throne through election although historically, he admitted, kingship might have originated from some sort of popular election:

At some time or other, to be sure, all the beginners of dynasties were chosen by those who called them to govern. There is ground enough for the opinion that all the kingdoms of Europe were, at a remote period, elective, with more or fewer limitations in the objects of choice. But whatever kings might have been here, or elsewhere, a thousand years ago, or in whatever manner the ruling dynasties of England or France may have begun, the king of Great Britain is, at this day, king by a fixed rule of succession, according to the laws of his country.

And Burke went on to deny categorically the assertion that the king of Britain had ever owed his high office to 'any form of popular election'.¹⁹

It could well be argued, however, that since the Hanoverian succession had based its legality upon the Revolution Settlement and as the Revolution Settlement had implied the principle of the choice of the people, it was therefore legitimate to claim that the British monarchy, after 1688 at least, was elective. Indeed, did not those decisions amount to the most daring acts of choice when the British nation enthroned King William in 1688 and when they later offered the crown to the House of Hanover through the Act of Settlement? To defuse such a challenge, Burke had invoked firstly historical documents from the Revolution as his authority and pointed out that the Declaration of Rights in effect had been quite silent on the so-called right of election, for throughout that great cornerstone of the British constitution, he noted, 'not one word is said, nor one suggestion made, of a general right "to choose our own *governors*". At the same time, he was anxious to play down the elective connotation in the case of King William's accession. He contended that though the accession of King William did constitute, so far as the hereditary succession was concerned, 'a small and a temporary deviation' from its regular order, it nevertheless could not be grossly interpreted as a downright popular election. The British people's acceptance of King William, he claimed, was not the result of an election freely made. It was rather a 'necessity' forced upon them by the situation of the time:

their accepting King William was not properly a *choice* but to all

¹⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 288-9.

those who did not wish, in effect, to recall King James, or to deluge their country in blood, and again to bring their religion, laws, and liberties into the peril they had just escaped, it was an act of *necessity*, in the strictest moral sense in which necessity can be taken.

King William's accession, at any rate, ought not to be made too much of. Whatever it might be, Burke argued, it was at most but a special case, made at an unusual moment; and it would be improper to draw a principle 'from a law made in a special case, and regarding an individual person'. He took the radicals to task for their imprudence to 'see nothing in that of 1688 but the deviation from the constitution' and then to 'take the deviation from the principle for the principle'. Indeed, even here the deviation did not seem to have strayed too far. To Burke, in truth, King William himself was no alien to the title of the throne: he was both James II's son-in-law and Charles I's nephew, and therefore 'though not next, was however very near, in the line of succession'.²⁰

If the British nation had not in effect made their king elective in 1688, they had more emphatically demonstrated their determined commitment to the principle of inheritance in the Act of Settlement of 1701. When a total failure of issue from King William III, and afterwards from Queen Anne, was in prospect, Britain would again face the thorny problem of settling the succession to the throne. There was then a pressing need to maintain a certainty in the future succession and, moreover, to secure the liberties of the people. Burke pointed out that when Parliament came to solve this problem, it revealed great judgment in the decision, on the one hand, to reaffirm without hesitation the principle of inheritance, which Burke believed had 'prevailed in the Declaration of Rights', and, on the other, to specify with precision the 'persons who were to inherit in the Protestant line'.²¹ The hereditary nature of the Hanoverian succession was undeniable:

The Princess Sophia was named in the act of settlement of the 12th and 13th of King William, for a *stock* and root of *inheritance* to our kings, and not for her merits as a temporary administratrix of a power, which she might not, and in fact did not, herself ever exercise. She was adopted for one reason, and for one only, because, says the act, 'the most excellent Princess Sophia, Electress and Duchess Dowager of Hanover, is *daughter* of the most excellent Princess Elizabeth, late Queen of Bohemia, *daughter* of our late *sovereign lord* King James the

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 290-2, 296.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

First'. . . This limitation was made by parliament, that through the Princess Sophia an inheritable line not only was to be continued in future, but. . . that through her it was to be connected with the old stock of inheritance in King James the First; in order that the monarchy might preserve an unbroken unity through all ages, and might be preserved. . . in the old approved mode by descent.

The making of such a settlement on that uncertain occasion, indeed, had betrayed quite remarkably the pertinacity of the nation in support of the principle of inheritance: 'At no time, perhaps,' Burke explained,

did the sovereign legislature manifest a more tender regard to that fundamental principle of British constitutional policy, than at the time of the Revolution, when it deviated from the direct line of hereditary succession. The crown was carried somewhat out of the line in which it had before moved; but the new line was derived from the same stock. It was still a line of hereditary descent; still an hereditary descent in the same blood, though an hereditary descent qualified with Protestantism. When the legislature altered the direction, but kept the principle, they showed that they held it inviolable.

The fact that the Hanoverian succession was a foreign line also reinforced this point. If it had been true that the British nation had been honoured with the right freely to choose their king without regard to the constitutional policy of the land, it would then appear puzzling, Burke suggested, that they should have 'fastidiously rejected the fair and abundant choice which our country presented to them, and searched, in strange lands for a foreign princess'. Certainly, it was unreasonable that they should risk 'a plan of hereditary Protestant succession in the old line, with all the dangers and all the inconveniences of its being a foreign line full before their eyes'.²²

The cautious step which the British people had then taken to settle the throne, in Burke's view, revealed the reserved nature of the 1688 Revolution. It had to be admitted that, had there been any occasion more favourable for the British people to render their king elective, it must have been at the era of the Revolution when the nation was left without a king. 'It is true,' Burke pointed out, 'that, aided with the powers derived from force and opportunity, the nation was at that time, in some sense, free to take what course it pleased for filling the throne.' Indeed, they could have even totally abolished the monarchy and torn apart the whole frame of the constitution. Political wisdom and moral prudence nevertheless had, it appeared,

²² *Ibid.*, 296-9.

dissuaded the British nation from thinking such bold changes within their commission:

It is indeed difficult, perhaps impossible, to give limits to the mere *abstract* competence of the supreme power, such as was exercised by parliament at that time; but the limits of a *moral* competence, subjecting, even in powers more indisputably sovereign, occasional will to permanent reason, and to the steady maxims of faith, justice, and fixed fundamental policy, are perfectly intelligible, and perfectly binding upon those who exercise any authority, under any name, or under any title, in the state.

The reluctance of the then Parliament to establish the principle of popular election as the legal title to the British throne had important implications. If the nation had not thought it rightful to assert such a principle at its most favourable opportunity, it proved, Burke was convinced, that the people 'was of opinion it ought not to be done at any time'. He had gone so far as to declare that not only had the British people not acquired by the Revolution a right to choose their king, but, even had they possessed it before, they 'did at that time most solemnly renounce and abdicate it, for themselves, and for all their posterity for ever'.²³

In the final analysis, Burke insisted, the throne of Britain had been succeeded neither along the absurd doctrine of indefeasible hereditary right, nor through the frantic theory of popular election. Rather, it

has always been what it now is, an hereditary succession by law: in the old line it was a succession by the common law; in the new by the statute law, operating on the principles of the common law, not changing the substance, but regulating the mode, and describing the persons.

This, he believed, had been a rational settlement, 'bottomed upon solid principles of law and policy'.²⁴ Above all, Burke wrote, the British throne had been settled for ever in the House of Hanover upon the idea of an hereditary succession qualified with protestantism, and not upon '*elective* principles, in any sense of the word *elective*, or under any modification or description of *election* whatsoever'.²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, 291, 294.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 295, 300.

²⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 56.

If it had been delusive and ill-founded to assert that the 1688 Revolution had secured to the British people the right to choose their governors, the claim that it had mandated them to cashier them for misconduct was even more misleading and utterly mischievous. 'No government could stand a moment,' Burke warned, 'if it could be blown down with anything so loose and indefinite as an opinion of "misconduct".' The crucial point here naturally turns on the question about the right of resistance: namely, would revolution ever be justifiable? To Price, that power should be resisted when abused, was a matter of course and the 1688 Revolution seemed to have made it clear that misconduct could justify resistance. Burke was of quite another mind. To be sure, Burke had not disputed in principle the claim that the people had indeed reserved a right to resist; instead, he was more concerned lest it should be agitated too often and too lightly, for, in his view, any event which should involve resisting supreme power would always be a cause of great concern and, therefore, should always be approached with the highest seriousness. To Burke, a charge of 'misconduct' tended to be ambiguous and was too liable to 'light and uncertain' rendition to become a suitable justification for such a serious case as dethronement. The British people had not revolted against King James II for such vague reasons; on the contrary, Burke pointed out,

They charged him with nothing less than a design, confirmed by a multitude of illegal overt acts, to *subvert the Protestant church and state*, and their *fundamental*, unquestionable laws and liberties: they charged him with having broken the *original contract* between king and people.

The crime here that James II was accused of was 'more than *misconduct*!' In reality, it was out of grave necessity that the British nation was obliged to resist. And even then, Burke noted, they took it 'with infinite reluctance, as under that most rigorous of all laws'.²⁶

It was therefore not chiefly the right of resistance *per se*, but the expediency of its licentious use, that was at issue. To repudiate the allegation that the 1688 Revolution could be summoned to justify any resistance, Burke turned his attention chiefly to the unusual nature of the case to find his arguments. The 1688 Revolution, he pointed out, had been no wanton enterprise. It amounted to no less than a desperate measure for curbing the nearly successful attempt which King James had made to subvert the

²⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 301.

British constitution; it could therefore constitute no other than an exceptional instance, and justifiable, 'only upon the *necessity* of the case', as the sole means left for the recovery and the future preservation of that constitution.²⁷ In other words, it could establish no precedent for future revolution. This view was vindicated by appealing to the arguments which the Whig defenders, attempting to justify the 1688 Revolution to themselves, had put forward in the impeachment of Dr Sacheverell in 1710.²⁸ Burke resorted to the historical trial of Dr Sacheverell because he was persuaded that the case had enunciated an orthodox, because clearly Whig, interpretation of the 1688 Revolution: the impeachment was then undertaken by a Whig government, carried on before a Whig parliament and intended for 'the express purpose of stating the true grounds and principles of the Revolution'. Burke was actually inclined to deem it as but a show trial, deliberately 'made' by the Whigs for an authentic and recorded 'declaration of their political tenets upon the subject of a great constitutional event like that of the Revolution'.²⁹

Basically, Burke acknowledged that the Whig managers of the impeachment had asserted in principle that the British people were possessed of a right to resist, which they had used justly in 1688. The British constitution, according to Nicholas Lechmere, one of the Whig managers of the impeachment, presumed the existence of an 'original contract' between the crown and the people, which implied that there was a power in the latter, who had '*inherited*' their freedom, to 'assert their own title to it'. Under this constitution, the British government was a limited monarchy, with its supreme power shared between Crown, Lords and Commons. Should therefore any one of them contrive to subvert the constitution, the original contract would then be broken and 'that part of the government, thus *fundamentally* injured, hath a right to save or recover *that* constitution in which it had an original interest'. However, Burke contended that, despite his arguments for the right of resistance, Lechmere in practice had not endorsed its unqualified use. Resistance should never be resorted to, said Lechmere, save for dire necessity, such as the case of Britain in 1688:

the right of the people *to self-defence and preservation of their liberties, by resistance as their last remedy, is the result of a case of*

²⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 45.

²⁸ For a discussion of the trial of Dr Sacheverell, see: Geoffrey Holmes, *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* (London, 1973). See also J. P. Kenyon, *Revolution Principles* (Cambridge, 1977), chap. 8.

²⁹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 43-4.

such necessity only, and by which the original contract between king and people is broken

Burke asserted that the Whig apologists had been utterly unwilling to justify the general principle of resistance by pointing to the example of the 1688 Revolution. They were content rather to see it as an exception reached out of exigency. General Stanhope, he observed, had stressed that the Revolution had resulted from the '*necessities*' of the time when '*no other* remedy was left to preserve our religion and liberties'.³⁰ Sir Joseph Jekyll, meanwhile, was not prepared to legalise resistance, except by '*extreme necessity*'; and he emphasised that such necessity, if it arose, ought to be '*plain and obvious to the sense and judgment of the whole nation*'. To Sir John Holland, the resistance at the Revolution was but a '*necessary exception*' to the general rule of obedience:

'Tis with this view of *necessity* only, *absolute necessity* of preserving our laws, liberties, and religion; 'tis with *this limitation* that we desire to be understood, when any of us speak of resistance in general. The *necessity* of resistance at the Revolution was at that time obvious to every man.

He went on to deny that their defence of the 1688 Revolution could in any way be induced to plead for licentious resistance, 'as if *subjects* were left to *their* good-will and pleasure, when they are to *obey*, and when to *resist*'.³¹ Sir Robert Eyre, Burke added, had struck the same note when he argued that the resistance in 1688, being a clear case of unavoidable necessity, could not be construed to mean that '*the people might cancel their allegiance at pleasure*'. It could never, Eyre emphasised, be 'inferred from the lawfulness of resistance, at a time when *a total subversion of the government both in church and state was intended*, that a people may take up arms, and *call their sovereign to account at pleasure*'.³²

According to Burke, the Whig veterans, for all their defence of the 1688 Revolution, had merely treated resistance as a negative principle, unsuitable to be instituted by law as a positive right. Joseph Jekyll, Burke observed, had thought it imprudent to state '*the limits and bounds* of the subject's submission to the sovereign' and was

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 46-50.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 53, 64.

³² *Ibid.*, 58-9.

utterly unwilling to put 'any case of a justifiable resistance, but that of the Revolution only'. On this point, Robert Walpole had enlarged considerably:

Resistance is nowhere enacted to be legal, but subjected. . . to the greatest penalties. It is what is not, cannot, nor ought ever to be described, or affirmed in any positive law, to be excusable: when, and upon what *never-to-be-expected* occasions, it may be exercised, no man can foresee; *and it ought never to be thought of, but when an utter subversion of the laws of the realm threatens the whole frame of our constitution, and no redress can otherwise be hoped for.* It therefore does, and *ought for ever*, to stand, in the eye and letter of the law, as the *highest offence*³³

Sir Robert Eyre considered it to be absurd that any law could be enacted to 'authorize the destruction of the whole'. It would be no less preposterous if the legislature 'should, in express terms of law, declare *such an ultimate resort as the right of resistance, at a time when the case supposes that the force of all laws is ceased*'. A case like the 1688 Revolution, which implied a total subversion of the constitution, was with Eyre what '*the laws of England could never suppose, provide for, or have in view*'.³⁴ All the attestations, Burke observed, had thus unanimously argued against resistance being set up as a positive right. This of course had been precisely what Burke had unequivocally wanted to assert. The ceremony of cashiering the king, he claimed, could never become a proper object of the constitution. 'The question of dethroning,' he explained,

. . . will always be, as it has always been, an extraordinary question of state, and wholly out of the law; a question (like all other questions of state) of dispositions, and of means, and of probable consequences, rather than of positive rights. As it was not made for common abuses, so it is not to be agitated by common minds. The speculative line of demarcation, where obedience ought to end, and resistance must begin, is faint, obscure, and not easily definable. It is not a single act, or a single event, which determines it. Governments must be abused and deranged indeed, before it can be thought of; and the prospect of the future must be as bad as the experience of the past. When things are in that lamentable condition, the nature of the disease is to indicate the remedy to those whom nature has qualified to administer in extremities this critical, ambiguous, bitter potion to a distempered state.

It was not a case on which laws could be expected to pronounce: Times, and

³³ *Ibid.*, 51-2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 59-60.

occasions, and provocations, will teach their own lessons.' Still, with or without right, Burke stressed, revolution should always remain the very last resort.³⁵

Burke's interpretation of the right of resistance, it is now clear, had been, generally speaking, cautious and restrictive. To be sure, Burke, as a Whig, had not gone as far as to rule out the principle of resistance altogether, which had long been a recognised element in the Whig ideology. Resistance, however, would always be a very dangerous principle; and there was a sense in which Burke seemed to have purported implicitly to dispose of it by deliberately playing down its practical relevance to current politics. He had in fact enlarged particularly upon the preventive nature of the Revolution Settlement, arguing that those who led the 1688 Revolution had intended not to make the Revolution 'a precedent for further revolutions', but to render 'such revolutions, so far as human power and wisdom could provide, unnecessary'.³⁶ To prevent future revolutions, he noted, efforts had been made to stop future sovereigns from compelling the nation 'to have again recourse to those violent remedies'. Ministerial responsibility had been established, thus rendering the king perfectly irresponsible before the law; the frequent meetings of parliament had been secured in order that government could be brought under its constant inspection and active control; and, finally, the granting of a royal pardon had been prohibited for any impeachment initiated by the House of Commons. All these measures obviously had been contrived, on the one hand, to reduce the accountability of the king and, on the other, to prevent the vices of administration. It was hoped thus to forestall forever the claim of revolution, 'a right so difficult in the practice, so uncertain in the issue, and often so mischievous in the consequences'. In truth, Burke insisted, the 1688 Revolution had been intended to be 'a parent of settlement, and not a nursery of future revolutions': 'Ill would our ancestors at the Revolution have deserved their fame for wisdom, if they had found no security for their freedom, but in rendering their government feeble in its operations and precarious in its tenure; if they had been able to contrive no better remedy against arbitrary power than civil confusion.'³⁷

The most revolutionary among Price's claims perhaps was his allegation that the 1688 Revolution had honoured British people with the right to frame a new government by their own will. In making this allegation, Price, it is plain, had assumed

³⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 303-4.

³⁶ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 64.

³⁷ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 301-3.

that the post-1688 political order in Britain had been in essence a new edifice created at the hands of the people. It was however not an interpretation that Burke was prepared to endorse. Burke's view of the Revolution had never been this audacious. Far from being a bold move to remake the old order of things, the Revolution in effect had turned out to be rather a circumspect step taken to preserve the '*ancient, indisputable laws and liberties*' of the land and that '*ancient constitution of government*', which was regarded as their sole security. It could therefore furnish nothing which would serve, either as principle or as precedent, to allege that the people of Britain had thereby secured a right to reformulate their government at pleasure.³⁸

To explain this view, Burke, not untypically, had drawn his arguments mainly from the tradition of British political culture. He pointed out that the claim that the people had retained a right to remodel their government at will was grossly out of tune with the reasoning of the British public, who, in his opinion, had been characteristically indisposed to the spirit of innovation. 'The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror.' It tended to be, he added, 'as ill-suited to our temper and wishes as it is unsupported by any appearance of authority'. This essentially conservative cast of British political culture had consisted of two primal features. On the one hand, there had prevailed among the nation a general inclination to cherish their ancient traditions. The minds of the British people, Burke noted, had been generally filled with a 'powerful prepossession towards antiquity'. Under its influence, political change in Britain, instead of taking a drastic turn, had usually proceeded in the mode of reaffirming those rights and liberties which were believed to have long existed in their ancient constitution. Most reformations in British history, Burke pointed out, had been carried out according to the principle of 'reverence to antiquity':

Our oldest reformation is that of Magna Charta. You will see that Sir Edward Coke, that great oracle of our law, and indeed all the great men who follow him, to Blackstone, are industrious to prove the pedigree of our liberties. They endeavour to prove, that the ancient charter, the Magna Charta of King John, was connected with another positive charter from Henry I., and that both the one and the other were nothing more than a re-affirmance of the still more ancient standing law of the kingdom.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 304.

And this spirit, he added, had pervaded all the laws which the nation had hitherto made to guard their rights and liberties. On the other hand, and in line with this, it had long become the established policy of the British people to claim their most sacred rights and franchises 'as an *inheritance*. From Magna Carta onwards, Burke observed,

it has been the uniform policy of our constitution to claim and assert our liberties, as an *entailed inheritance* derived to us from our forefathers, and to be transmitted to our posterity; as an estate specially belonging to the people of this kingdom, without any reference whatever to any other more general or prior right. By this means our constitution preserves a unity in so great a diversity of its parts. We have an inheritable crown; an inheritable peerage; and a House of Commons and a people inheriting privileges, franchises, and liberties, from a long line of ancestors.

A most celebrated case to testify to the tenacity of this principle was the *Petition of Right* (1628). In that historical document, Parliament had plainly declared to King Charles I that his subjects had 'inherited' their freedom. They were disposed, that is, to assert their franchises as the 'rights of Englishmen', regarding them as 'patrimony derived from their forefathers'. It was from the perspective of this tradition that, to Burke, the 1688 Revolution was to be properly appreciated. 'We wished,' he claimed, 'at the period of the Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an *inheritance from our forefathers*' Indeed, he stressed, the leaders of the Glorious Revolution, in their *Declaration of Rights*, had sagaciously declared their mission to be to secure the laws, liberties and religion, that 'had been long possessed, and had been lately endangered'.³⁹

The 1688 Revolution was hence explicitly linked up to the historical efforts of the British people to revive their ancient constitution.⁴⁰ The British nation in 1688, Burke wrote, had endeavoured to 'defend its ancient constitution':⁴¹ their aim had been not so much to claim new franchises as to restore their ancient rights, unlawfully violated by King James II. He was persuaded that the 1688 Revolution had never been intended

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 305-6.

⁴⁰ On the idea of the 'ancient constitution', see: J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law. A Reissue with a Retrospect* (Cambridge, 1987). With regard to Burke's role in this tradition in particular, see: *idem*, 'Burke and the Ancient Constitution - A Problem in the History of Ideas', *Historical Journal*, iii (1960), 125-143.

⁴¹ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works*, iii, 278.

to be innovative. When King William was invited to Britain, he had given his fullest assurance to the nation that his enterprise was not to introduce 'any change whatever in the fundamental law and constitution of the state'. In fact, William's declaration had shown his determination to restore the old order:

*All magistrates, who have been unjustly turned out, shall forthwith resume their former employments, as well as all the boroughs of England shall return again to their ancient prescriptions and charters, and more particularly, that the ancient charter of the great and famous city of London shall be again in force. And that the writs for the members of parliament shall be addressed to the proper officers according to law and custom.*⁴²

Throughout the Revolution, Burke insisted, 'no essential change' had then been made 'in the constitution of monarchy, or in any of its ancient, sound, and legal principles'.⁴³ In order to safeguard the rights and liberties of the nation, solid securities had indeed been taken, doubtful questions had been settled, and anomalies in the law had been corrected; but, he claimed,

In the stable, fundamental parts of our constitution we made no revolution; no, nor any alteration at all. We did not impair the monarchy. Perhaps it might be shown that we strengthened it very considerably. The nation kept the same ranks, the same orders, the same privileges, the same franchises, the same rules for property, the same subordinations, the same order in the law, in the revenue, and in the magistracy; the same Lords, the same Commons, the same corporations, the same electors.

In other words, the political order in Britain had remained the same after the Revolution as it had been before, 'but better secured in every part'. From the constitutional light, therefore, Burke would rather argue that what the nation had done in 1688, was in substance 'a revolution, not made, but prevented'.⁴⁴

This essentially conservative view of the 1688 Revolution, according to Burke, had always been the established interpretation accepted by all quintessential Whigs. Sir Joseph Jekyll, during the trial of Dr Sacheverell, had categorically denied that any innovation had been made in the constitution during the Revolution: '*The Revolution*,

⁴² 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 64-5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁴ 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burke's Works* iii, 278-9.

Burke quoted him with emphasis, '*did not introduce any innovation; it was a restoration of the ancient fundamental constitution of the kingdom, and giving it its proper force and energy.*' Indeed, Jekyll had rather marvelled at the miraculous result that the frame of the government could have been thus restored 'entire and unhurt':

This showed the excellent temper the nation was in at that time, that, after such provocations from an abuse of the regal power, and such a convulsion, *no one part of the constitution was altered, or suffered the least damage; but, on the contrary, the whole received new life and vigour.*

Burke asserted that the leading Whigs of Jekyll's generation had never associated Revolution principles with the spirit of innovation. Sir Robert Eyre had contended that the Revolution was to 'revive' the British constitution; and he had made efforts to distinguish it, Burke wrote, from 'a proceeding at pleasure, on the part of the people, to change their ancient constitution, and to frame a new government for themselves'. In the same vein, Sir John Holland had stressed that what the British people had then campaigned for had been the preservation of their laws, liberties, and religion, as provided in the British constitution. He was prepared to guard against

a confusion of the principles of the Revolution, with any loose, general doctrines of a right in the individual, or even in the people, to undertake for themselves, on any prevalent, temporary opinions of convenience or improvement, any fundamental change in the constitution, or to fabricate a new government for themselves, and thereby to disturb the public peace, and to unsettle the ancient constitution of this kingdom.

After all, Burke believed, no sound Whig would have the prudence to countenance any arbitrary attempt which would mean to remodel, upon fancies, their ancient constitution. It should be the object of all honest men not to sacrifice the constitution of a nation to the visionary theories of their own, but to 'preserve our whole inheritance in the constitution, in all its members and all its relations, entire, and unimpaired, from generation to generation'.⁴⁵

With Burke, therefore, the whole range of Price's theorising on the 1688 Revolution had proved ill-founded. In the end, of course, this judgment must also undermine Price's reasoning about the majesty of the people. Indeed, in Burke's eyes, Price's

⁴⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 57-61, 63-4.

doctrine had secured a 'most unfounded, dangerous, illegal, and unconstitutional position'. The professed rights of the people to choose governors, to depose them for misconduct, and to frame a new government, Burke claimed, had composed in reality a 'new, and hitherto unheard-of, bill of rights', which was completely foreign to the opinions of the British people. The nation, he was persuaded, would be ready to reject it: 'They utterly disclaim it. They will resist the practical assertion of it with their lives and fortunes. They are bound to do so by the laws of their country, made at the time of that very Revolution. . .'.⁴⁶ It had never occurred to them that they had ever acquired a 'moral or civil competence' to change their monarch, or any right to set up a new government by their own will.⁴⁷

The dispute on the nature of the 1688 Revolution, as has been pointed out above, was extremely relevant to the political ferment of the 1790s. It had actually formed an essential part of the constitutional controversy sparked off by the French Revolution. Without doubt, in the debate, Burke aimed in the main to expose the adverse implications which Price's preaching would have for the British constitution.⁴⁸ Price's doctrine, he warned, would affect the British constitution 'in its vital parts'.⁴⁹ Indeed, its impact could be even more far-reaching: 'These doctrines concerning the *people* . . . tend, in my opinion, to the utter subversion, not only of all government, in all modes, and to all stable securities to rational freedom, but to all the rules and privileges of morality itself.'⁵⁰

Burke's concern here naturally led him further to elucidate the historical foundation of the British constitution. What was then the nature of the constitution which Burke was obliged to defend? Burke had declared his firm commitment to the 'principles of a mixed constitution'.⁵¹ The political system of Britain, according to current opinion, was not built upon any simple form of government. It was neither a pure monarchy, nor a

⁴⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 288, 290.

⁴⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 54.

⁴⁸ Burke indeed had his reasons for apprehension. Cf. D. O. Thomas, *The Honest Mind*, pp. 325-332. It was the more so when the impact of the French Revolution was taken into account.

⁴⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 287.

⁵⁰ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 45.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

pure aristocracy, and much less a pure democracy.⁵² The British constitution, Burke claimed, ought to consist 'of the three members, of three very different natures, of which it does actually consist'. They included King, Lords and Commons, representing respectively the various principles of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. To maintain such a mixed construction, Burke stressed, each member ought to be preserved 'in its proper place, and with its proper proportion of power'.⁵³

Within this edifice, it was pointed out, the monarchy had constituted the presiding and connecting principle of the whole.⁵⁴ In Britain, all establishments, to be viable, should be built upon its monarchy '*as its essential basis*'. It was necessary, Burke contended,

that all such institutions, whether aristocratic or democratic, must originate from their crown, and in all their proceedings must refer to it; that by the energy of that main-spring alone those republican parts must be set in action, and from thence must derive their whole legal effect.

Monarchy, that is, was the only focus which was in a position to unite the entire body politic; and deprived of it the whole would fall into confusion.⁵⁵ Burke in fact was inclined to insist that all the benefits that had ever accrued from the British constitution ought to be attributed to the existence of its monarchy: 'without monarchy in England, most certainly we never can enjoy either peace or liberty.' Historically, Burke noted, it was owing to such an understanding that the British people, after experiencing the terror of Cromwellian republicanism, had been so ready to restore their monarchy in 1660 and that 'the very regular step, which we took on the Revolution of 1688, was to fill the throne with a real king'.⁵⁶ With regard to his role in politics, the king of Britain, Burke asserted, was a real, not a nominal, monarch.⁵⁷ Under the constitution, the British monarch had kept nothing short of

⁵² The principle of the 'balanced constitution' was central to the prevalent Whiggism of the century. See: H. T. Dickinson, 'Whiggism in the eighteenth century', in John Cannon (ed.), *The Whig Ascendancy* (London, 1981), pp. 38-41; *idem*, *Liberty and Property* (London, 1977), pp. 142-59.

⁵³ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁶ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works* ii, 544.

⁵⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 37.

power and splendour. He was a genuine king, possessed of 'real, solid, extensive power':

The direct power of the king of England is considerable. His indirect, and far more certain power, is great indeed. He stands in need of nothing towards dignity; of nothing towards splendour; of nothing towards authority; of nothing at all towards consideration abroad.⁵⁸

Burke would support an effective, though limited, monarchy, with its proper rights and prerogatives maintained.⁵⁹ The royal office, he remarked, was a great trust, instituted for active exertion. It should therefore be environed with proper dignity, authority and consideration so that it could become strong enough to fulfil the 'tasks of power'.⁶⁰ The monarch of Britain, in short, had to be secured not only 'in its peculiar existence, but in its pre-eminence too'.⁶¹

Monarchy, however, would never be suffered to become absolute in Britain. It had long been limited, as well as fenced, by other orders of the realm.⁶² The estate next to the crown was the peers who, in Burke's opinion, were the 'pillars of the Crown'.⁶³ The House of Lords was exclusively made up of hereditary property and hereditary distinction.⁶⁴ It represented virtually the aristocracy of Britain and was the 'great ground and pillar of security to the landed interest'.⁶⁵ An influential and independent aristocracy, according to Burke, was indispensable to the British constitution. It could form an impenetrable fence to stop any attempt to breach the constitution.⁶⁶ Within the political structure of Britain, the aristocratic orders had secured a sort of middle place between the crown and the people.⁶⁷ They constituted a strong bulwark, able to prevent either the 'mere despotism of the Prince' or the 'brutal Tyranny of a ferocious

⁵⁸ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 554.

⁵⁹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 60.

⁶⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 470.

⁶¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 29.

⁶² 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 137.

⁶³ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 430.

⁶⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 324.

⁶⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 68-9.

⁶⁶ *Corr.*, vii, 56. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.

⁶⁷ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 468.

and atheistical populace'.⁶⁸ Burke had looked upon aristocracy as the 'ballast in the vessel of the commonwealth'.⁶⁹ It was they who had sustained the stability and continuity of the nation:

no great commonwealth could by any possibility long subsist, without a body of some kind or other of nobility, decorated with honour, and fortified by privilege. . . no political fabric could be well made without some such order of things as might, through a series of time, afford a rational hope of securing unity, coherence, consistency, and stability to the state.⁷⁰

The aristocracy, in sum, was the estate that could 'give a bias, and steadiness, and preserve something like consistency in the proceedings of state'.⁷¹ Paradoxically, however, influential as it was, the House of Lords by itself was in Burke's view 'the feeblest part of the constitution'. It could not subsist independently: 'the House of Lords,' he contended, 'is supported only by its connexions with the crown, and with the House of Commons.' And with the Commons especially, the Lords had, through the operation of property in elections, secured a close 'connexion and communication of interests'.⁷² Hence Burke was bound to oppose any radical scheme for parliamentary reform that aimed to reduce the aristocracy's ability to influence the outcome of elections in areas where they had a natural and preponderant interest.

The House of Commons was a 'more subtle and artificial combination of parts and powers'. As an essential part of the legislature, Burke wrote, the Commons had incorporated itself with other members of the constitution, forming at once 'the great support and the great control of government'. It intended on the one hand to limit, and on the other to secure and even strengthen, the crown.⁷³ As the House of Lords was the joint which united the aristocracy to the crown, so the House of Commons was the link which connected both the crown and the aristocracy with the

⁶⁸ *Corr.*, vii, 160. 'To Richard Burke, Jr - 29 July 1792'.

⁶⁹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 325.

⁷⁰ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 148.

⁷¹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, 468.

⁷² 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 500.

⁷³ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 552.

mass of the people.⁷⁴ Constitutionally, Burke claimed, the Commons stood for the people, speaking their sense and taking care of their interests:⁷⁵

In legal construction, the sense of the people of England is to be collected from the House of Commons; and, though I do not deny the possibility of an abuse of this trust as well as any other, yet I think that, without the most weighty reasons, and in the most urgent exigencies, it is highly dangerous to suppose that the House speaks anything contrary to the sense of the people.

And to him, the House of Commons did perfectly represent 'the whole Commons of Great Britain'.⁷⁶ In the meantime, Burke pointed out that the House of Commons was possessed of great power: 'The power of the House of Commons, direct or indirect, is indeed great; and long may it be able to preserve its greatness, and the spirit belonging to true greatness, at the full.' Of course, this power similarly was not infinite: the Commons had used to be

circumscribed and shut in by the immoveable barriers of laws, usages, positive rules of doctrine and practice, counterpoised by the House of Lords, and every moment of its existence at the discretion of the crown to continue, prorogue, or dissolve. . .⁷⁷

Burke was not prepared to see a predominant Commons: 'the abstract and unlimited perfection of power in the popular part,' he warned, 'can be of no service to us in any of our political arrangements.'⁷⁸ There could be no true security to the liberty of the people should the Crown be deprived of its proper prerogatives and the Lords its just influence.⁷⁹ On the whole, Burke remarked, the House of Commons was indispensable for maintaining the mixed constitution of Britain. It was, however, a House of Commons whose composition was greatly influenced by the patronage of the crown and the aristocracy. It was chosen by an irregular system of representation which gave great weight to landed property and other vested interests and which rejected

⁷⁴ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 69; 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 500.

⁷⁵ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 501.

⁷⁶ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 294-5.

⁷⁷ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 318.

⁷⁸ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 110.

⁷⁹ *Corr.*, vii, 144. 'To Lord Loughborough - 27 May 1792'.

the radical claim that all men deserved the right to vote. Burke was determined to defend the existing electoral system: 'That artificial representation of the people being once discredited and overturned, all goes to pieces, and nothing but a plain *French* democracy or arbitrary monarchy can possibly exist.'⁸⁰

The operation of this mixed constitution had proceeded upon the principle of 'check and balance', which aimed to prevent its members from going beyond their own power so as to destabilise the whole edifice. The British constitution, Burke explained, had been so constituted that none of its principles might be 'carried as far, as, taken by itself, and theoretically, it would go':

To avoid the perfections of extreme, all its several parts are so constituted, as not alone to answer their own several ends, but also each to limit and control the others: insomuch, that take which of the principles you please – you will find its operation checked and stopped at a certain point. The whole movement stands still rather than that any part should proceed beyond its boundary.

Throughout its proceedings, there were always some 'treaty and compromise' perpetually going on, 'sometimes openly, sometimes with less observation'.⁸¹ The result was that a state of equilibrium had been maintained in the body politic. The political system of Britain therefore was in essence an embodiment of the spirit of 'check and balance'. It came to be, Burke wrote,

a monarchy directed by laws, controlled and balanced by the great hereditary wealth and hereditary dignity of a nation; and both again controlled by a judicious check from the reason and feeling of the people at large, acting by a suitable and permanent organ.

It was a 'mixed and tempered' government, combining all the advantages of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy.⁸²

On the other hand, under the framework of 'check and balance', the members of the constitution not only could not be suffered to trespass on the rights of others but would not be even allowed to give away their own parts. The mixed constitution

⁸⁰ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 500.

⁸¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 110–1.

⁸² 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 395.

would be jeopardised should that happen. Burke declared that the engagement of the British nation had forbidden such invasion and such surrender:

The House of Lords, for instance, is not morally competent to dissolve the House of Commons; no, nor even to dissolve itself, nor to abdicate, if it would, its portion in the legislature of the kingdom. Though a king may abdicate for his own person, he cannot abdicate for the monarchy. By as strong, or by a stronger reason, the House of Commons cannot renounce its share of authority.

All parts of the nation, in his view, had already entered into an irrevocable pact for pursuing their common interest. They were therefore all obliged to 'hold their public faith with each other, and with all those who derive any serious interest under their engagements'.⁸³

The benefits which the principle of 'check and balance' had accrued to British politics were enormous. Most important of all, Burke noted, it had caused moderation to be the leading spirit of the British political tradition: 'They render deliberation a matter not of choice, but of necessity; they made all change a subject of *compromise*, which naturally begets moderation; they produce *temperaments*.' The mutual restraint between the opposed interests of the nation could interpose a salutary check to all precipitate resolution in political transactions. It would then be able to prevent the sore evil of harsh, crude, and unqualified reformations and to render all the 'headlong exertions of arbitrary power, in the few or in the many, for ever impracticable'. With different social interests balancing one another, Burke was persuaded, the liberty of the people could procure 'as many securities as there were separate views in the several orders'.⁸⁴

For all its merits, the apparatus of 'check and balance', it must be admitted, was in essence a negative principle. Presupposing a conflict of interests, it tended naturally in the main to prevent abuses. But it could harbour at the same time certain centrifugal effects, potentially inimical to the integration of the constitution. There could be no doubt that the working of the body politic would be crippled if its various social interests were in permanent conflict. In any society, however, just as there was some conflict of interests, so there was a certain community of common concerns.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 294.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 309.

Accordingly, along with the principle of 'check and balance', there had also existed a spirit of cooperation. With respect to the British constitution, Burke pointed out, the various parts, 'whilst they are balanced as opposing interests, are also connected as friends; otherwise nothing but confusion could be the result of such a complex constitution'.⁸⁵ He emphasised that the contending parts of British society had 'gradually, and almost insensibly, in a long course of time, accommodated themselves to each other, and to their common, as well as to their separate, purposes'.⁸⁶ The inter-connection between different estates of the nation was indeed essential to the British constitution: 'Our fabric is so constituted, one part of it bears so much on the other, the parts are so made for one another, and for nothing else.'⁸⁷ Despite their diverse interests, Burke noted, they had all become so interwoven that none could possibly survive without the others. 'As they have lived, so they will die, together.'⁸⁸ Any attempt to separate them could only result in their common destruction.⁸⁹ After all, in Burke's eyes, the three estates of the realm – the King, the Lords and the Commons – had become virtually incorporated into an unbreakable 'triple cord' and had become the guarantees of each other's being and each other's rights.⁹⁰

Burke's view of the British constitution, generally speaking, was derived from his understanding of the complexity of British society. The British constitution, he wrote, had been 'no simple, no superficial thing'.⁹¹ It was a highly complicated construction, developed to realise the diverse ends of the British nation: 'The British state is, without question, that which pursues the greatest variety of ends, and is the least disposed to sacrifice any one of them to another, or to the whole.' It wished to take in the entire circle of human desires and was ready to secure for them their fair enjoyment.⁹² Its whole structure had embraced diverse views and had made many combinations.⁹³ The body politic of Britain, in short, comprised different parts which

⁸⁵ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 500.

⁸⁶ 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 554.

⁸⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 111.

⁸⁸ 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 422.

⁸⁹ 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority', *Burke's Works*, iii, 500.

⁹⁰ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 137-8.

⁹¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 111.

⁹² 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 254.

⁹³ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 112.

reflected correspondingly the various forces of the community. And between them, there were all the combination, and all the opposition, of interests, with every kind of action and counteraction. In the end, Burke pointed out, the British constitution was a 'harmony of the universe' that had emerged out of the reciprocal struggle between these discordant powers.⁹⁴

Looked at as a whole, the British constitution appeared to have achieved a high order of excellence. This eminent edifice, Burke observed, was not an instant creation 'struck out at a heat by a set of presumptuous men'; rather, 'It is the result of the thoughts of many minds, in many ages.'⁹⁵ It could not therefore, as had often been alleged, be deemed to be a wicked system which was an usurpation in its origin, unwise in its contrivance, and mischievous in its effects. On the contrary, Burke recommended it as a noble establishment which the 'Wisdom of our Ancestors has formed for giving permanence to those blessings which they have left to us as our best Inheritance'.⁹⁶ It was all the more a superior system whose merits had been 'confirmed by the solid test of long experience, and an increasing public strength and national prosperity'.⁹⁷

The concept of a mixed and balanced constitution could furnish a useful means to help clarify the much debated issue concerning the consistency of Burke's principles. The publication of Burke's *Reflections* had thrown his credit into endless disputes. Since Burke had for most of his career associated himself with the Whig opposition in attacking the influence of the Court, his outburst against the cause of the French Revolution confounded many of his contemporaries. For them, Burke's condemnation of French liberty was a grossly 'unjustifiable change of opinion'. It had embarrassed the Foxite Whigs, in particular, who were so inflamed as to charge that Burke had 'for a bad reason, or for no reason', disgraced 'his whole public life by a scandalous contradiction of every one of his own acts, writings, and declarations'.⁹⁸ Did Burke then contradict his old principles when he chose to attack the French Revolution? Had

⁹⁴ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 308-9.

⁹⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 111, 112.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, iii, 99; *Corr.*, vi, 194. 'To William Windham - 22 Dec. 1790'.

⁹⁷ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 331.

⁹⁸ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 23.

he after all betrayed the spirit of the Whig political tradition?

To Burke, a Whig veteran, accusations of this nature were no doubt exceedingly offending. Burke had always entertained a high opinion of his own political integrity. If he should venture to value himself upon anything in his life, he wrote, it would be on the virtue of consistency that he would value himself the most: 'Strip him of this, and you leave him naked indeed.'⁹⁹ Meanwhile, he was ready to lay claim to the ideological consistency of his *Reflections* 'I hope I have been pretty consistent with myself, in that piece.'¹⁰⁰ But was this assertion justifiable? It must be noticed, before entering into the main discussion, that to a politician of Burke's long career and prolific experiences, faults could always be easily found with the coherence of his politics or the consistency of his principles. To be sure, Burke noted, there would be no lack of hostile critics who simply intended to harass him:

In the case of any man who had written something, and spoken a great deal, upon very multifarious matter, during upwards of twenty-five years public service, and in as great a variety of important events as perhaps have ever happened in the same number of years, it would appear a little hard, in order to charge such a man with inconsistency, to see collected by his friend a sort of digest of his sayings, even to such as were merely sportive and jocular. This digest, however, has been made, with equal pains and partiality, and without bringing out those passages of his writings which might tend to show with what restrictions any expressions, quoted from him, ought to have been understood.¹⁰¹

Such hypercritics would merit no reply; and Burke would fain leave them to 'rejoice in that discovery and in my inconsistency, and the antidote they have found in one part of my writings against the poison that exists in another'.¹⁰²

To be sure, Burke did not remain altogether silent on all those doubts about his political integrity. The success of any attempt to vindicate his own consistency, however, must hinge on whether he was able to convince those, who had remembered him as the great defender of American liberty and as the notorious critic of the crown's influence, that he was not at all eccentric when he came to flay the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁰⁰ *Corr.*, vi, 178. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 29 Nov. 1790'.

¹⁰¹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 24.

¹⁰² *Corr.*, ix, 241. 'To William Windham - 12 Feb. (1797)'.

French Revolution. How then did Burke vindicate himself?

In the main, Burke realised the complexity of the problems which the British constitution would come across in the course of its development. Throughout his career, he claimed, he had ever been 'awfully impressed with the difficulties arising from the complex state of our constitution'. The defence of such a system of course was no simple task. As revealed before, the British constitution was a mixture made up of different parts of very different nature. To defend it, therefore, it would require 'in different emergencies, different sorts of exertions, and the successive call upon all the various principles which uphold and justify it'.¹⁰³ Based on this conviction, Burke's tactics for defence contained two major points. On the one hand, he pointed out, the compound nature of the British constitution had made it necessary that its different parts would need to be vindicated upon the various principles particularly belonging to them: 'He cannot assert the democratic part on the principles on which monarchy is supported, nor can he support monarchy on the principles of democracy; nor can he maintain aristocracy on the grounds of the one or of the other, or of both.' On the other hand, different circumstances might also call for different exertions to be attended to those parts that were in danger while leaving undisturbed those that were out of question:

As any one of the great members of this constitution happens to be endangered, he that is a friend to all of them chooses and presses the topics necessary for the support of the part attacked, with all the strength, the earnestness, the vehemence, with all the power of stating, of argument, and of colouring, which he happens to possess, and which the case demands. He is not to embarrass the minds of his hearers, or to encumber or overlay his speech, by bringing into view at once. . . all that may and ought, when a just occasion presents itself, to be said in favour of the other members. At that time they are out of the court; there is no question concerning them.

On a specific occasion, indeed, a man might, among the various things which he held in equal regard, attend with more care to the object which happened to fall under his immediate solicitude. This however would not necessarily mean that he had no regard for 'the just rights of all the rest'. This principle being established, Burke hence contended that, if he had defended popular privileges at one time, this should not imply that he would concur on another occasion with those who would mean to

¹⁰³ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 28.

destroy the throne. It would also be unreasonable to say that his vindication of the throne at some moment should imply that he deserted the rights of the people.¹⁰⁴ To him, association of this kind was not only absurd but pernicious:

This mode of arguing from your having done *anything* in a certain line, to the necessity of doing *everything*, has political consequences of other moment than those of a logical fallacy. If no man can propose any diminution or modification of an invidious or dangerous power or influence in government, without entitling friends turned into adversaries to argue him into the destruction of all prerogative, and to a spoliation of the whole patronage of royalty, I do not know what can more effectually deter persons of sober minds from engaging in any reform; nor how the worst enemies to the liberty of the subject could contrive any method more fit to bring all correctives on the power of the crown into suspicion and disrepute.¹⁰⁵

Indeed, Burke was ready to defy tactical rigidity in the defence of the mixed constitution of Britain. Whenever a distemper was found in the commonwealth, he claimed, it had to be treated according to the 'nature of the evil and of the object'.¹⁰⁶ A dutiful supporter of the British constitution should be prepared to protect it against 'all the various partisans of destruction, let them begin where, or when, or how they will'. He would suffer neither the Commons to be undermined through the Crown, nor the Crown through the Commons, nor both through another force.¹⁰⁷

It had often been argued that Burke's anti-French stand had belied his much acclaimed role in the economical reforms of the early 1780s, which were held to have connoted popular principles.¹⁰⁸ To explain his case, Burke admitted that his proposal for economical reforms had indeed been an attempt to curb the influence of the monarch. The purpose of that reform, he claimed, had been to cure a malady in the nation, originating in the overgrown influence of the throne. During that period, the government had invidiously increased its 'means of strength'. Moreover, it had threatened to destabilise the constitution by using its influence to corrupt Parliament, which had lost 'not a little in its dignity and estimation, by an opinion of its not acting

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 25-6.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

¹⁰⁶ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 119.

¹⁰⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 40-1.

¹⁰⁸ For Burke's role in the economical reforms, see: E. A. Reitan, 'Edmund Burke and Economical Reform, 1779-83', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* xiv (1985), 129-58.

on worthy motives'. The rationalisation of the crown's influence hence became the main concern in Burke's reform. However, Burke noted, the measures which he had then proposed were chiefly 'healing and mediatorial', aiming purely to prevent evils. 'A complaint was made of too much influence in the House of Commons; I reduce it in both Houses; . . . A disposition to expense was complained of; to that I opposed, not mere retrenchment, but a system of economy.' These reforms had not been intended to temper the main body of the constitution:

I had . . . a state to preserve, as well as a state to reform. . . In that situation of the public mind, I did not undertake, as was then proposed, to new-model the House of Commons or the House of Lords; or to change the authority under which any officer of the Crown acted, who was suffered at all to exist. Crown, Lords, Commons, **judicial** system, system of administration, existed as they had existed before; and in the mode and manner in which they had always existed.

Indeed, the spirit of that reform was not revolutionary at all: 'It was then not my love, but my hatred, to innovation, that produced my plan of reform.'¹⁰⁹ On the whole, Burke emphasised that though aiming to retrench the influence of the throne, his economical reforms could by no means be deemed as part of an anti-monarchical movement. It had never been desired, Burke claimed, to proceed to indefinite lengths, so as not merely to reduce, but 'wholly to *take away all* prerogative and *all* influence whatsoever'. Still less could it be supposed to have embraced republicanism: 'No correctives which he proposed to the power of the crown could lead him to approve of a plan of a republic . . . which has no correctives.' Above all, Burke's economical reforms would not oblige him to endorse the French Revolution which had gone so far as to reduce their monarchy to 'its present nothing'.¹¹⁰

Granted that economical reforms had nursed no anti-monarchical sentiment, how could Burke justify his defence, a few years earlier, of the American revolt, an unequivocally democratic revolution? Burke's explanation of his support for the American cause was much subtler. It had been current among the sympathisers of the American Revolution to hold that the Americans had rebelled chiefly because of their desire to enlarge their liberty. Charles James Fox, Burke pointed out, had insisted that from the beginning the Americans had aimed at independence, meaning entirely to

¹⁰⁹ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 119-20, 121-22.

¹¹⁰ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 33-4.

'throw off the authority of the crown, and to break their connexion with the parent country'. Burke's reading of the cause of the American Revolution was quite different. Instead of purporting to enlarge their liberty, he argued, the American revolt had in fact resulted from the colonial people's determination to defend the 'ancient laws, rights, and usages' of Englishmen. In contrast with the hostile attempt of the British government, Burke was convinced, the Americans 'were purely on the defensive in that rebellion'. Indeed,

He considered the Americans as standing at that time, and in that controversy, in the same relation to England, as England did to King James the Second, in 1688. He believed, that they had taken up arms from one motive only; that is, our attempting to tax them without their consent.

The American Revolution, in other words, was fully justifiable from the principles of the British constitution. 'No taxation without representation' had long been an undeniable constitutional principle which the American colonists, being Englishmen, were also entitled to. Burke was thus inclined to consider the American Revolution as a movement to defend the principle of the British constitution.¹¹¹ From this angle, his support of the American cause was consistent with his general political principles. It therefore could not be properly introduced into the debate in order to contradict his stand against the French Revolution: the foundations of these two cases, in his view, had not stood 'exactly upon a Par'.¹¹² In the case of the French Revolution, Frenchmen had in reality rebelled against a mild monarch who, after divesting himself of his arbitrary powers, had been rather 'on the defensive' in his effort to secure some fragment of royal authority. It was all the more a revolution, aiming utterly to annihilate the whole royal authority and to 'level all ranks, orders, and distinctions in the state'. In any case, Burke insisted, his defending the just cause of the American Revolution should not imply that he would 'enter into an alliance offensive and defensive with every rebellion, in every country, under every circumstance, and raised upon whatever pretence'.¹¹³

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29-33.

¹¹² *Corr.*, ix, 241. 'To William Windham - 12 Feb. (1797)'.

¹¹³ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 32-3. Frank O'Gorman has argued, in defence of Burke's consistency, that he saw the threat to the constitutional balance of Britain coming from the crown during the American Revolution, but, by the time of the French Revolution, he thought the greater threat to this balance came from the radical demands of the people. See his *Edmund Burke: His Political Philosophy* (London, 1973), pp. 49-50, 71-74, 128-34.

In retrospect, Burke was persuaded that nothing that he had done before had in principle contradicted his 'opinions on the hideous changes, which have since barbarized France'.¹¹⁴ Indeed, he claimed, all his political career he had never pursued any 'high popular courses' which he was then accused of having subsequently deserted. He drew attention to the fact that as early as 1774 he had, in a popular election at Bristol, already publicly rejected the popular claim that people had the right to instruct their representatives. And for years, he went on, he had uniformly and steadily opposed the proposals for the reform of the system of representation and the bills for shortening the duration of parliaments.¹¹⁵ It had ever been his opinion that those changes proposed under the 'misnomer called parliamentary reforms' would lead inevitably to the undermining of the British constitution, and leave the whole nation in the 'death-dance of democratic revolution'.¹¹⁶

Burke's abhorrence of high popular politics, nevertheless, had not led him to support absolute monarchy. Rather, he had taken a balanced view. 'I have struggled to the best of my power against two great public evils, growing out of the most sacred of all things, Liberty and Authority.' He would never endorse either the 'Tyranny of Freedom' or the 'Licentiousness of Power'.¹¹⁷ The duty of government, he wrote, was to protect its people from both the tumults of the multitude and the insolence of the powerful. All the vices of pride, cruelty and oppression had to be repulsed, whether they should take place under royal, or aristocratic, or democratic power.¹¹⁸ 'The Crimes of Democracy, and the madness and folly of Aristocracy alike frighten and confound me,' Burke claimed.¹¹⁹ To avoid all these evils, no other alternative could be found but in a mixed government. It would constitute a 'third option' between the new violent scheme of liberty and the old abject system of servitude: between the despotism of monarchy and the tyranny of the multitude.¹²⁰

The framework of Burke's defence, it was then clear, had been based on his

¹¹⁴ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 119.

¹¹⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 26-7.

¹¹⁶ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 116.

¹¹⁷ *Corr.*, vii, 367-8. 'To Arthur Murphy - 26 May 1793'.

¹¹⁸ *Corr.*, viii, 139. 'To the Rev. Thomas Hussey - 4 Feb. 1795'.

¹¹⁹ *Corr.*, viii, 216. 'To Mrs John Crewe - (Circa 23 March 1793)'.

¹²⁰ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 395.

doctrine of the mixed and balanced constitution. Those who would be concerned to see the mixed constitution of Britain preserved 'entire, and practically equal to all the great ends of its formation', had to support it 'not in one single part, but in all its parts'.¹²¹ They must not suffer any of its parts to be sacrificed to another and should always take care to prevent 'either the regal power from being swallowed up on pretence of popular rights, or the popular rights from being destroyed on pretence of regal prerogatives'.¹²² To Burke, the maintenance of the British constitution was the ultimate concern of his politics; as for 'popularity' and 'power', they were merely different means to achieve that object. No preference therefore should be given to any of them but 'as one or the other might afford a surer or a less certain prospect of arriving at that end'.¹²³ Hence there was room for pragmatism in Burke's politics.

Not surprisingly, Burke's approach to politics must of necessity beget a spirit of moderation. He contended that his politics had been based on a political tradition which would never go to the extreme: 'They who go with the principles of the ancient Whigs. . . never can go too far. They may indeed stop short of some hazardous and ambiguous excellence, which they will be taught to postpone to any reasonable degree of good they may actually possess.' It had ever been his disposition to travel along the safe and middle path. Indeed, he claimed, all his principles must by nature 'gravitate to a middle point, or to some point near a middle'.¹²⁴ And he proclaimed that he was a man who had always chosen to keep himself 'in a medium'. Against those who were pleased to accuse him of shifting from extreme to extreme, he rebuked:

This charge is not so wonderful. It is in the nature of things, that they who are in the centre of a circle should appear directly opposed to those who view them from any part of the circumference. In that middle point, however, he will still remain, though he may hear people, who themselves run beyond Aurora and the Ganges, cry out, that he is at the extremity of the west.¹²⁵

Thus, the dispute over Burke's consistency ultimately becomes a question

¹²¹ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 117.

¹²² 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 60-2.

¹²³ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 117.

¹²⁴ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 109-110.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

concerning ends and means. Burke tended to believe that all such controversies had resulted from the failure of his critics to tell his ends from his means. The prominent feature of Burke's politics, as discussed above, had been his determination to maintain the mixed and balanced constitution of Britain. To reach this end, he stressed, his approaches could be variable. Upon this conviction, Burke contended that he had indeed always been prepared to preserve his consistency, but he would like to preserve that consistency 'by varying his means to secure the unity of his end'. His political career was compared to a sailing at sea. In the voyage, he claimed, he, 'when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails may be endangered by overloading it upon one side, is desirous of carrying the small weight of his reasons to that which may preserve its equipoise'.¹²⁶ While he had in previous years struggled mostly to ward off the abuses of authority, it was now his concern to fight against the excess of liberty. And if there was any discrepancy to be detected in his career, he asserted, it was not so much an 'inconsistency in principle' as a 'difference in conduct under a variation of circumstances'.¹²⁷

According to Burke, indeed, not only had his opinions of the French Revolution not run counter to his former principles, but they were essentially in line with the spirit of the old Whig tradition. On the one hand, he declared that his *Reflections*, though hated by the radical Whigs, had received full approbation and kind indulgence from those 'old Stamina of the Whiggs' of the day, including the Duke of Portland, Lord Fitzwilliam, the Duke of Devonshire, Lord John Cavendish-Montague, and so on.¹²⁸ On the other hand, Burke had actually claimed no invention of principles. What he had written, he emphasised, had but conveyed 'what were the avowed sentiments of the old Whigs'. Throughout the debate he had made every effort, endeavouring to prove that his principles had been derived no more than from those held by the old Whig party, that is, 'the Whigs of the Revolution'.¹²⁹ Of this, he entertained no doubt:

I think at least that I have shewn, beyond a Dispute, that my Sentiments are those of the rational Whiggs who settled the succession, upon the antient principles of the constitution, in the House of

¹²⁶ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' *Burke's Works* ii, 517-8.

¹²⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 27.

¹²⁸ *Corr*, vi, 178. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 29 Nov. 1790'.

¹²⁹ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 66, 68.

Hannover.¹³⁰

He proclaimed himself to be 'no worse a Whigg than the Somers's, Godolphins, and Jekylls', and retorted that those who condemned him, 'condemn their predecessors in principle whom they so highly and justly honour and esteem'.¹³¹

The whole controversy on Burke's consistency, or on his Whiggishness, however, might in the end come to be rather meaningless. It seemed to have ignored a truly essential point in the question. To Burke, in a debate over his political principles, what should matter most ought to be whether these principles had embraced anything valuable rather than whether they had been consistent with certain systems. In the present case, Burke argued that the principles spread in his *Reflections*, be what they might, had at any rate had their intrinsic value and were able to stand on their own merits. Thus, he sneered at the cynicism of those contradictory critics, who would bother to find fault with his supposed inconsistency while remaining blind to the value of his principles themselves:

It is certainly a great aggravation of his fault in embracing false opinions, that in doing so he is not supposed to fill up a void, but that he is guilty of a dereliction of opinions that are true and laudable. This is the great gist of the charge against him. It is not so much that he is wrong in his book. . . as that he has therein belied his whole life.¹³²

Burke of course would never admit that his *Reflections* had taught anything contradictory to what he had 'formerly ever said in a style either ludicrous or serious'. But he was all the more persuaded that his doctrines were not adverse to the true principles of freedom. Again, he indicted his critics:

as they are unable to cite any such contradictory passage, so neither can they show anything in the general tendency and spirit of the whole work unfavourable to a rational and generous spirit of liberty; unless a warm opposition to the spirit of levelling, to the spirit of impiety, to the spirit of proscription, plunder, murder, and cannibalism.

His principles, in short, had been perfectly agreeable to a rational plan of free

¹³⁰ *Corr.*, vi, 309. 'To the Bishop of Salisbury - 31 July 1791'.

¹³¹ *Corr.*, vi, 331. 'To the Earl of Charlemont - 8 Aug. 1791'.

¹³² 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 24.

government,¹³³ and were therefore by no means those to which 'honest men are bound to declare, not a shade or two of dissent, but a total, fundamental opposition'.¹³⁴

After all, Burke professed himself to be a man in whom 'no anger durable or vehement has ever been kindled, but by what he considered as tyranny'. Throughout his political career, he claimed, he had always been struggling for the liberty of others.¹³⁵ It had been his mission to support with unrelaxing vigilance every right, privilege and franchise in their proper places and to screen every man in every class from oppression.¹³⁶

No man would set his face more determinedly against those who should attempt to deprive them, or any description of men, of the rights they possess. No man would be more steady in preventing them from abusing those rights to the destruction of that happy order under which they enjoy them.¹³⁷

He made it clear, however, that he had never intended to endorse every programme of liberty without discrimination, least of all the system that the French Revolution stood for, for this he believed to be 'nothing but the rein given to vice and confusion'.¹³⁸ Instead, he was willing to stand by a 'wise, moral, well-natured, and well-tempered spirit of freedom': a freedom maintained in its full vigour, but qualified in all its exertions.¹³⁹ It ought to be, in other words, a liberty associated with order, virtue, morality, and religion.¹⁴⁰ In effect, he insisted, it was by this kind of rational liberty that he had ever been animated: 'I flatter myself that I love a manly, moral, regulated liberty. . . and perhaps I have given as good proofs of my attachment to that cause, in the whole course of my public conduct.'¹⁴¹

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 35-6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹³⁵ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 517.

¹³⁶ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 131-2.

¹³⁷ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works* iii, 41.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁴⁰ 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works* v, 117.

¹⁴¹ 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works* ii, 282.

In the final analysis, Burke declared that, so long as the cause he championed was just in itself, the question about his consistency ought to become, in comparison, a 'matter of small moment'.¹⁴² Meanwhile, to allege that his thoughts on French affairs had not contained the sentiments of the present Whig party would also not necessarily constitute an affront to him.¹⁴³ Thus, he claimed:

My principles upon any publick matter are of no great importance: for, there is an end of my political exertions. Whatever they are, they are sufficiently declared. Whether they are allowed to be Whigg principles, or not, is a very small part of my concern. I think them exactly such as the sober, honourable, and intelligent in that party, have always professed. I think, I have shewn, beyond a possibility of debate, that they are exactly the same. But if any person or any number of persons, choose to think otherwise, and conceive that they are contrary to the Doctrines of their Whigg party, - be it so. I am certain, that they are principles of which no reasonable man or good citizen need be ashamed of. If they are Tory principles, I shall always wish to be thought a Tory, If the contrary of these principles be Whigg principles, I beg, that you, my Dear Friend will never consider me as belonging to that description: For I look upon them to be wicked and absurd in the highest degree; and that whatever they shall become the ruling maxims, they must produce exactly the same Effects, which they do, in the miserable, depraved, and contemptible Nation in which they now predominate.¹⁴⁴

Indeed, he emphasised, none of his principles should, from consistency, oblige him to advocate an exchange of mischief and to justify the replacement of a mitigated monarchy with a new, and far more despotic, democratic power, which he supposed the French Revolution to have been.¹⁴⁵ At any rate, Burke was persuaded, the principles his *Reflections* had maintained were necessary to the welfare and dignity of his country and could only be enforced by 'the general persuasion of his sincerity'.¹⁴⁶ And while he insisted on his ultimate consistency of principles, he went on to claim: 'If I had all my Life been of a quite different opinion from my present, . . . what has happend in France would have perfectly cured me of the distemper of my erroneous metaphysics.'¹⁴⁷

¹⁴² *Corr.*, vi, 179. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 29 Nov. 1790'.

¹⁴³ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 6.

¹⁴⁴ *Corr.*, ix, 446. 'To [Dr Richard Brocklesby] - n. d.'.

¹⁴⁵ 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 34-5.

¹⁴⁶ *Corr.*, ix, 373. 'Jane Burke to Charles James Fox - (ante 9 July 1797)'.

¹⁴⁷ *Corr.*, vi, 179. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 29 Nov. 1790'.

Part Two

THE CRITICS OF BURKE

CHAPTER 5
THE RIGHTS OF MAN

Burke's attack on the French Revolution and its British supporters served to aggravate the underlying ideological tension which had, for some time, been building up uneasily within the world of British politics. As Philip Francis had predicted, the publication of Burke's *Reflections* was to provoke a great 'war of Pamphlets' that would last many years.¹ The rage of Burke at the new Gallic liberty had indeed surprised many of his contemporaries who had long become used to his reformist polemics of the last two decades. Thomas Paine had obviously entertained no idea that Burke would deplore the Revolution in France when he wrote to Burke from Paris in January 1790, with jubilation, to report the miraculous progress of events.² From Burke's defence of the American Revolution, Paine thought, it was natural to assume that he would also welcome the approaching freedom of France. It could hardly be expected that he would give vent to such 'outrageous abuse on the French Revolution, and the principle of Liberty'.³ Similarly, when Charles-Jean-Francois Depont, the young Frenchman to whom the *Reflections* was addressed, approached Burke in early November 1789 to secure his opinion on the Revolution, he seemed to have anticipated that Burke would respond positively.⁴ James Mackintosh perhaps was among the few who had been able to grasp the ideological connection between the political convictions of Burke and the seemingly eccentric position which he took on the French Revolution: 'The late opinions of Mr. Burke,' he wrote, when commenting on the *Reflections*

furnished more matter of astonishment to those who had distantly observed, than to those who had correctly examined the system of his former political life. An abhorrence for abstract politics, a predilection for aristocracy, and a dread of innovation, have ever been among the most sacred articles of his public creed. It was not likely that at his age he should abandon to the invasion of audacious novelties, opinions which he had received so early, and maintained so long, which had been fortified by the applause of the great, and the assent of the wise, which

¹ *Corr.*, vi, 86. 'Philip Francis to Edmund Burke - 19 Feb. 1790'.

² *Corr.*, vi, 67-75. 'Thomas Paine to Edmund Burke - 17 Jan. 1790'.

³ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (London, 1791-2), ed. Henry Collins (Pelican ed., 1969), p. 57.

⁴ M. Depont, *Answer to the Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, with the original notes* (London, 1791), pp. 3-4. Cf. *Corr.*, vi, 31-2. 'Charles-Jean-Francois Depont to Edmund Burke - 4 Nov. 1789'.

he had dictated to so many illustrious pupils, and supported against so many distinguished opponents.

Mackintosh, nevertheless, was still much amazed at the range and ardour of Burke's philippic. It might not be unreasonable for Burke to deride the excesses that seemed to tarnish the lustre of the Revolution, but it could hardly be imagined, Mackintosh claimed, that he should have exhausted against it almost every epithet of contumely and opprobrium which language could furnish. And all the more extraordinary was it 'that the rage of his declaration should not for one moment have been suspended, that his heart should not betray one faint glow of triumph, at the splendid and glorious delivery of so great a people'.⁵

The *Reflections*, there was no doubt, had achieved an immediate and magnificent success in its circulation,⁶ but, almost at once, it had also engulfed British public opinion in a bitter controversy. Indeed, though the reception accorded to this treatise was sensational, the opinions it had thus invited were conflicting. While Burke received warm acclamations from his sympathisers, the radical attacks on him, at the same time, had scarcely been of less vigour. As a matter of fact, during the debate, those who disagreed with Burke on the whole would appear to have been much more vociferous.⁷ There was, of course, no lack of reasons why the British radicals should be so infuriated. Like Paine or Depont, to be sure, few of these writers had been well prepared for Burke's somewhat unusual action. '[I]t certainly never was expected,' one author exclaimed,

that the admirers of the late measures in France would meet their vehement antagonist in EDMUND BURKE. It was not expected, that the warm champion of political liberty would desert his cause, and act in

⁵ James Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* (London, 1791), pp. i-iii.

⁶ For a discussion on the publication and reception of the *Reflections* see: J. T. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke*, pp. 75-82; and F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 132-143.

⁷ It has been suggested recently that in the Price-Burke-Paine controversy the contributions from the conservative writers had, in terms of quantity at least, overshadowed those penned by their radical counterparts. See: Gayle Trusdel Pendleton, 'Towards a Bibliography of the *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* Controversy', *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities* lxxxv (1982), 74. Here, Pendleton takes a broader view of the debate and includes in her bibliography all the publications arguing for, and against, Price, Burke and Paine. It is indeed very likely that, in the whole debate on the French Revolution, the conservative pamphleteers published more materials; so far as the particular debate on Burke's *Reflections* is concerned, however, it seems to remain true that, as F. P. Lock points out, 'it was mainly those who differed from Burke who set down their opinions at length'. See Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 133. Cf. Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke*, p. 83.

hostility to his former principles, at the moment when that liberty became more honestly asserted . . . in manly actions.⁸

Thomas Christie similarly was shocked to find that Burke was prepared to defend such a bad cause: 'Mr. Burke,' he wrote,

. . . is the first example I ever knew of a *liberal* scholar. . . who was capable of writing an elaborate apology for despotism; of composing an *elegy on the fall of arbitrary power*, or of prostituting eloquence, and the rich treasures of a mind stored with the wisdom of ages, to undermine the birthright of human-kind, and to abuse Patriots whom Athens would have adored, and of whom Rome was not worthy.⁹

Understandably, many radical writers – not a few of them Burke's erstwhile admirers – must have felt themselves betrayed. 'Do we live to hear,' thus Benjamin Bousfield exclaimed, 'the eloquent declaimer in favour of the right of humanity, and the freedom of the subject, become the avowed advocate of cruelty and despotism?'¹⁰ As a result, the consistency of Burke's politics was cast into great doubt. James Parkinson, for instance, had made efforts to discredit Burke, likening him to a chameleon whose appearance, he indicated, had ever changed with its situation. Burke, he claimed, had stood out one day as a friend of liberty, while boldly avowing himself, the next, to be the 'admirer and champion of those whom all the world besides call tyrants'.¹¹ Indeed, in the opinion of Charles Pigott, the *Reflections* had left in the lurch all those principles which Burke had previously supported and to which he had in effect owed all his success and elevation in life.¹² And, on the other hand, one critic would feel it regrettable that Burke had undeservedly tarnished the close of an honourable career 'by preaching the most polluted maxims of servitude'.¹³

The radical pamphleteers were soon to be concerned about what appeared to them the sinister tendency of Burke's polemics, which might become repugnant in the

⁸ *Political Correspondence* (London, 1793), pp. 70–1.

⁹ Thomas Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France* (London, 1791), pp. 2, 4–5.

¹⁰ Benjamin Bousfield, *Observations on the Right Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet, on the Subject of the French Revolution* (Dublin, 1791), p. 2.

¹¹ [James Parkinson], *An Address, to the Hon. Edmund Burke. From the Swinish Multitude* (London, 1793), pp. 12–3.

¹² Charles Pigott, *The Jockey Club* (London, 1792), part iii, p. 97.

¹³ *Parallel between the Conduct of Mr. Burke and that of Mr. Fox* (London, 1791), p. 1.

end to their own radical politics. The sentiments conveyed in the celebrated publication of Burke were, George Rous remarked,

neither more nor less than the exploded doctrine of the old school revived in a new dress, calculated equally to support *bad* as *good* Government, under all its forms, from the mad despotism of Asia to the mild administration of laws in Great Britain.¹⁴

Mary Wollstonecraft was not in the least amused with the 'grand principles' which lurked under the specious garb of Burke's 'sophistical arguments'. She came to attack the *Reflections*, accusing it of having burnished up 'rusty, baneful opinions'.¹⁵ There was a prevalent view that Burke's reflections on the French Revolution had entirely wandered away from the old tradition of English liberty: 'It is the duty of an Englishman,' one pamphleteer wrote,

while he reveres that constitution which pronounces him a son of liberty, to rejoice at any change by which the invaluable advantages of freedom are communicated to another people: from this duty Mr. BURKE has widely deviated; he has praised the English constitution, but not in the language of liberty – he has stigmatized the French Revolution, but from no other visible motives, than those of prejudice, petulance, and misrepresentation.¹⁶

According to Joseph Priestley, what the *Reflections* had advocated was in reality downright Toryism: its principles, he claimed, consisted of 'no other than those of *passive obedience and non-resistance*, peculiar to the Tories and the friends of arbitrary power'.¹⁷ It was apprehended at length that Burke's doctrines would tend to encourage tyranny and superstition to the detriment of the natural rights and liberty of mankind.¹⁸ Moreover, George Rous emphasised, they had also flown in the face of the wise and free constitution of Britain.¹⁹ The principles which Burke cherished, in short, were, as Benjamin Bousfield concluded, altogether 'inimical to the rights of the

¹⁴ George Rous, *Thoughts on Government* (London, 1791), pp. 2-3.

¹⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (London, 1790), pp. iii-iv, 7.

¹⁶ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (London, 1791), p.23.

¹⁷ Joseph Priestley, *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (Birmingham, 1791), p. viii.

¹⁸ Robert Woolsey, *Reflections upon Reflections* (London, 1790), p. 1.

¹⁹ George Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, in Reply to His Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (Dublin, 1791), p. 4.

people, and subversive of the fundamental principles of the British constitution'.²⁰

The attacks launched on Burke, generally speaking, were extensive in range and blatant in tone; as a whole, however, the camp of Burke's opponents again seem to have shown no overall ideological unity. Various factors can be advanced to help to explain this phenomenon. The social origins of the individual critics, first of all, were vastly different. There could be found among them men of noble family, such as Earl Stanhope.²¹ Mark Wilks had styled himself as a 'Norfolk farmer',²² while John Butler would appear to be merely an 'obscure citizen' of Canterbury.²³ Burke's critics were in fact spread over a wide arc of the social spectrum; nevertheless, the majority, it seemed, had mainly come from those classes of men who could be said to be 'comfortable in their circumstances'.²⁴ Secondly, the political affiliations of these radicals were also extremely complicated. There were many who belonged to the circle of the progressive Whigs: some of them, such as James Mackintosh, George Rous and Joseph Towers were more radical, while others, such as Sir Brooke Boothby and Samuel Parr, less so. Another group of Burke's opponents were in close connection with the Dissenting community, including most notably Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, Robert Hall, Francis Stone, and Samuel Heywood. There remained others, Thomas Paine for instance, who seemed to have no specific political affiliation, but who had somehow felt impelled to controvert Burke for different reasons.²⁵ Thirdly, with such diverse backgrounds, the ideological orientations of these critics not surprisingly turned out to be highly divergent. There was on the far left Paine's outright republicanism; meanwhile, the radical opinions of Mary Wollstonecraft, David Williams, John Oswald and Benjamin Flower were no less unequivocal. On the other hand, the political views of Boothby and Parr would appear rather moderate. Few pamphleteers, however, had gone to the length of Paine's radical republicanism: the majority seem to move, one scholar has pointed out, within the wide range between

²⁰ Bousfield, *Observations on the Right Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet, on the Subject of the French Revolution*, 'Advertisement', p.2.

²¹ He published *A Letter from Earl Stanhope, to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London, 1790). It was a reply to Burke's speech on the Army Estimates of 9 Feb. 1790.

²² See the title page of his *The Origin and Stability of the French Revolution* ([Norwich?], 1791).

²³ See his *Brief Reflections on the Liberty of the British Subject* (Canterbury, 1791), p. 143.

²⁴ Pendleton, 'Towards a Bibliography of the *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* Controversy', p. 72.

²⁵ For a tentative effort to define the political groupings of Burke's opponents, see: Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke* pp 83-96.

'the unrevolutionary tradition of whiggism and Dissenting radicalism'.²⁶ Finally, the manner in which the debate proceeded also added not a little to complicate the situation. Most of the pamphleteers, being virtually provoked to meet Burke's attack without proper preparation, had not been in a position to coordinate their reactions. When these factors are put together, the range of opinions in the individual pamphlets, and of the topics discussed, were as diverse and complicated as could be imagined. James T. Boulton has acutely touched on the complexity of the subject. The controversy, he observes, had assumed no clearly defined shape and showed no signs of orderly development:

it was the natural outcome of the complex political situation in 1790. The pamphleteers. . . were guided by their private political loyalties, their views on the whole question of reform, and their estimation of the value of the French example for the English reform movement. The anti-Burke writers had, then, a common adversary, but they wrote largely as individuals. The reason for this is not difficult to determine. The material of the *Reflections* is so far-ranging and Burke's attitude so provocative that there was no single and narrow point at issue. Writers were compelled to oppose Burke where they felt themselves attacked; the issue seemed to be between him and themselves as representative individuals, and consequently their tone is chiefly personal. Opposition came, then, from so many sides that there was no concerted effort, no possibility of mutual support.²⁷

There were indeed even differences existing among these critics themselves, which sometimes could be as serious as their disagreement with Burke. Both Boothby and Parr, for instance, had harboured no more liking towards Paine than towards Burke.²⁸ Likewise, another critic would share Burke's abhorrence at the tendency of Price's politics and partake no less in his contempt for such a popular association as the Revolution Society.²⁹ In fact, many critics of Burke – notably those of moderate opinions – would find Burke's account of the British constitution agreeable though they were not prepared to endorse his view of the French Revolution.³⁰

²⁶ Pendleton, 'Towards a Bibliography of the *Reflections* and *Rights of Man* Controversy', pp. 74-5.

²⁷ Boulton, *The Language of Politics in the Age of Wilkes and Burke*, pp. 83-4.

²⁸ See: Sir Brooke Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and on Mr Paine's Rights of Man* (London, 1792), part ii; Samuel Parr, 'Miscellaneous Remarks on Politics, Jurisprudence, Moral, &c.', *The Works of Samuel Parr, LL.D.* (London, 1828), iii, 239, 248.

²⁹ *Temperate Comments upon the Intemperate Reflections* (London, 1791), pp. 8-9, 13-4.

³⁰ For instances, [Henry Mackenzie], *The Letters of Brutus* (Dublin, 1791), Letter iv; *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, William Fox, *The Interest of Great Britain, respecting the French War* (London, 1793).

The lack of ideological unity, no doubt, was characteristic of those who contended against Burke. Care should be taken, when their opinions are investigated, in order that over-simplification can be avoided. The heterogeneous nature of Burke's critics of course poses methodological difficulties for any one who intends to analyse their opinions as a whole. This concern, however, need not lead us to abandon such an attempt. Indeed, if a proper approach is taken, the diversity of the radical arguments can in fact highlight the many sides of the debate in question. With such a conviction, to catch the comprehensive outlook of British radicalism, with due regard to its internal complexity, the analysis undertaken here will focus on the numerous topics which were debated and the different arguments called forth.

The efforts of Burke's critics collectively brought his *Reflections* under a most searching examination. Almost no aspect of Burke's principles was left untouched and nearly every kind of opinion was advanced. Despite their want of overall unity, however, some fundamental assumptions were still commonly asserted. Generally speaking, the opponents of Burke had tended, implicitly or explicitly, to base their arguments upon a theory that contended for the sovereign authority of the people. Earl Stanhope had perhaps represented a common conviction shared by many critics of Burke when he declared:

All warrantable political Power is derived, either mediately, or immediately, from the *People*. All political Authority is a TRUST; and every wilful act of abuse of that Authority, is a *Breach of Trust*. The natural RIGHTS of the PEOPLE are sacred and *inalienable* - Rights of which Despotism may *rob* them for a time, but, which is not in the Power of Tyranny to *annihilate*.³¹

George Rous would advocate the same opinion:

Magistracy is created for *the benefit of the people* - derived from the *people* - and, *from its nature, perpetually held in trust* for the people.³²

The assertion of Robert Hall was even more straightforward: 'Government,' he declared, 'is the creature of the people.'³³ The most prominent feature which

³¹ Earl Stanhope, *A Letter from Earl Stanhope, to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 26.

³² Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p.44.

³³ Robert Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* (London, 1793), p. 9.

distinguished the radicalism of Burke's critics, no doubt, had consisted in their popular politics. The origin of political power, according to Benjamin Flower, had to be traced back to the people at large for its primary source: '*All authority, he claimed, 'proceeds from the people - All is executed by those whom the people appointed, and - All is designed for the benefit of the people'*³⁴ In the same vein, David Williams insisted that the supreme power of a nation had resided in the body of its people.³⁵ It could never, Thomas Paine added, be deposited in other hands:

Sovereignty, as a matter of right, appertains to the Nation only, - and not to any individual; and a Nation has at all times an inherent indefeasible right to abolish any form of Government it finds inconvenient, and establish such as accords with its interest, disposition, and happiness.³⁶

Indeed, William Cuninghame would find it difficult to oppose the sovereignty of the people and consider it unreasonable to dispute the sanctity of their rights. 'Can there be the shadow of a doubt,' he asked, 'that their wishes are authority, their will law, and their actions government?'³⁷ The sovereign authority of the state, in short, ought ever to be seated, as another writer insisted, in the 'aggregate will of the nation'.³⁸

To vindicate the popular origin of government, the concept of 'consent' had been invoked. All the lawful governments, it was widely maintained, had derived their authority from the consent of the people, implied or expressed.³⁹ In this respect, both George Rous and Robert Hall were ready to appeal to the political tradition of John Locke.⁴⁰ Rous had ventured to repeat the doctrine, 'taught by Locke and Sidney', that a legitimate government could have no other foundation than the consent of the people

³⁴ Benjamin Flower, *The French Constitution; with Remarks on Some of its Principal Articles* (London, 1792), pp. 123-4.

³⁵ [David Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince* (London, 1791), 7th ed., p. 22.

³⁶ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 165.

³⁷ William Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings* (London, 1791), p. 32.

³⁸ *Thoughts on a Peace with France* (London, 1796), p. 37.

³⁹ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, on the Revolution in France* (London, 1790), p. 94; William Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs' (1792), *Essays Philosophical and Moral, Historical and Literary* (London, 1799), ii, 320; *Political Correspondence*, p. 43.

⁴⁰ For Locke's theory of consent, cf. John Dunn, 'Consent in the Political Theory of John Locke', *Historical Journal* x (1967), 153-82.

under its rule.⁴¹ The necessity of popular consent for the legitimation of civil government, according to Hall, could be inferred from the Lockean theory of natural equality:

The doctrine of Mr. Locke and his followers is founded on the natural equality of mankind; for as no man can have any natural or inherent right to rule any more than another, it necessarily follows, that a claim to dominion, wherever it is lodged, must be ultimately referred back to the explicit or implied consent of the people. Whatever source of civil authority is assigned different from this, will be found to resolve itself into *mere force*

As a matter of fact, Hall insisted, the great Author of Nature had placed the right of dominion in no particular hands, leaving instead 'every point relating to it to be settled by the consent and approbation of mankind'. The origin of political authority must at length rest upon the acquiescence of the people and could only be explained by resolving it into the will of the nation.⁴² The opponents of Burke, in general, were disposed to cherish the consent of the people as the sole legitimation of government. To William Belsham, there could be no other just or lawful foundation of political power than the choice or consent of the people.⁴³ In contrast, the authority of rude force was condemned. The writer of *Political Correspondence* had pointed out:

On two principles only can all Government be founded, viz, on force, or on popular agreement. That which exists not with the popular consent, exists *against* the popular consent, and such Government is a Government of force.

He dismissed all rude force as but a kind of usurpation that always incurred injustice. It could be no more than a vicious ground, unsuitable for any authority whatever.⁴⁴ After all, it was asserted, the pretensions of those rulers who had usurped their powers through rude force could never deserve the respect which was paid to the claims of those sovereigns whose titles had been conferred by 'exalting choice of an approving people'.⁴⁵

⁴¹ George Rous, *Thoughts on Government* (London, 1790), pp. 22-3.

⁴² Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 9-10, 56-7.

⁴³ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays*, ii, 320.

⁴⁴ *Political Correspondence*, pp. 43, 88.

⁴⁵ *Temperate Comments upon the Intemperate Reflections* p.12.

On the other hand, some radical thinkers had stepped forward to bring out a more positive aspect of popular sovereignty: the right of the people to meddle in the affairs of government. The people of every country, William Cuninghame declared, had a constant and inalienable right to form their own government and to change their ruler. They were entitled to remodel the former as often as it became defective and to remove the latter as soon as he abused his powers.⁴⁶ The author of *The Political Crisis* went further. The people, he insisted, possessed an undoubted right to set up whatever magistracy they would please, retaining meanwhile a power, once they saw fit, to alter it, for any reason, or for no reason at all: 'if they will it, it is sufficient'.⁴⁷ After all, George Rous pointed out, civil authority, being held solely for the benefit of the nation, should count upon the people at large to define its power. He compared the claim of the nation to change its government to the right of the individual to dispose of his own property, arguing that

A man who should disinherit a worthy son in favour of a worthless stranger, would act a most *immoral* part; but his *right* to dispose of his property could not be questioned. So a nation which should change their government, without an adequate motive, without a rational prospect of advancing the public happiness, would likewise act a most *immoral* part; but *their right to judge for themselves* . . . is alike unquestionable.⁴⁸

Most certainly, Rous was convinced, when determined to exercise their sovereign power, the whole body of the people could theoretically be restrained by 'no human controul' though, in practice, they would certainly be subject to a 'moral obligation' not to damage the public felicity of all.⁴⁹

These radical reasonings on the sovereignty of the people had connoted a new conception of the relationship between the ruler and his people at large. If the power of the governor had, as argued above, been derived from the people, he could then no longer be deemed, as hitherto, as the master of the nation. Thus, David Williams declared:

⁴⁶ William Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings*, pp.8, 40-1.

⁴⁷ *The Political Crisis* (London, 1791), p. 25.

⁴⁸ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 38.

⁴⁹ Rous, *Thoughts on Government* pp. 72-3.

The depositaries of delegated power, whether called princes, senates, or parliaments, are not proprietors or masters, they are subject to the people, who form and support the society; by an eternal law of nature, which has ever subjected a part to the whole.⁵⁰

Francis Stone contended that the king had not been created to become the proprietor of the nation: rather, he was intended to act as the protector of the people. He compared the power which the governor derived from the people to the light which the moon reflected from the sun, asserting

that the majesty of the people, to whom, by God's permission, kings owe their creation as kings, is as much superior to the majesty of the crown, as the strong, dazzling, native lustre of that glorious luminary the sun outshines the pale reflected light of the moon, from whom she derives her borrowed splendour.

The body of the people ought to be the master, while^a magistrate was no more than their servant.⁵¹ Being a public servant, another critic went on to assert, a magistrate ought to be made accountable to the people for the use he would make of public power.⁵² Above all, Robert Hall emphasised, civil rulers could never claim any rights which would be considered co-extensive with those of the people or which might tend to form a distinct part separate from the nation. 'They are appointed by the community to *execute* its will, not to *oppose* it; to manage the public, not to pursue any *private* or *particular* interests.' To claim that they could become independent of the people's will, he believed, would be as absurd as to assume that 'water can arise above its source'.⁵³

The principle of popular sovereignty, without doubt, was central to the political arguments of Burke's critics. In itself, nevertheless, this doctrine could not be separated from the more fundamental theory of the 'rights of man'. To a great extent, in fact, the 'rights of man' theory can be said to be what had truly underlain the radical polemics of those who rose to defend the French Revolution.

⁵⁰ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince* p. 24.

⁵¹ Francis Stone, *An Examination of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London, 1792), pp. 25, 57-8.

⁵² *The Political Crisis*, pp. 35, 84.

⁵³ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 10, 57.

It is necessary then to make an enquiry into the views of these writers concerning the rights of man, in order to understand the nature of their radical arguments. The rights of man, according to John Thelwall, had grown out of the nature of man.⁵⁴ Catharine Macaulay meanwhile stressed that these rights existed 'in the very constitution of things'.⁵⁵ In the main, those who were at odds with Burke's principles were prepared to cherish the rights of man as the fundamental values of their politics. To Francis Stone, the natural equal rights of men formed the 'first principles' of government.⁵⁶ Thomas Christie proclaimed these rights to be things of greater and dearer concern, because, he stressed, they were founded upon the great principles of eternal justice and reason.⁵⁷ But the most elegant opinion came from Capel Lofft who claimed that, compared with other civil inheritance, the rights of man were principles of date far higher and of origin more venerable:

It is an inheritance coeval with the commencement of humanity: its ensigns is the countenance impressed with the divine character of Reason; its gallery the extent of the habitable earth; its monuments the unperishable memory of the wisest, best, and bravest of the species of every age and country; its evidence, the voice of nature; its title our equal relation to the Deity.⁵⁸

They came down, another writer asserted, as the 'gift of Heaven to all mankind' and had on that account assumed superior claims.⁵⁹ In the final analysis, William Belsham concluded, the rights of man had resulted purely from the reason and nature of things, dependent upon no other artificial or positive institution. They were, he cited David Hume's words, 'rights perpetual and unalienable, which no time, no precedent, no statute, can either abrogate or impair'.⁶⁰

The role of the rights of man in civil life was asserted in two main aspects. On the

⁵⁴ John Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature, against the Usurpation of Establishments*, Part II (London, 1796), p. 37.

⁵⁵ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 95.

⁵⁶ Stone, *An Examination of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 36.

⁵⁷ Thomas Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Capel Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, concerning the Revolution in France* (London, 1790), pp. 30-1.

⁵⁹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke, on the Revolution in France* (London, 1791), p. 82.

⁶⁰ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays*, ii, 315.

one hand, many radical writers were ready to see natural rights laid down as the foundation of civil liberty. All liberty, one critic pointed out, must be grounded upon the natural rights of man.⁶¹ Another writer shared this opinion and compared these rights to the 'root of the tree'.⁶² To deny the authority of natural rights, it was warned, would be to leave the freedom of the people in danger of being subject entirely to the arbitrary will of the civil power.⁶³ At the same time, the rights of man were also thought to be the only principles that could legitimate any civil authority. A lawful government, Catharine Macaulay was convinced, could have no other foundation than the '*native and unalienable* rights of man'.⁶⁴ Francis Stone insisted that natural rights ought to form the basis of all government.⁶⁵ According to Benjamin Flower, the grand end of political association had been to 'secure those natural rights, which are the birth right of every man, and of which he cannot be justly deprived'.⁶⁶ It was, Thomas Christie contended, from these rights that all particular constitutions derived their authority; and no civil power could therefore deserve respect until it was rendered conformable to this unchangeable standard.⁶⁷

But how had the theory of the rights of man been built up? To elucidate natural rights, the foremost task that befell the radical writers was to trace their origin. Arguing in the Lockean tradition, those who defended the rights of man were generally inclined to relate the origin of these rights to a state of nature.⁶⁸ George Rous obviously assumed such a position when he asked: 'what can be the origin of human rights, if they be not derived from nature?'⁶⁹ The same view was more

⁶¹ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', *Essays on Political Subjects* (London, 1791), p. 61.

⁶² *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, on the Revolution in France* (London, 1791), p. 37.

⁶³ *The Political Crisis*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 94.

⁶⁵ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 36.

⁶⁶ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 117.

⁶⁷ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 16.

⁶⁸ For the concept of the 'state of nature' in the political theory of the 18th-century Britain, see: H. V. S. Ogden, 'The State of Nature and the Decline of Lockian Political Theory in England, 1760-1800', *American Historical Review*, xlvii (1940), 21-44. Ogden believes that the theory of natural rights had been disintegrating in England since the 1760s. 'By 1800,' he continues, 'the theory of natural rights had lost virtually all its English adherents.' (p. 21) It must be pointed out, however, that in the 1790s this theory had still attracted, as can be seen in this study, many ardent defenders among the British friends of the French Revolution.

⁶⁹ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 79.

distinctly declared in another anonymous pamphlet:

The best way to discover the natural rights of man, is to refer to him in a state of nature. There certainly was a time when he existed in that state, unless we supposed that government dropped upon him from the clouds. When he was, or how long he remained in it, we cannot tell; but common sense compels us to conclude, that in that state he must have been some time or another.⁷⁰

From an historical perspective, this natural state was by some referred to as the period before civil society was formed. It was, to Vicesimus Knox, a stage 'preparatory to forming a convention'.⁷¹ 'I believe,' another critic declared confidently, 'few will deny but that there was a time *prior* to any social compact in society.' At that time, he suggested, the world had been only a state of nature where solitary men could not find any established rule to follow.⁷²

It needs to be remembered here that not every radical writer had in fact been convinced enough to accept the historical authenticity of this state of nature. Robert Hall, notably, remarked that there were no traces, 'even in tradition, of a period when men were utterly unconnected with each other'.⁷³ A man without society, or a society without government, John Thelwall contended, had never been known: 'The fact is,' he stressed, 'we are not only unacquainted with solitary man, but with society uninfluenced by political compact.' In spite of such doubts, however, Thelwall would still find it advisable, and indeed necessary, to abstract a state of things, conceived to be the 'natural condition of man', in which, he believed, man's original rights could be identified:

But though neither history nor observation furnish any examples either of unassociated man, or of society without some sort of political institution, yet it is not difficult to form a distinct idea of what may be called the natural condition of man: that is, to distinguish, in our minds, between what the individual has derived from nature, and what has been conferred, or abrogated, by civil society.

And, in his mind, this state was sketched to be a situation in which every man existed

⁷⁰ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', p. 35.

⁷¹ Vicesimus Knox, *The Essence of the Calm Observer* (2nd ed., London, 1793), p. 50.

⁷² *The Political Crisis*, pp. 5-6.

⁷³ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 55.

purely as an individual, 'stripped of all the relationships of Society, independent of its compacts, and uninfluenced by its reciprocations'.⁷⁴ Various portrayals had been given to illustrate this supposed natural state. To Sir Brooke Boothby, a state of nature had been almost an animate and uncivilized state.⁷⁵ Francis Stone called it a state of savage nature,⁷⁶ while yet another writer tended to associate it with an 'unsocial state of savage life'.⁷⁷ In any case, as Thelwall emphasised, it was not supposed to be either an ideal era of perfect happiness or a poetical vision of a golden age.⁷⁸

A savage state of primitive life, according to *The Political Crisis*, had been an order in which every man, governed by no civil regulations, had simply followed the dictate of his native reason, restrained merely by the law of nature, to seek after his own welfare. In such situation, a man must naturally possess a power to will, and to act, in whatever manner might contribute the most to his own happiness.⁷⁹ In this context, what could the natural rights of man be said to stand for? '[I]n a pure state of nature,' Sir Brooke Boothby declared, 'right and power seem to be perfectly equivalent terms.' Boothby contended that in the natural state, 'since man was driven purely by his physical necessity, his rights must hence become 'co-equal with his natural powers, and capacities, and wants'.⁸⁰ John Thelwall had interpreted the original rights of man in the same physical terms. The natural rights, he wrote, consisted in the mere powers and means, of which the individual was by nature possessed. To make plain his point, he explained:

Man, from the very circumstance of his existence, has an inheritance in the elements and powers of nature, and a right to exercise his faculties upon those powers and elements, so as to render them subservient to his wants, and conducive to his enjoyments. In other words, Man is the sovereign; the material universe is the subject; his faculties are the powers by which he enforces his authority; and expediency is his rule of right. He is a despot, to the limit of his power,

⁷⁴ John Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, pp. 35, 37, 51.

⁷⁵ Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, p. 263.

⁷⁶ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 37, 119.

⁷⁷ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, p. 33.

⁷⁹ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 5-6, 10.

⁸⁰ Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, pp. 118, 122, 160.

over the physical universe; and he has a right to be so.

On the whole, Thelwall summed up, the rights of man in the natural state had been simple in their elements: 'They are determined by his wants, and his faculties; and the means presented by the general system of nature. . . for the gratification of the former, and the improvement of the latter.' There would be no other boundary.⁸¹

Before civil society was formed, therefore, every individual could be supposed to have been totally independent, retaining, as James Mackintosh alleged, his natural sovereignty over his own actions.⁸² Man had at that time acted, Samuel Heywood claimed, as his own soldier, his own lawgiver and his own judge, without giving up the government of himself and his concerns.⁸³ Theoretically, of course, a state of nature ought to be an ideal world of perfect freedom and complete independence in which man could fully enjoy his natural rights. This, however, seemed to have been far from the case. The rights of man in the natural state, according to the definition above, should be equal to his native wants. Unfortunately, Thomas Paine observed, man was never rendered physically competent enough to gratify his own desires. In all cases, nature had made his natural wants greater than his individual powers and no one had been able, without aids, to supply his own needs.⁸⁴ In fact, man's life in the natural state could hardly be quite secure. He was then left, John Thelwall noted, entirely to the wild growth of nature, living like other animals and, if particularly feeble, liable to perish in the bleak wild of barbarism.⁸⁵ 'Man, at his origin,' *The Political Crisis* stressed, 'felt himself depressed with wants, debility and woe, and exposed to every kind of hardship.' Indeed, the first proprietors of the world must have experienced great inconveniences of living independent and unconnected, subject to all sorts of insults and wrongs without the power of proper redress.⁸⁶ The moral imperfection of men, another pamphlet added, had also conduced to turn the natural state into a miserable world of conflict and oppression:

⁸¹ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature* Part II, pp. 37-41.

⁸² Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* p. 207.

⁸³ [Samuel Heywood], *High Church Politics* (London, 1792), p. 160.

⁸⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 185.

⁸⁵ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature* Part II, p. 53.

⁸⁶ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 5, 10.

If no man had a right to controul another in a state of nature, every man had a right to be free. Men, however, were not perfect beings; they had vices and passions, and these vices and passions produced mischievous effects in society. The strong oppressed the weak.

Since every individual would be liable to become the weaker some time or other, no one hence could be secure for ever.⁸⁷ In all probability, Francis Stone was persuaded, the stronger would always subdue the weaker, depriving him of his life and liberty.⁸⁸ In truth, Thelwall insisted, a state of nature must at all times be a state of incessant war, ever tending to degenerate into an 'anarchic *Tyranny of Physical Force*.'⁸⁹

The state of nature, it must then become plain, would never form a proper environment in which the rights of man could be better maintained. Thelwall was virtually convinced that at the rude stage of society all those boasted liberties and independence were extremely precarious because they had been then 'little calculated for permanent establishment'. Worse, he stressed, 'liberty' under that condition could be easily perverted into '*a privilege of the strong to tyrannize over the feeble*'.⁹⁰ In this circumstance, therefore, the search for protection and security naturally became the main concerns of mankind. And as a result of necessity, it was assumed, men were driven to contrive government: 'They devised the expedient of chusing some one person or persons to rule them, whose power they shall all support, and whose power so supported should be sufficient to restrain oppression.'⁹¹ Similar observations were made by one Irish author who came to stress that

every society of human creatures who wish for protection from internal and external violence, will consent to pay those who will protect them, and are willing to agree some individuals should direct the public power to those purposes; every society wishes therefore for some government.⁹²

⁸⁷ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', pp. 37-8.

⁸⁸ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 119.

⁸⁹ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, pp. 41, 58.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁹¹ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', p. 38.

⁹² *An Answer to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Dublin, 1791), pp. 17-8.

To avoid the inconveniences of the natural state, in other words, human beings had been forced to associate together: 'Mankind,' as Francis Stone remarked, 'conscious that in a state of savage nature the weakest becomes a prey to the strongest, embody themselves in civil society for the preservation of these rights, namely, their lives, liberties, and properties.'⁹³

Many radical writers were actually inclined to view this movement towards civil society as a process quite conformable with the natural disposition of man. A state of nature, Benjamin Flower noted, had been virtually a state of solitude, in which it was impossible that human beings would like to stay for long:

Man originally was, and still is, formed for a social creature; he is by choice, as well as necessity, compelled to seek the help of, and to unite in society with, his fellow creatures. We find it our interest, as well as our duty, to endeavour to encrease each other's happiness.⁹⁴

It was indeed generally held that man was by nature a social creature, destined especially for civil life. 'There is no dispute but that man is naturally a social being,' one writer wrote.⁹⁵ Thomas Paine was of the same opinion. Human beings, he claimed, had as well from natural instinct, as from reciprocal benefits, habituated themselves to civil life. 'In short,' he wrote, 'man is so naturally a creature of society, that it is almost impossible to put him out of it.'⁹⁶

We need further enquire: what was then the process which created civil society? Upon this, a prevalent opinion was to approach it as an institution established through some kind of original contract. The author of *The Political Crisis* had manifestly assumed that it was the people's 'combining together in social compact, and relinquishing a portion of their natural rights, and making regulations for the common good, which creates *civil society*.'⁹⁷ But two different accounts had been advanced to explain the making of this social contract. Some pamphleteers, first of all, were ready – and it seemed natural – to conceive it as an act transacted between the ruler and his people. In the formation of civil society, Francis Stone pointed out, the people had

⁹³ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 36-7.

⁹⁴ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 114.

⁹⁵ *The Political Crisis*, p. 7.

⁹⁶ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 185-6.

⁹⁷ *The Political Crisis*, p. 10.

'entered into a convention or compact with their governors'.⁹⁸ Joseph Priestley declared that there had existed a virtual, though not express, '*compact between the king and the people*' which set down stipulations for protection on the part of the king and for allegiance on the part of the people.⁹⁹ This original compact, another writer asserted, was derived from a 'great agreement between the governing and the governed'.¹⁰⁰ It was, thus William Belsham concluded, a contract 'subsisting between the magistrate and the people'.¹⁰¹

This reading of the social contract, nevertheless, would prove unacceptable to many other radical writers, who were keen enough to discern in it certain theoretical flaws and, moreover, to apprehend from it some mischievous implications. Instead, a more radical version was brought out. William Cuninghame denounced the assumption that civil authority had been founded upon an original contract, supposed to be engaged by the people with their magistrate: 'If we mean anything by a contract,' he argued,

it is that, while one party abides, the other is bound by it. Now is this our sense of government? If the king of any country should possess too much power by its constitution, could not the people diminish it? Could the king urge that he had never broken his contract, and could not, therefore, lose any of his power? Could he oppose his language to the unanimous voice of the people? If he could not, there is no contract, no bargain – the idea is ridiculous.¹⁰²

No government, in his view, could ever be entitled to claim a share in the sovereignty of the nation. David Williams likewise contended that the act which constituted a government should never become the subject of a contract. It was the will, or rather the 'arbitrary law', of the people.¹⁰³ The arguments which Thomas Paine elaborated were much better reasoned. Paine accepted in principle the view that the social contract had been essential in the foundation of civil government, but he refused to grant that a compact of this nature could be seen as a transaction negotiated

⁹⁸ Stone, *An Examination of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 116.

⁹⁹ Priestley, *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*, pp. 27, 28, 32.

¹⁰⁰ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', p. 39.

¹⁰¹ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays* ii, 305.

¹⁰² William Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings*, pp. 41-2.

¹⁰³ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 24.

between the governor and the governed:

It has been thought a considerable advance towards establishing the principles of Freedom, to say, that government is a compact between those who govern and those who are governed: but this cannot be true, because it is putting the effect before the cause; for as man must have existed before governments existed, there necessarily was a time when governments did not exist, and consequently there could originally exist no governors to form such a compact with.

The social contract, that is, could only originate with the people at large. It was a transaction in which 'the *individuals themselves*, each in his own personal and sovereign right, *entered into a compact with each other* to produce a government'. And this, he added, was the only mode in which government could have the right to arise.¹⁰⁴ To make plain the nature of the social contract, Paine went on to maintain:

there is no such thing as the idea of a compact between the people on one side, and the government on the other. The compact was that of the people with each other, to produce and constitute a government. To suppose that any government can be a party in a compact with the whole people, is to suppose it to have existence before it can have a right to exist.

It was, after all, not an offer granted by the governor, but the act of 'a people constituting a government'.¹⁰⁵

No matter how the social contract was interpreted, there was at any rate no dispute about the necessity of civil society. Most radical writers seemed ready to allow that the institution of civil society was ultimately essential for the proper maintenance of the rights of man. 'I do not intend to say,' Samuel Parr had declared, 'that all the rights of men derive their origin from society, but that, in a well-regulated society, their natural rights are recognized, preserved, defined, and invigorated.'¹⁰⁶ To James Mackintosh, only in a civil society could the rights of man be much better defended: 'In a state of *nature*, the equality of right is an impotent theory, which inequalities of strength and skill every moment violate. It is called into energy and

¹⁰⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 207, 210.

¹⁰⁶ Parr, 'Miscellaneous Remarks', *Works* iii, 217n.

effect only by society.¹⁰⁷ But the important point here is: when once civil society was formed, what would happen to man in terms of his rights? This is a question crucial to the radical polemics of Burke's critics.

Among Burke's opponents some were disposed to assert that, when man became a member of civil society, he must surrender to it all his natural rights and receive instead what that society would give as his real rights. After the formation of civil society, according to Sir Brooke Boothby, those rights which were originally attached to man in the natural state must be assumed to have been given up in exchange for the benefits of that society. Consequently, he asserted, the rights of man to be enjoyed afterwards had to be 'determined and ascertained by the laws and institutions of the society in which he is born'. Since the rights of man in society, thus considered, would mainly depend on the established laws, they could therefore never be insisted upon as anything absolute. Boothby's view about the rights of man in truth had been fundamentally utilitarian:

Liberty is one of the means of happiness, but not happiness itself. It is only good as it gives the power of enjoying the good which we possess; where there is nothing to enjoy it is useless; where it can only be employed in doing evil to ourselves or others it is pernicious. . . Civil liberty therefore consists as much in the restraint as in the exercise of natural liberty.

With this conviction, he continued to claim that the rights of man in civil life had been only of secondary importance and must always be made subordinate to all laws and institutions for the good of the whole. They were, in his eyes, all relative, ever liable to vary with circumstances and not suitable to be 'reduced to any positive or immutable principles'.¹⁰⁸

Most of Burke's critics, however, would find it quite difficult to appreciate Boothby's sentiments on the rights of man, which must certainly appear to them not

¹⁰⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 209.

¹⁰⁸ Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and on Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, pp. 118-9, 158-9, 162. Boothby was himself a critic both of Burke and Paine. His view about the rights of man here, it must be admitted, is surprisingly Burkean. In an earlier pamphlet replying to Burke's *Reflections* however, he had taken a stand more in tune with the general views of Burke's critics: 'All political powers,' he wrote, 'consists of an aggregate sum of the natural rights and liberties of the persons over whom it is exercised. In a just and equitable government no more liberty will be taken from the individual than is necessary to form an aggregate of power sufficient to protect the whole against each and each against the other. The best government therefore is that, under what denomination soever, where the smallest quantity of liberty is exchanged for the greatest quantity of protection.' See his *A Letter to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London, 1791), pp. 38-9.

so much different from the stand they associated with Burke. The opinion which Burke asserted, Mackintosh pointed out, tended to infer that man, after entering into civil society, had abdicated all his natural rights and that henceforth 'the only rights which he retains are CREATED by the compact which holds together the society of which he is a member'.¹⁰⁹ Samuel Heywood treated Burke in the same light: 'Mr. Burke in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*,' he claimed,

countenances this error, when treating the rights of men in society, he says, they 'are *their advantages*, and these rights are often in balances between differences of good, in compromises sometimes between good and evil, and sometimes between evil and evil. . . .' From this sublime passage I collect, that when man enters into society, and becomes a civil social being, all the direct original rights which he enjoyed in a state of nature are destroyed, and *he has no rights left but the advantages for which civil society was formed*. The argument must amount to this, or it amounts to nothing.¹¹⁰

To Robert Hall, Burke's theory implied that a total surrender had been made by man of his natural freedom, in return for the superior advantages of civil society. Upon this argument, he warned, man would never be permitted to appeal again to any original principles, 'but must rest content with the advantages that are secured by the terms of the society'.¹¹¹

No true radicals among Burke's opponents, it can be easily perceived, could be persuaded, with consistence, to endorse such an authoritarian view. They were, on the contrary, convinced that liberty must be founded upon the natural rights of man, or it would be entirely left to the tender mercies of the ruling power. One critic argued that civil liberty, being rooted in the natural rights of man, could never be restricted to those rights only which civil government would allow man to enjoy. To render civil authority the source of human rights, he insisted, would be to justify every kind of oppression.¹¹² *The Political Crisis* was horrified at the Burkean suggestion that 'man has no *natural*, but all are *civil* rights'. Man would be enslaved if such a principle prevailed, since according to this doctrine, he claimed,

¹⁰⁹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 204-5.

¹¹⁰ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 156-7.

¹¹¹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 48-9.

¹¹² *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 37.

he is totally subject to the will and caprice of those in power; has no business to murmur at, or to enquire into the conduct of the magistrate, be it ever so cruel and oppressive; has no concern with government, but must submit to every imposition, believe whatever is taught and bear whatever is imposed upon him.¹¹³

For Mackintosh, indeed, to contend for the absolute surrender of natural rights by civil and social man would serve to justify every kind of atrocious despotism, outraging the most avowed conviction of man.¹¹⁴ 'It requires little discernment to see,' thus Robert Hall wrote, 'that this theory rivets the chains of despotism, and shuts out from the political world the smallest glimpse of emancipation or improvement.'¹¹⁵

The rational object of political society, according to John Thelwall, was to increase the welfare and happiness of the whole, which he believed could only be achieved through promoting the future enjoyment of natural rights.¹¹⁶ To be sure, Thomas Paine claimed, man did not enter into civil society in order to become worse than he had been in the natural state and he never intended to 'have fewer rights than he had before, but to have those rights better secured'.¹¹⁷ For all such constant calls for the promotion of natural rights, however, few radical writers would in reality pretend to insist upon these rights in their entirety. Vicesimus Knox admitted that there might be occasions when the natural rights would need to 'stand compromised and affected by incidental circumstances'.¹¹⁸ In practice, John Butler emphasised, such a compromise had been virtually rendered inevitable as a result of the need to maintain a civil authority: '[W]ithout a government,' he wrote, 'we would be in a state of perpetual war and rapine; it is therefore absolutely necessary that our liberty and freedom should be both reasonable and limited.'¹¹⁹ After all, Robert Hall remarked, since government implied restraint, every one under it must hence be obliged to give up some part of his natural freedom.¹²⁰

¹¹³ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 78-9.

¹¹⁴ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 219-20.

¹¹⁵ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 53-4.

¹¹⁶ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, p. 46.

¹¹⁷ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 90.

¹¹⁸ Vicesimus Knox, *The Essence of the Calm Observer*, p. 49.

¹¹⁹ Butler, *Brief Reflections on the Liberty of the British Subject*, p. 129.

¹²⁰ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 51.

'I believe,' *The Political Crisis* declared, 'it is admitted on all hands, that there was a voluntary resignation and a deposit of a certain portion of the rights of individuals at the foundation of society.'¹²¹ In discussing the rights of man in society, therefore, what would truly concern the radicals in the end became not so much whether any right had to be resigned as how far such a resignation could be justly made. When man entered into a state of society, one writer pointed out, he relinquished a part of his natural liberty for the general good of the community.¹²² In the same vein, Francis Stone claimed that every individual, in virtue of his uniting himself into a civil association, had surrendered a small portion of his liberty, in order that he might secure the greater portion of it.¹²³ Generally speaking, the radical pamphleteers were prepared to claim that the natural rights which man was obliged to give up had been very partial. According to James Mackintosh, a society could not require its members to surrender any right which was not in accordance with the end for which it was formed. Civil society had been intended principally to protect every man against abuses from others; accordingly, the rights which needed to be sacrificed to the public authority should include those only which 'in their exercise might be injurious to ANOTHER'. Man, in other words, could never be supposed to have resigned all of his natural rights.¹²⁴ Robert Hall maintained that civil government had been instituted for quite specific aims: chiefly to secure man from 'eternal injury and violence'. It would be absurd, then, to suggest that 'by submitting to civil power, with a view to some *particular* benefits, we should be understood to hold all our advantages dependent upon that authority'. Civil restraints could imply no more than a resignation of liberty in some points, so as to maintain undisturbed others of more importance.¹²⁵ Samuel Heywood admitted that man had indeed brought into the aggregate stock of society some natural rights to be modified and arranged for the great end of social union. Nevertheless, he contended, this did not mean that he was thereby stripped of all his natural rights. There remained, besides the advantages from civil institutions, rights which 'certainly never could be surrendered to society, or dependent on its institutions'.¹²⁶

¹²¹ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 79-80.

¹²² *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 82-3.

¹²³ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 119.

¹²⁴ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 206-8.

¹²⁵ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 51-2.

¹²⁶ [Heywood], *Hight Church Politics*, pp. 157-8.

Many a pamphleteer, meanwhile, went further to stress that the rights which had been thus resigned were not merely quite limited; they in reality belonged to the kind which tended to be not so fundamental to the welfare of the individual himself. 'It must be admitted,' one critic claimed,

that men necessarily abridge themselves a part of their natural rights, those of an inferior nature, that are not essential to their happiness, in order to obtain the advantages resulting from society, which are of superior value.

He insisted that a good government would never conspire to take away rights which were 'compatible with strict justice to individuals'.¹²⁷ It would be too unequal indeed, Capel Lofft maintained, if man should resign in trust the whole of his natural rights in order to preserve a part of them:

a surrender of primary independent rights, to preserve secondary and adventitious rights, the whole of natural liberty for a precarious portion of civil, is an imaginary compact so replete with more than paradox, so incompatible with every idea of reason and justice, that the wildest imagination never created such a chimera.

To Lofft, in short, the rights to be given up should extend to no more than those which might stand inconsistent with the end of civil society.¹²⁸ They were, another writer added, rights fit only for the unsocial state of savage life and alienable therefore for the purpose of giving energy to the operation of a social contract.¹²⁹

Social man, in any case, was believed to have still reserved the essential part of his natural rights. Robert Hall was positive that there had always been some liberty which man could freely exercise without the need of permission from civil authority.¹³⁰ In the opinion of John Thelwall, man was no doubt entitled to all those rights which he was not obliged to resign:

Society is responsible, in the first place, for an equivalent for that which society has taken away. For all the rest, you have still a right to

¹²⁷ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 37-8.

¹²⁸ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 36-7.

¹²⁹ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, pp. 25-6.

¹³⁰ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 48.

employ your faculties for your own advantage.

Every one, for instance, had the rights to gratify his natural appetites and to practise his rational faculties. Rights of this nature ought to be inalienable because, he contended, they were indispensable for basic human existence.¹³¹ Samuel Heywood meanwhile would refuse to allow that all rights were civil. There were certain rights which were neither springing out of, nor affected by, civil institutions and which must therefore remain 'to *social* man, in the strictest sense, a *natural* right'.¹³² In the final analysis, James Mackintosh stressed, natural rights could never be supposed to lie dormant in civil society: 'It remains,' he remarked, 'in its full integrity and vigor, if we except that *portion* of it which men mutually sacrifice for protection against each other.'¹³³

True to their radical politics, most of Burke's critics, alongside with their insistence on the natural rights of man, were in the meantime reluctant to second an all-powerful civil authority. It had been their persistent effort to try to keep the minimum of government in the hope that the natural rights of man could be promoted to their maximum possible level. The more free and mild a government became, Benjamin Bousfield claimed, the stronger could the natural rights of man be maintained. 'In every material departure from the rights of men,' he was convinced, 'the subject is aggrieved, the trust violated, and government assumed an arbitrary and despotic sway.'¹³⁴ John Thelwall argued that the just and rational object of civil authority ought, not to retrench or abrogate, but to secure and equalise, natural rights.¹³⁵ John Oswald had gone further. He pointed out that the end of good government was to give 'free and unimpeded operation to the *will of the people*, and he contended that only a despotic system would attempt to obstruct such operation.¹³⁶ For some writers, hence, the extent to which the rights of man had been promoted became a ready criterion to assess the merit of a government. Thus, Robert Hall declared: 'Political arrangement is more or less perfect in proportion as it enables

¹³¹ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, pp. 78-9.

¹³² [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, p. 159.

¹³³ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 207-8.

¹³⁴ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 11.

¹³⁵ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, pp. 42, 45.

¹³⁶ John Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain* (London, 1793), p.32.

us to exert our natural liberty to the greatest advantage.' It should not be suffered to impose greater restraint than its object had prescribed. If that should be the case, he warned, the whole system would degenerate into a baneful order of oppression and tyranny.¹³⁷

This inclination to temper the power of civil government, in favour of man's natural rights, had obviously stemmed from the deep distrust of the radicals over the contribution which civil power could positively make to the civilization of mankind. The advantages to be expected of civil government, according to Robert Hall, were quite limited. Compared with the general condition of man, only a small part of human concerns could fall under its influence.¹³⁸ Thomas Paine had elaborated more upon this point. Formal government, he wrote, was able to affect but a narrow area of civilised life, which he believed had been for the most part virtually run by the common usages and natural rules of the community:

GREAT part of that order which reigns among mankind is not the effect of government. It has its origin in the principles of society and the natural constitution of man. It existed prior to government, and would exist if the formality of government was abolished. The mutual dependence and reciprocal interest which man has upon man, and all the parts of a civilized community upon each other, create that great chain of connexion which holds it together. . . Common interest regulates their concerns, and forms their law.

The laws ordained by common usage, generally speaking, had exerted greater influence than civil laws. Indeed, Paine observed, human society had virtually performed for itself most of the functions which, however, had been mistakenly attributed to civil government. A public authority could be no farther necessary than to supply 'the few cases to which society and civilization are not conveniently competent'. He had gone so far as to ridicule the existence of government as having been for most of the time a matter 'more in name and idea, than in fact':

It is to the great and fundamental principles of society and civilization - to the common usage universally consented to, and mutually and reciprocally maintained - to the unceasing circulation of interest, which. . . invigorates the whole mass of civilized man - it is to these things, infinitely more than to anything which even the best

¹³⁷ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* p. 56.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

instituted government can perform, that the safety and prosperity of the individual and of the whole depends.

Paine's arguments connoted a strong anarchic sentiment which led him to set at defiance all the formal governments.¹³⁹

Having surveyed the various situations that affected the subsistence of the rights of man, it is now time to examine what those rights were which man was thought able to maintain in civil society. There was no right, it could be readily assumed, which was not originally a natural right. According to Paine's definition, 'natural rights' referred to those which appertained to man 'in right of his existence'. Theoretically, then, they ought to include all the rights, intellectual and physical, which man had possessed as an individual to promote his own comfort and happiness. But if civil society implied, as discussed above, resigning some portion of these natural rights, upon what criterion could one decide between the rights to be surrendered and those to be reserved? Thomas Paine had set down a simple principle:

The natural rights which he retains, are all those in which the *power* to execute is as perfect in the individual as the right itself. Among this class. . . are all the intellectual rights, or rights of the mind. . . The natural rights which are not retained, are all those in which, though the right is perfect in the individual, the power to execute them is defective. They answer not his purpose.

Rights unable to be carried into practice, anyway, would be good for nothing; they were therefore deposited in society as common stock, in order that public force could be relied on to promote their enjoyment. The rights thus trusted, in Paine's opinion, became 'civil rights'.¹⁴⁰ The author of *The Political Crisis*, drawing virtually on Paine's principle, had pronounced a similar opinion. All those rights were relinquished which, he wrote, the individual could not exercise without incurring manifest inconvenience. 'They were put into the common stock of society, over which trustees were appointed to exercise them for the good of all.' On the other hand, all those rights had been reserved, which the individual could enjoy by himself, without relying on the arm of society for support. His only difference with Paine was that he would prefer to term

¹³⁹ Paine, *Rights of Man* pp. 185-7.

¹⁴⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man* pp. 90-1.

those deposited rights 'political'.¹⁴¹

By this definition, two categories of rights could be distinguished. There were, on the one hand, 'natural' rights which man was able to exercise independently and, on the other, 'civil' rights which could not be enjoyed without the aid of civil authority. The rights thrown into society, according to Thomas Paine, were mainly those which were related to 'security' and 'protection'.¹⁴² This appeared to be a position widely assumed. Civil society, Samuel Heywood asserted, had been principally formed for securing the life and property of its members. In the state of nature, every one had to defend himself. He must come to judge how far the offender should be punished and then to inflict the punishment by his own hands. But, he went on,

when he enters into society he gives up those rights; the general defence is then intrusted to persons selected for that purpose; judges are appointed to examine into criminal charges, and apportion the punishments, and their sentences are carried into execution by the officers of the public.¹⁴³

To Robert Hall, the duties of public authority ought to contain mainly the administration of justice, the protection of property, and the defence of its people from violence and outrage. The purpose of maintaining a civil government, he remarked, had been primarily to help remedy the injustice which lay beyond the individual power to redress: 'we give up the liberty by repelling force by force, in return for a more equal administration of justice than private resentment would permit.' Where there was no injustice, there would be no need for protection; public force would then become dispensable and every one could thereby be left without restraint or control.¹⁴⁴ *The Political Crisis* had made the same point. So long as man was able to redress, or to avoid, his own wrongs, it claimed, civil government would be unnecessary. In the meantime, this author conceived a broad view of the matter. He tended to read protection both in personal and national terms and would like to include in the rights to be resigned not only that of every one to judge in his own cause, but all those concerned with levying war, mobilising the public force, making treaties, and 'all other national concerns'. The deposit of these rights in a common

¹⁴¹ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 11-2.

¹⁴² Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 90.

¹⁴³ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 157-8.

¹⁴⁴ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 2, 51-2.

authority, he believed, could serve to create 'one soul' in the nation, so that foreign invasions could be more effectively repelled and the domestic peace better maintained.¹⁴⁵

The category of rights declared inalienable referred chiefly to those which were believed to be fundamental to the existence, and essential to the dignity and happiness, of man. Upon this, most radical writers were content in the main to follow the principles set down in the French *Declaration of ^{the} Rights ^{of Man} and Citizens*. The most important of such rights was the freedom of the person. Personal freedom, one writer claimed, composed the first of natural rights: 'It affords a picture of liberty in its native simplicity.'¹⁴⁶ Every person, it was widely maintained, should have the natural right to exert his corporal power in whatever manner not injurious to others; and he was entitled, as an individual, to pursue his own good by any means without encroaching on the rights of another man.¹⁴⁷ 'Liberty,' thus David Williams declared, 'is a power, obtained for every citizen by the disposition and arrangement of the general force, to act for his own happiness, without injuring others.' And all beyond this would become licence.¹⁴⁸ Personal freedom, of course, ought never to be allowed to degenerate into licence, but neither could it be arbitrarily limited. On leaving a state of nature, one critic remarked,

man resigned his personal freedom. . . to be modelled for the good of the community, but it was to be modelled by certain institutions. He must, then, retain whatever is left by these institutions, and on this principle. . . where a man is not bound by the laws of his country, he is as free at this moment, as ever he was in a state of nature.

The freedom of the person, above all, could only be regulated by laws properly made: 'Where the laws restrain him, he is bound, in all other cases he is free.'¹⁴⁹ John Butler was indeed prepared to endorse neither a perfect liberty nor a severe restriction. He admitted that in a well-regulated commonwealth the liberty of man would need to be circumscribed within certain bounds. However, he warned, if the people were screwed up in too narrow a compass, they would surely be forced to overthrow the

¹⁴⁵ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 8, 11-12.

¹⁴⁶ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', p. 44.

¹⁴⁷ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 48, 52; *The Political Crisis*, pp. 8, 12.

¹⁴⁸ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 118.

¹⁴⁹ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', pp. 46-8.

'boundaries of political districts' which restrained them.¹⁵⁰

The second right reserved was the right of property. Man was entitled, Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out, to enjoy the acquisitions which his talents and industry had acquired and to bequeath them to whom he would choose.¹⁵¹ The author of *The Political Crisis* asserted that every one had an exclusive right to the property he procured by his own efforts: 'If a man fenced and tilled a piece of ground,' he illustrated, 'it became his by occupation or improvement, and no one could legally enter upon it till he had relinquished it.' Labour, in his view, had created the sole right to any thing held in common.¹⁵² The right of property, another critic echoed, had originated in 'occupancy':

When men were in a state of nature, the only objects of possession were the birds and beasts of the field, and they became the property of the first occupant. A man was supposed to create a title to a thing, by the trouble he took to procure it.

To explain the sacredness of property, this author invoked the old maxim that the people should never be taxed without their own consent. This principle, he stressed, had, in truth, formed one of the great bulwarks of liberty: 'take away that, and we lose every degree of security.' Its infringement could even justify rebellion.¹⁵³ David Williams was prepared to extend the right of property to include not merely the ownership of real estate, but the title of every person to the advantages of all his honest industry.¹⁵⁴ Some pamphleteers, meanwhile, drew attention to the question concerning the equity of distribution. John Thelwall proposed that production ought not to be taken as the sole object of human economic activities. It was more important that society should take care to ensure for all a '*General and impartial distribution*'. Without a just distribution, the increased production could but serve to aggravate the evils it was expected to remove. It would turn out to be a curse rather than a blessing: 'better is a little that is well distributed, than much that is

¹⁵⁰ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* pp. 129-30.

¹⁵¹ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 51.

¹⁵² *The Political Crisis* p. 8.

¹⁵³ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', pp. 43, 50-4.

¹⁵⁴ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 118.

monopolized and wasted.¹⁵⁵ The author of *The Political Crisis* concentrated his attack upon monopoly. The earth was common to all and all therefore had a common right to the products of it. The law of nature, he pointed out, would not suffer any one to heap up all the goods of providence: 'If he acquired more than he wanted, he had no right to withhold the overplus from the sufferer.' He was bound in reason to give it to those who stood in need of it.¹⁵⁶

The third unabridgeable right consisted in the liberty of expression. The freedom of thought, Robert Hall contended, was crucial to the happiness and dignity of man in every stage of his existence. He deemed it to be much more valuable to preserve this right than to protect other constitutions.¹⁵⁷ Nothing had ever been so favourable to liberty as the freedom of opinion, exclaimed another writer: 'That a citizen should be obliged to conceal his opinions, is one of the most disgraceful marks of slavery.'¹⁵⁸ The main function of civil authority, Robert Hall stressed, was not to direct the opinions of its people, but to protect their lives and property. When a people set up a civil government, what they invested in it was 'power' rather than 'wisdom'. For a government to assume the wisdom to tell truth from error and to countenance one set of opinions to the prejudice of another, it abused its power in a manner most mischievous and absurd.¹⁵⁹ In truth, Samuel Heywood claimed, the right of private judgment had not sprung out of, and was not in the least affected by, civil institutions. The governing power, therefore, could lay no claim to jurisdiction over the opinions of its subjects and must never intend to punish or restrain them in whatever manner, or on whatever pretence.¹⁶⁰

The claim to the freedom of opinion had a specific implication for those radical pamphleteers with a Dissenting background. To them, it was a struggle for liberty of conscience. The free use of human faculties to tell truth from falsehood, and hence the free choice of religion, Robert Hall declared, were the branches of natural freedom which no civil authority could with justice invade. Man must have a right to worship

¹⁵⁵ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, pp. 91-3.

¹⁵⁶ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁵⁷ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 17.

¹⁵⁸ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', pp. 55, 57.

¹⁵⁹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶⁰ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, p. 159.

God after whatever mode he should think appropriate; and he ought not in this matter to be forced to consult anything other than his own conscience.¹⁶¹ *The Political Crisis* stressed that the concerns which touched the human heart were not within the capacity of civil authority to mould. Religion belonged to the right of mind. It was the practice of man bringing 'to his Maker *the fruits of his heart* and it could hence subsist neither between man and man, nor between government and its subjects, but between 'GOD and MAN'. If any civil power attempted to interfere in the right of religion, it would constitute a most arbitrary and dangerous abuse of its authority. 'Experience teaches us,' he observed, 'that modes of worship and church-discipline established and enforced by law, are abhorrent to the feelings of men, and repugnant to the wise dictates of Heaven.' It denied the ability of the people to choose a religion for themselves.¹⁶²

The freedom of the person, the right of property and the liberty of expression had been generally reckoned among rights fundamental and sacred. There were still many writers who were prepared moreover to extend the inalienable rights to include political rights. It was contended that man, after becoming a member of civil society, ought to have the privilege to mould his own government: a right, one writer claimed, 'subserving to our happiness'.¹⁶³ Joseph Towers was anxious to assert it

an original right of men in civil society, to adopt those measures that are most conducive to the welfare of the whole, and of consequence to appoint such men to public offices, or to establish such a mode of government, as the majority shall judge best calculated to advance the general happiness.¹⁶⁴

In particular, Capel Lofft wrote, the people ought to be entitled to take part in the formation of the laws which were intended to govern their community.¹⁶⁵ Lofft's opinion was echoed by another author who also insisted that every one must have an equal share in making those laws by which his liberty was to be limited:

¹⁶¹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 48, 52.

¹⁶² *The Political Crisis* p. 14.

¹⁶³ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 26.

¹⁶⁴ Joseph Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* (London, 1790), p. 154.

¹⁶⁵ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p.37.

If he has had no share in making those laws, I do not see how those laws concern him; he lives it is true among others under laws which restrain natural liberty, but what is that law to him who has no share in the making it, and is therefore not bound to obey it.¹⁶⁶

The political rights, in sum, were essential to the liberty of mankind. If a man were deprived of these rights, Francis Stone concluded, he became to all intents and purposes 'a slave'. 'He is compelled to obey laws, made without his consent, given either personally, or by his representative: he, therefore, wears the distinguishing, humiliating badge of a bondman.'¹⁶⁷

This claim to political rights could be vindicated in terms of the principle of popular sovereignty. The people ought to have a share in the management of their government, one critic claimed, because it was from them that all powers had originated and by them that every state had been supported.¹⁶⁸ John Oswald tended to regard governors as public agents employed to manage the common stock of society. Since this stock was the collective wealth of all, every one therefore must reserve a voice in the appointment of their common agents.¹⁶⁹ To Francis Stone, the political rights had stemmed from the necessity of man to protect their basic rights of lives, liberties, and properties:

It is sufficient for my purpose to remark, that all men are interested in the enjoyment of these natural equal rights, and that from these rights are deducible their claim to the choice of that form of government which is best adopted to protect them, and to reform it when, through inadvertence, length of time, or the craft of designing men, or from any other cause, they find such errors or abuses crept into it as bear hard on these natural rights, and threaten the impairment or loss of them. Hence too arises the right of every man to a voice in the choice of those who are to be entrusted with the . . . important functions of government.

He continued to define the main political rights of the people to be including: the right to choose their legislators, the right to be elected a legislator, the right to annual election, and the right to remonstrate with or even cashier them. These, Stone

¹⁶⁶ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 83.

¹⁶⁷ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 44.

¹⁶⁸ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p.4.

¹⁶⁹ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 5.

stressed, ought to be insisted upon as '*among the direct original rights of man in civil society*'.¹⁷⁰

There was however considerable disagreement among Burke's critics over whether political rights ought to be made available, and equal, to all. William Belsham was not convinced that all men should have an equal and inherent right to share in the powers of government. The distribution of political rights, he claimed, was chiefly a question of utility. It must be calculated whether it would bring to society the greatest number of advantages and the greatest sum of happiness. He would think it not incompatible with the principle of equity to deprive, if it should prove necessary for general good, some citizens of their right to take part in public affairs:

The grand axiom of equitable government is this – that as all men are naturally equal, all civil or political inequality must rest upon the basis of public utility. If then any class of men be disqualified, in a moral view, by extreme ignorance, gross venality, abject dependence, or any other cause, from exercising the privilege of voting in the elections of those who are to guide and govern the great concerns of the community, they have no more right to complain of the injustice or hardship of not being permitted to nominate the rulers of the state, than of the injustice of not being allowed to rule the state in person.¹⁷¹

Vicesimus Knox had similarly refused to treat the claim to take part in politics as the '*first right of man*'. He argued that not in fact every man in a society was capable of making good political judgements. There were three different classes of men: namely, those who could judge for themselves, those who were able to find some others to judge for them and those who were capable of doing neither properly. For the good of the community, he suggested, only the first two classes could be properly conferred with political rights. The desideratum of civil society, of course, ought to be to impart rights and blessings to the greatest number of its members; however, he insisted,

if it should happen, that a large description of men should be found below that temperament, either of virtue or of knowledge, which is necessary to enable them to assist, either directly or indirectly, in judging of the general welfare, the happiness of the whole will require the exclusion of such portion from all interference in politics.

¹⁷⁰ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 37, 115.

¹⁷¹ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform' (1793), *Essays*, ii, 371-2.

Such an exclusion would be unavoidable though it was, as he admitted, 'much to be lamented'.¹⁷²

At the other end, many other writers harboured a deep sympathy for the political weakness of many members of society. A people, one writer claimed, could be said to enjoy their civil and political liberty only when they had personally, or by delegates, voted for their magistrates. He declared that political rights should be equal and universal. Men of opulence, high birth and good education, he remarked, were not naturally more capable of offering services to the public. Neither were they necessarily better calculated to regulate the great machine of government. Politics was no abstruse thing. Every one who could boast of having noble feelings of man and humanity and who possessed a dignified sense of virtue and public spirit, he was confident, ought to be qualified enough for 'every thing great and glorious'. It would be unjust, then, to attempt to cut off the people of lower rank from any participation in the civil and political order of the state.¹⁷³ The equality of political rights was likewise central to the arguments of John Oswald. Every member of the state, he contended, must be actually represented and ought to have an equal vote in the choice of his delegate. Indeed, the have-nots, no less than the haves, had had their own great stakes in the administration of their government: 'Is not the poor man,' he asked, 'whose very existence depends on the wisdom or folly of administration, at least as much interested in the right management of government, as he whose superfluities alone are endangered by its imprudence?' Oswald was prepared to speak for the 'political weakness of poverty', who, he stressed, would need much more to be protected from the outrageous insults and cruel oppression of the powerful and the rich. Thus, he claimed: 'If there be any class of men that might, with some degree of safety, be left without a voice in the government, it is the opulent; for in all governments not absolutely despotic, the opulent are sufficiently protected by their wealth.'¹⁷⁴

On the whole, what Burke's critics contended for was to reassert that men in civil society had by no means lost all his natural rights. There had remained in civil society, as one writer insisted, original rights which 'ought to be sacred, and are what

¹⁷² Vicesimus Knox, *The Essence of the Calm Observer*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁷³ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 22, 76-7.

¹⁷⁴ John Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, pp. 5, 8-9.

no power on earth can, consistent with the trust reposed in them, destroy'.¹⁷⁵ Man, in any case, could not be supposed to have set aside all the 'claims of nature' when he became a member of civil society.¹⁷⁶ James Mackintosh held the same opinion and exclaimed: 'Nothing. . . can be more fallacious, than to pretend that we are precluded in the social state from *any* appeal to natural rights.'¹⁷⁷ To William Belsham, above all, natural rights, though protected by civil society, had suffered nothing from such a protection. Their abstract clearness and perfection, he insisted, had never been in the least diminished by any means which had been adopted to secure their 'uninterrupted and peaceable exercise'.¹⁷⁸

From the view of moral philosophy, in addition, James Mackintosh came to justify the claim for the perfection of the inalienable rights of man. All political principles, he pointed out, had been no more than 'moral principles adapted to the civil union of men'. The rights of man, in his opinion, were the first principles of politics and could be considered as forming part of the 'GENERAL MAXIM of *social morals*'. General moral principles ought ever to be rendered inflexible: 'A general moral maxim is to be obeyed, even if the inutility is evident, because the precedent of deviating more than balances any utility that may exist in the particular deviation.' The natural rights of man, that is, ought always to be strictly insisted upon, against either the seduction of passion or the suggestion of interest. He insisted that no plea whatsoever of expediency could be pretended to justify any slight relaxation in their observance, which he was convinced would open the door for unending violation, thus leading to their total ruin:

The moment that the slenderest infraction of these rights is permitted for motives of *convenience*, the bulwark of all upright politics is lost. If a small convenience will justify a little infraction, a greater pretended convenience will expiate a bolder violation. The Rubicon is past. Tyrants never seek in vain for sophists. Pretences are multiplied without difficulty and without end.

To him, after all, nothing but an inflexible adherence to the natural rights could serve

¹⁷⁵ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 35.

¹⁷⁶ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* p. 54.

¹⁷⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 207.

¹⁷⁸ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays* ii, 316.

to 'preserve the purity, consistency, and stability of a free State'.¹⁷⁹

The natural rights of man, hitherto, have been given a comprehensive, and theoretical, vindication. But no matter how sound and cogent its arguments might be, at last, what measure could be taken if civil authority should venture to violate these sacred rights? To provide for such an occasion, most of the radical writers were determined to reserve, as a final resort, for the people the right of resistance – a right so mischievous in the eyes of Burke. Joseph Priestley frankly declared that it was a most sacred right for the people to resist oppressive government.¹⁸⁰ The right to revoke power when abused, another critic echoed, was natural, inherent, eternal and inalienable.¹⁸¹ What is more, William Belsham also asserted it to be an undeniable truth that the people were entitled 'to resist oppression, to dethrone and punish tyrants, and to provide, by the most effectual means in their power, for their own security and happiness'.¹⁸² Indeed, even Sir Brooke Boothby felt impelled to give his hearty assent to the proposition that

when government under any form or denomination offers oppression in the room of protection and injury instead of justice; a stone for bread and a serpent for fish; such government ought to be resisted with all the powers which God and nature have placed in our hands.

Oppression was a great and grievous disease, for which, he stressed, a revolution was the 'only true specific'.¹⁸³ On the whole, John Thelwall insisted that, if the rights of the people were invaded, the injured could rise to remonstrate and seek redress. When they were obstinately and systematically violated, he added, obedience would then become a question, not of morality, but of 'prudence' and the people could thereby assume a firm, inalienable right to renounce the broken compact and dissolve the system.¹⁸⁴

In speaking of its origin, the right of resistance was clearly derived from the

¹⁷⁹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 216–9.

¹⁸⁰ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 23.

¹⁸¹ 'A Short Essay on the Whigs and Tories', p. 42.

¹⁸² Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution' (1791), *Essays* ii, p. 251.

¹⁸³ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 12–3.

¹⁸⁴ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, p. 47.

principle of popular sovereignty. The people, it was claimed, had the right to recall power which had constantly resided in themselves and they could reassert it as often as they should consider the occasion proper.¹⁸⁵ Joseph Priestley pointed out that the magistrate was originally appointed by the people and that, as a consequence, he ought to be answerable to them for his conduct and removeable at their pleasure.¹⁸⁶ The sovereign authority of a nation, William Belsham explained, ever inhered in the people at large, who thus reserved at all times a right to provide for their own security and happiness. To William Belsham, all civil authorities were delegated from the people. When therefore the purpose of that delegation was missed, their commission should be terminable at the discretion of those who had originally entrusted it.¹⁸⁷ Thus, Benjamin Bousfield urged: 'It should be remembered that all power originates with the people, that it is delegated, but never alienated; that when power is abused, the people have a right to resume it.' This principle, he claimed, had formed the key-stone which bound and supported a free government.¹⁸⁸ In the end, George Rous asserted, the people ought to have the right, and had certainly possessed the power, to change their government, whenever in their judgment the aim of their association could be better attained. It hinged on them to determine under what circumstances their constitution had to be corrected, varied, or even totally changed.¹⁸⁹

To help elucidate this argument, the concept of 'trust' had been readily invoked. Capel Lofft was of the opinion that all the rights resigned to public authority were merely held in trust. They were, he emphasised, 'held by the Government, in trust for the Society and the individual, than directly by the Society at large'. If the terms of this trust should be neglected or transgressed, the people could redress it by means of collective interposition.¹⁹⁰ The author of *The Political Crisis* elaborated upon this point. He had, in the first place, made an effort to explain the nature of 'trust' by illustrating:

¹⁸⁵ 'A Short Essay on the Whigs and Tories', p. 41.

¹⁸⁶ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁷ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays* ii, 298-9.

¹⁸⁸ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁹ Rous, *Thoughts on Government*, pp. 30, 31-2.

¹⁹⁰ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 39.

If I resign part of my goods to a man *in trust* to keep them safely for me, or to trade upon them, I hold him accountable at any time I please; and if I begin to doubt his fidelity in *the trust* and find that he is converting *my* goods to *his* own use, and means to wrong me, I have an undoubted right by the laws to demand them back, and to inflict a punishment on him proportionable to his guilt.

There would be no difference in politics. Every civil authority was maintained in the form of a trust. Being the source of all political powers, the people had naturally retained a supreme authority to alter, or to remove, that government which should act in contradiction to the trust reposed in it. When once the end of government was manifestly opposed, he claimed, 'the trust must necessarily be forfeited, and the power devolve into the hands of those who gave it, who may place it anew where they shall think best for their safety and security'.¹⁹¹

The right of resistance was generally thought to be an effective measure to deter the abuse of power. Samuel Heywood was inclined to defend the principle of resistance as part of the right of self-defence. The right to resist tyranny, he contended, could never be surrendered to civil society because it was the only right which could form the ultimate security for all those which civil authority was intended to protect.¹⁹² A right without a remedy, William Belsham claimed, would be absurd: the extraordinary principle of resistance was what the people could rely on to secure themselves from the abuse of the superior power. It was, above all, a doctrine which proved consonant to the spirit of a free constitution and which ought never to be forgotten or lost sight of.¹⁹³ On the other hand, another writer pointed out, the main force of the principle of resistance consisted in the fact that it was a principle which could give efficacy to all the regulations imposed upon the ruling authority:

Nothing proves more clearly the right of ultimate resistance, than the consideration, that if that right did not exist, all the laws, which human ingenuity could contrive, to secure the state from the abuse of power in its governors, would be utterly ineffectual.

To be sure, he stressed: 'All the laws in the world to restrain governors are but sentinels to give the alarm; the right of resistance is the main body.' Without this last

¹⁹¹ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 13, 80.

¹⁹² [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, p. 158.

¹⁹³ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 265.

check, a ruler could be free by his single authority to subjugate his people into his own arbitrary will. Under such situation, he warned, all the laws would be reduced into nothing but waste papers and 'the most sacred charter no better than a piece of parchment with a lump of wax dangling from the end of it'.¹⁹⁴

But the justification of the right to resist could by no means be misunderstood to be to encourage rebellion. Resistance, one author claimed, was a right which the people should desire to know, but dread to exercise. He was convinced that, the better this right was made known, the less occasion would there be to use it.¹⁹⁵ Under normal circumstances, obedience to civil authority would be still honoured as a fundamental principle of political behaviour. William Belsham strongly denounced it to be senseless and monstrous for any one to urge that the people could subvert an established government from mere caprice. In principle, of course, a civil community would be entitled to act in the manner the most conducive to its own good, but, he argued, this right must at the same time involve in it an obligation not to violate the principles of equity, justice and civil subordination which were themselves essential to public happiness. Resistance, in other words, ought always to be regarded as a serious right which must ever be exercised in conformity to the dictate of reason. It could not all the more be directed to disturb the general principle of obedience:

Obedience to civil authority is, most undoubtedly, a duty of the highest magnitude and importance. Without any particular reference to excepted cases it may be justly affirmed, that not only the peace and happiness but the very existence of society depends upon it. For a community to resume the powers it had once delegated, from mere will and caprice, would argue a species of infatuation more deplorable than history exhibits an example of. And for any individual to presume to resist the lawful authority of the magistrate because *such is their pleasure*, would be treason and rebellion in their most odious and aggravated form.

The principle of obedience could never be deviated from without very cogent reasons. Indeed, Belsham stressed, nothing would be sufficient to justify resistance to supreme authority other than motives of the highest urgency and importance: motives 'so obvious as to approve themselves to the general understanding, and so

¹⁹⁴ *An Answer to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 7.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

comprehensive as to affect the foundations of the general happiness'.¹⁹⁶

For Burke's critics, certainly, the right of resistance was never meant to harass any good and lawful government. 'A chief magistrate, duly chosen, should be the parent of civil society, the guardian of our inherent liberty, and the preserver of our tranquillity,' claimed John Butler. He continued to urge that the people ought to respect and obey a government which executed its duties with justice and precaution.¹⁹⁷ Whenever a government was founded upon justice and equity, Benjamin Flower asserted, it should become the duty of every people to submit to its rule and those who refused to obey would be 'culpable in the sight both of God and man'.¹⁹⁸ Francis Stone meanwhile insisted that the people were obliged to abide by those laws which were not flagrantly repugnant to the invariable principle of the natural equal rights of men.¹⁹⁹ In truth, Robert Hall claimed, all the existing authorities of the state ought to be respected and obeyed as the interpreters of the public will. Till they were set aside by the unequivocal voice of the people, they should form the law to every member of the community. 'To resist them is rebellion; and for any particular set of men to attempt their subversion by force, is a heinous crime, as they represent and embody the collective majesty of the state.'²⁰⁰ To Samuel Heywood, the right of resistance, unlike other natural rights, had never been active; and it would always lie dormant until, through the misconduct of the governing power, the objects for which the individuals associated were lost.²⁰¹ In that case, Francis Stone asserted, the public had the duty, for common interest, to take efficacious measures to redress their own grievances, by either 'reforming their political constitution, or, if absolutely requisite, modelling it anew'.²⁰² This, in Hall's opinion, ought to be a right which could be neither alienated nor diminished and which had been exerted 'as often as a free government has been formed'.²⁰³

¹⁹⁶ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays* ii, 308-9, 342-3.

¹⁹⁷ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* p. 134.

¹⁹⁸ Flower, *The French Constitution* pp. 151-2.

¹⁹⁹ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections* p. 59.

²⁰⁰ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* p. 57.

²⁰¹ [Heywood], *High Church Politics* p. 159.

²⁰² Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 59.

²⁰³ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* p. 58.

It might be apprehended of course that the right of resistance, in the hands of the multitude, could be easily perverted into wanton use, thus threatening to destabilise every kind of civil authority, good or bad. There could be no doubt, William Cuninghame admitted, that the people had the right to change their government even if they were happy: 'What can hinder them, if unanimous?' Nevertheless, he argued, this seemed to be a mere possibility which could but exist hypothetically and which would never happen in reality.²⁰⁴ The majority of the people, Robert Woolsey claimed, were disposed to be governed more by their natural feelings than by their speculative notions.²⁰⁵ 'They are,' another writer resumed, 'ever roused into action, or lulled into peace, in proportion to the good or bad effects of the government under which they live.'²⁰⁶ In fact, William Cuninghame indicated, the multitude were by nature politically passive. They were normally submissive and would usually bear much oppression from their rulers.²⁰⁷ 'Men indeed are naturally inclined to submit patiently and *long* to oppressive governments; and nothing short of a *necessity*, real or imaginary, can impel them to resist,' concurred Samuel Heywood.²⁰⁸ For sure, another critic was convinced, the common people, from various reasons, were always averse to revolution and would never be provoked to resist simply on trivial occasions.²⁰⁹ After all, Woolsey stressed, a state of revolution would by no means become beneficial to the public:

when any government is once established, the misconduct of the governors must be very gross indeed, and speak home to the feelings of the majority of men, before such government can be subverted. Men do not quit a state of peace for that of war, till goaded to it by tyranny of their governors.²¹⁰

This seemed to have been well attested in history. Throughout its pages, as John Thelwall noticed, there had never been a great popular revolution which had not taken place till grinding and long-continued oppression had rendered it absolutely

²⁰⁴ Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings* p.43.

²⁰⁵ Woolsey, *Reflections upon Reflections*, p. 12.

²⁰⁶ *The Political Crisis* p. 119.

²⁰⁷ Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings* p. 44.

²⁰⁸ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, p. 164.

²⁰⁹ 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', p. 42.

²¹⁰ Woolsey, *Reflections upon Reflections*, p. 12.

necessary, till 'groaning Nature called for the dire relief'.²¹¹

²¹¹ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature, against the Usurpation of Establishments*, Part I (London, 1796), p. 83.

CHAPTER 6
THE CRITIQUE OF THE OLD ORDER

Having set up the doctrine of the rights of man as the ideological foundation of their political arguments, Burke's opponents went on to launch an extensive and vehement attack on the old order which Burke had made efforts to defend. In this debate, they struck at the aristocracy, they fell upon the church, and they went on to run down the old system of government. Ultimately, the arguments here called forth were to form a theoretical framework, in terms of which the Revolution in France was to be vindicated.

I

Aristocracy became the most conspicuous landmark of the ancien regime first to attract the attention of Burke's critics. It has to be noticed, at the outset, that on this subject, as on others, no unanimous opinions were put forth and that all those who disagreed with Burke were not necessarily inclined to oppose the aristocratic orders. Sir Brooke Boothby, for instance, never intended to suppress every kind of social distinction. Boothby, to be sure, was no defender of hereditary titles: that personal distinction should be rendered hereditary, he admitted, would be 'not only barren of any good, but very mischievously prolific in evil'. It could achieve for nothing but divide a nation into unnatural classes and would prove utterly 'unfavourable to liberty and all virtuous exertion'. The elimination of titles in France, indeed, was to win from him little pity: its occurrence, he was convinced, had 'its peculiar necessity in the peculiar constitution of the body of nobility in France'. In principle, however, Boothby was in no sense an egalitarian and he did not commit himself to the radical theory of the perfect natural equality of man. For all his dislike of hereditary titles, he posed no objection to personal distinctions, though he would have liked them to be reserved as the personal rewards of public service. He was in fact prepared to preserve a class such as the 'judicial or legislative peerage' of Britain, which was in his opinion an order instituted to honour the respectable public characters of society and representing, generally speaking, '*the better sort* of the nation.'¹

Some critics were more unequivocal in support of social distinctions. One

¹ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 36-8; *idem*, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and On Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, pp. 125, 138-40, 145-7, 159-60, 168, 178-84, 199-201, 264-5.

anonymous writer cautioned his audience not to take his criticism of Burke to mean that he would approve those levelling principles which had cost the nobility of France their titles. No one, he contended, could venture, under any pretence, to demolish the hereditary distinctions which the nobility had long enjoyed and which had probably existed ever since the first appearance of regular government.² Capel Lofft was displeased with the abolition of 'titles and armorial Bearings'. Titles and honours, he observed, always commanded domestic sentiments of affection and respect. They had been conferred to 'cherish the remembrance of public Virtue, distinguished in Council and in the Field'; and, at any rate, many of those

who possessed them, had not overlooked, in these artificial Titles to respect, higher objects of generous ambition; but had disinterestedly, and with zealous alacrity, cooperated in the cause of Freedom.³

The writer of *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* was concerned to preserve ranks. The public, he urged, ought never to be jealous of those titles which society had bestowed as rewards on their 'men of public merit': 'There can be,' he continued,

no rational objection to honourable distinctions, they are frequently conferred on individuals obscure in birth, but who distinguish themselves by various qualifications from the general mass of people; there are also many men of bravery, of splendid talents, and liberal fortune, who are willing to hazard their lives, and employ their abilities, to the advantage of their country, and to whom the honour of nobility is the only acceptable reward.

With this author, stars and ribbons were by no means such 'contemptible playthings' as Thomas Paine was pleased to ridicule them: 'they are portraits emblematical of learning, of diligence, and virtue; they are historical pictures that represent the achievements of military heroism, or the splendor of political talents; they are tokens of memorable service performed in the cabinet, or field.'⁴

Several radical writers, moreover, were even ready to acknowledge the positive value of an aristocracy. Samuel Parr disputed the claim of the National Assembly that

² *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 9.

³ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 64.

⁴ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, pp. 16-7, 39-40.

the existence of ranks was repugnant to social union. Whether hereditary or personal, he argued, social distinctions could be rendered instrumental to public good. Indeed, many feudal principles of virtuous actions could well be 'adapted to the exigences of a more enlightened and more civilized age'. Parr's evaluation of the bearings of aristocracy on European society was in fact remarkably Burkean:

The manners of Europe, which form so large a part of our social duty and social happiness, originated chiefly among the nobility of Europe. And even in the more improved and more equalized state of society, numerous gradations of rank are necessary to preserve those sentiments which soften the ruggedness of human character, and teach every man at once to respect the dignity of others, and to support his own.

In particular, he pointed out, the existence of the noble order could serve to spread refined culture among the lower orders of society:

Refinement generally descends from the higher to the lower ranks, and its progress seems to be facilitated by the authority of illustrious example, and by the necessity which custom imposes upon us to recognize that pre-eminence, which is fixed by a known rule, and distinguished by an appropriate name.⁵

The author of *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, likewise, praised the value of orders: 'Varieties of order in society,' he wrote, 'contribute to the elegance and beauty of the whole.' He admitted that this thought could hardly be reconciled to the suppression of titles. In any case, he believed, the abolition of nobility would certainly be regarded with utter disgust in Britain, where the peerage had formed not only an ornament of her society but an essential part of her excellent constitution.⁶

These opinions notwithstanding, the main force of Burke's critics were, without doubt, fundamentally anti-aristocratic. The nobility, James Mackintosh remarked, was a 'Gothic' ornament that had long deformed and encumbered the august fabric of European society.⁷ John Oswald derided the privileged orders as the disgraceful

⁵ Parr, 'Miscellaneous Remarks', *Works* iii, 251-2, 226n.

⁶ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, p. 48.

⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 79.

'Gothic badges of Barbarian insolence'.⁸ Many radical writers went on to vilify the noble as a kind of dreadful being. Mary Wollstonecraft, for instance, attacked the pernicious effect of hereditary distinctions: 'The man,' she claimed, 'has been changed into an artificial monster by the station in which he was born, and the consequent homage that benumbed his faculties like the torpedo's touch.'⁹ Another critic disparaged the nobility as 'State monster'.¹⁰ 'A Peer,' John Oswald echoed, 'is a sort of political monster, who is born a law-giver, sucks from his nurse's breast the wisdom of legislation, and comes into Parliament to represent – himself.'¹¹ It was so, Thomas Paine decried, 'whether we view it before or behind, or sideways, or any ways else, domestically or publicly'.¹² Francis Stone took issue with Burke, ready to confute his claims that aristocracy was '*a graceful ornament to the civil order*' and that it formed '*the Corinthian capital of polished society*': 'I regard it,' he asserted to the contrary,

rather as an excrescence, a fungus in the body politic, and more as a wart, which, on the application of a proper caustic, may be with safety corroded, than a wen, which the operation of the knife cannot extirpate, without hazarding an effusion of blood, which may terminate in a loss of life.¹³

To Thomas Cooper, every hereditary institution was 'absurd and useless, dangerous and unjust'. They had all been calculated to render the happiness and welfare of the many subservient to the pride and emolument of the few.¹⁴ In the end, Paine believed, the aristocratic system was so full of evil, and had become so inconsistent with justice, wisdom and nature, that everyone would call for its total abolition.¹⁵

Naturally, then, most of Burke's critics would fain see the noble ranks and titles suppressed. With jubilation, Thomas Paine hailed the eventual abolition of titles in France: 'This species of imaginary consequence,' he claimed, 'has visibly declined in

⁸ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 12.

⁹ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 12.

¹⁰ *The Political Crisis*, p. 61.

¹¹ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 9.

¹² Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 104-5.

¹³ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 171.

¹⁴ Thomas Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* (London, 1792), 2nd ed., pp. 16-7.

¹⁵ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 278-9.

every part of Europe, and it hastens to its exit as the world of reason continues to rise.' The elimination of titles in France, that is, was attributed to the awakening of the 'elevated mind' of the French people:

The world has seen this folly fall, and it has fallen by being laughed at, and the farce of titles will follow its fate. – The patriots of France have discovered in good time, that rank and dignity in society must take a new ground. The old one has fallen through. – It must now take the substantial ground of character, instead of the chimerical ground of titles; and they have brought their titles to the altar, and made of them a burnt-offering to Reason.¹⁶

Joel Barlow responded to the destruction of the French nobility with similar enthusiasm. In France, he exclaimed, the feudal system, with all its notorious idolatries, had fallen to the ground and the whole nation was united into one:

Honor is restored to the heart of man, instead of being suspended from his button-hole; and useful industry gives a title to respect. The men that were formerly dukes and marquisses are now exalted to farmers, manufacturers, and merchants; the rising generation among all classes of people are forming their maxims on a just estimate of things.

France had eventually extracted the 'poisoned dagger' that the barbarian conquest had long planted in the vitals of her society.¹⁷ Francis Stone was also deeply impressed that the French people, by a determined spirit of freedom, had shattered their feudal system:

They have destroyed all the remains of the power of the great Barons in the suppression of the order of nobility. In France no Seigneuries or usurped manorial rights, now exist. . . . There that tyrannous system is annihilated, which, like a blight, blasts the fair blossoms of the mild spirit of equal liberty.

In the French Revolution, he remarked, Europe had beheld a great nation happily emancipating from the aristocratic encroachments and its government brought back to its true basis, the 'sacred regard to the natural equal rights of men'.¹⁸ At last, George Rous concluded, the French people had, with justice, abolished an order which had

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

¹⁷ Joel Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I (London, 1792), pp. 46-7.

¹⁸ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 156.

ever been possessed of invidious claims. And this effort, he added, constituted an heroic act that bid 'a bold defiance to the prejudice of all Europe'.¹⁹

There were several reasons to explain the anti-aristocratic sentiment of Burke's opponents. The order of nobility was, first of all, often resented as an historical vestige of despicable feudalism. A titled nobility, James Mackintosh pointed out, was the 'most undisputed progeny of feudal barbarism'.²⁰ Thomas Paine drew attention to its barbarian foundation. The aristocracy, he wrote, had arisen out of a political order established by conquest; and it embodied the uncivilised principle of governments founded in conquest, and the base idea of enslavement.²¹ The author of *The Political Crisis* proceeded to condemn the iniquitous origin of nobility, whose foundations, he hinted, had been laid by the sword and servitude. To illustrate his point, the historical experience of Norman England was drawn upon:

When William of Normandy conquered England, he divided it into baronies, or rather into so many little kingdoms or petty republics, and bequeathed them to his officers and adherents, for their services in carrying on the work of devastation. Thus the original inhabitants, who were lords of the soil, became, by the fortune of an unjust war, the humble tenants of the stall, were plundered of their property, and, from wealth and affluence, were doomed to misery and want; from freedom, to the vilest servitude!

In his opinion, the original ancestors of the nobility were no better than a gang of robbers and their posterity held their titles only by the execrable right of conquest.²²

It was, from here, further noted that, historically, the aristocracy had been in the main a military establishment. 'It was,' as Thomas Paine observed, 'originally a military order, for the purpose of supporting military government.'²³ To Joel Barlow, the noblesse and the military system were in reality almost inseparable: 'They are mutually necessary to each other's existence, - concurrent and reciprocal causes and effects, generating and generated, perpetuating each other by interchangeable wants.'²⁴

¹⁹ Rous, *Thoughts on Government* pp. 61-2.

²⁰ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* p. 77.

²¹ Paine, *Rights of Man* pp. 104, 105.

²² *The Political Crisis*, pp. 59-60.

²³ Paine, *Rights of Man* p. 104.

²⁴ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders* Part I, pp. 78-9.

For this military affiliation, the nobility was ready to be associated with wars and atrocities. 'War, they created; by War they were created,' Thomas Cooper wrote.²⁵ Barlow held similar opinions. The noble order of Europe, he claimed, had always 'fed upon human gore': they originated in war, they lived by war, and without war they could not survive.²⁶ In Cooper's eyes, the history of mankind had been but a record of wars and bloodshed which the privileged orders occasioned, and in which 'the people have been the miserable Victims of ambition and persecution, and have been led without remorse, like beasts to the slaughter'. The nobility, in short, had been no better than a band of 'hereditary Scourges of the human race'.²⁷

The chief argument used against aristocracy, however, was ideological. In principle, one writer noted, the existence of hereditary distinctions was repugnant to the doctrine of the natural rights of man.²⁸ It stood, in particular, in direct opposition to the principle of natural equality, a principle which most of Burke's opponents cherished. In highly sarcastic terms, another critic denounced the aristocratic assumption that inherent distinctions existed among men:

Nothing in Nature has baffled our understandings more than the distinctions of *royal, noble, and mean* BLOOD! From whence did this variety proceed? Had we royal, noble, and Vulgar Adams, at the beginning of the world? . . . If there is a real physical difference between the blood of a *Duke* and a *Drayman*, a *Lord* and a *Labourer*, a *Prince* and a *Peasant*, why are our dispensatories and other medical books so silent on the subject? . . . But if there is no inherent difference, why should we be eternally humbugged with unmeaning sounds, and tantalized with Aristocratical nonsense!!!²⁹

Thomas Paine sought to vindicate '*the unity or equality of man*'. He resorted to the divine authority of the creation, contending that men, having equally derived their existence from God, were all of the same kind and bore no other distinction than that of the sexes:

Every history of the creation, and every traditionary account,

²⁵ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* p. 38.

²⁶ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders* Part I, p. 80.

²⁷ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* p. 39.

²⁸ *The Political Crisis*, p. 61.

²⁹ *A Rod for the Burkites* (Manchester, 1792), p. 14.

whether from the lettered or unlettered world, however they may vary in their opinion or belief of certain particulars, all agree in establishing one point, *the unity of man*, by which I mean, that men are all of *one degree*, and consequently that all men are born equal, and with equal natural right.

This was, he stressed, the oldest, and most indisputable doctrine on record.³⁰ Equality, Benjamin Flower contended, was a birth-right which no man could ever be deprived of. He argued in favour of the new French constitution, accepting its declaration that '*All men are born, and remain, free and equal in rights; social distinctions cannot be founded but in common utility*'.³¹ William Belsham, having recourse to John Locke, declared that the equality of men was a simple, just and noble principle and it lay at 'the very foundation of all just reasoning on the subject of government'.³² *The Political Crisis* also rejected the claim that asserted the natural superiority of some men over others. The inequality of men was more owing to their own misconduct than to any '*natural cause*': 'The Almighty *makes* men free and equal, though he may deal very *unequally* with them after they are made; yet, his dealing *unequally* with them, does not destroy their *natural* and inherent rights on earth.' Above all, he insisted, civil power ought never to create social distinctions on the groundless assumption of natural inequality.³³

The natural equality of man was here invoked chiefly to condemn aristocratic distinctions. There was, it seemed, no intention to disturb property. Robert Hall, for instance, stressed that he had insisted on the equality of man mainly as a principle 'opposed to feudal oppression and hereditary distinctions'. It was by no means his purpose to force it into a system of equalisation: the equality of rights, he allowed, could subsist with the unequal possession of things. And least of all did he propose to equalise property.³⁴ Francis Stone, however, was more concerned lest the unequal distribution of property should be turned to upset the dignity of human nature. Property, he argued, was not necessarily, or in its own nature, unequal; its unequal possession had been mainly due to 'accidental or contingent circumstance' and could not therefore be used to overthrow the natural equality of men. To create artificial

³⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 88-9.

³¹ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 113, 115.

³² Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays*, ii, 313.

³³ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 75-6.

³⁴ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 24, 64.

distinctions and give '*pre-eminence and preference to birth*, he warned, would promote 'that imaginary *jure-divino* right of aristocratic tyranny'.³⁵ James Mackintosh, on the other hand, frankly admitted that wealth would, in effect, always remain unequal. It would run against justice, then, to turn the wealthy into a separate class and to honour them with political distinctions, because that, he asserted, would only serve to fortify and widen the inevitable inequality of fortune. The laws, if unable to bring about equality, ought never to be applied to 'aggravate the inequality which they cannot cure'. In the end, he stressed that political authority, instead of creating inequality, ought 'to recognize all only in their capacity of citizens, and to offer no assistance to the natural preponderance of partial over general interest'.³⁶

The radical critics attacked the aristocracy on two fronts: its external signs, the titles of honour, and its internal principle, the law of primogeniture. Titles, John Oswald claimed, were apt to corrupt the mind of man and 'overset the frail bark of human understanding'.³⁷ It marked, Thomas Paine noted, a sort of foppery, serving to distort the character of man: 'It reduces man into the diminutive of man in things which are great, and the counterfeit of woman in things which are little.' Paine soon turned noble titles into ridicule, jeering at them as a kind of 'chimerical nondescript' that baffled even the power of fancy:

When we think or speak of a *Judge* or a *General*, we associate with it the ideas of office and character; we think of gravity in the one, and bravery in the other: but when we use a word *merely as a title*, no ideas associate with it. Through all the vocabulary of Adam, there is not such an animal as a Duke or a Count; neither can we connect any certain idea with the words. Whether they mean strength or weakness, wisdom or folly, a child or a man, or the rider or the horse, is all equivocal.³⁸

Nonsensical though it might be, titles were nevertheless believed to be valuable to the noble order, as a means of boosting the social status of its members. Thomas Cooper observed that, not being able to gain public esteem through their own merits, the privileged orders had, instead, keenly contrived to clothe themselves with the 'Titles of Honours' and 'distinction of Dress', in order to make use of the artificial glare of these

³⁵ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 94-6.

³⁶ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 67-70.

³⁷ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 11.

³⁸ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 102, 103.

contrivances to dazzle the multitude, thus beguiling them to gain their respect:

Careless of intrinsic Merit, they have been Monopolists of every nominal Virtue which Fiction and Flattery have combined to create: and in every age, and Country, they have sedulously appropriated to themselves, attributes of the most ridiculous extravagance, the most fulsome adulation, and (in fact) the keenest and most ironical Sarcasm. The Language of every nation has been tortured, to furnish Appellations of the most hyperbolical panegyric, to gratify their unbounded vanity, and glut their insatiable avarice of unmerited praise.³⁹

On the whole, as another writer remarked, the 'bombastical and superstitious' titles were but things that the noble order had invented to bewilder the mind of the lower classes of people.⁴⁰

Other writers drew attention to the wider social and political implications of noble titles. George Rous pointed out that the titles of honours were ostentatious names which could remind the noblemen of their lordly superiority. Their existence served to divide the nation into different orders and to promote in society every kind of invidious distinction.⁴¹ James Mackintosh made a similar point. The noble titles, he claimed, were the notorious badges of inequality that perpetually inspired sentiments adverse to the spirit of free government. They connoted social distinctions and thus served 'to unfit the Nobility for obedience, and the people for freedom; to keep alive the discontent of the one, and to perpetuate the servility of the other'. They tended, on the one hand, to deprive the aristocracy of the moderation that would link them to the citizen and, on the other hand, to rob the multitude of the spirit that would exalt them into free men. Titles, in sum, would cultivate a kind of 'slavish prejudice' which could impede a nation's search for liberty.⁴²

The major attack on aristocracy, however, was centred on its internal principle, the 'law of primogeniture', whose operation was thought vital to its existence. Burke's critics generally detested the aristocratic rule of succession that deprived all but the eldest male issue of their rights to inherit. Thomas Christie attacked the claim of primogeniture as a most shocking, unnatural and abominable feudal right. It unjustly

³⁹ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* p. 25.

⁴⁰ *A Rod for the Burkites*, p. 15.

⁴¹ Rous, *Thoughts on Government* pp. 15, 62.

⁴² Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* pp. 80-1.

'appropriated almost the whole of a man's fortune to his eldest son, and left the rest of his children nearly beggars'.⁴³ The law of primogeniture, John Thelwall declared, was hideous, barbarous and unnatural. It was a law

which, if contemplated with any reference to the principles and rights of nature, is a most iniquitous usurpation, . . . an act of aggravated robbery, perpetuated by the elder brother, upon all the branches of his defenceless family.

It invaded the equal rights of man, annulled the common claim of justice and became the great root of all evils.⁴⁴ In Thomas Cooper's opinion, the law of primogeniture execrably violated the plain dictate of justice, humanity and natural affection. It tore asunder the ties of domestic union, sacrificing the welfare of all but the first-born in order that the family pride of aristocracy could be supported in all the splendour of luxurious ostentation.⁴⁵ To Paine, at length, primogeniture had itself duly betrayed the unnatural and iniquitous nature of aristocracy. 'The nature and character of aristocracy shows itself to us in this law,' he claimed. 'It is a law against every law of nature, and Nature herself calls for its destruction. Establish family justice, and aristocracy falls.'⁴⁶

The radical pamphleteers were well aware that the law of primogeniture was of critical importance to the existence, and the continuation, of the aristocratic order. In origin, John Thelwall pointed out, the barbarous law of primogeniture had been instituted with a view to preserving intact the order of aristocracy so that the normal working of the feudal system could be secured. It had been set up to maintain the original chains of the feudal relationship in the hope

that the respective links might not be broken or weakened; that the vassal might never, by looking round upon his family, forget to look up to his chief; and, above all, that every proprietor (or usurper) might be able, according to the original rank and character of his fee, to attend, with an appropriate number of vassals, upon his chief, and support the expence and preparation of new conquests and incessant

⁴³ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 265.

⁴⁴ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, p. 73; *idem*, *Sober Reflections on the Seditious and Inflammatory Letter of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, to A Noble Lord* (London, 1796), pp. 17-8.

⁴⁵ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, p. 65.

⁴⁶ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 104.

wars.⁴⁷

To continue the perpetual succession of a noble family, Thomas Paine observed, the law of primogeniture had to be established and the younger branches of the same house needed to be lopped off. He believed that aristocracy was founded upon 'family tyranny and injustice'.⁴⁸ In fact, Thomas Cooper asserted, this baneful law of succession was entailed on the privileged orders as a means indispensable for their own survival. It was a measure contrived to counteract the natural tendency of these orders to self-destruction from the 'effects of Luxury, Extravagance, and dissipation'.⁴⁹

The effects which this rule of succession brought to society were manifold and reprehensible. To individuals, it had conferred great injustice. Because of this law, Thomas Paine pointed out, the younger children of a family were inequitably deprived of their fair shares of inheritance.⁵⁰ They were all cast out, Mary Wollstonecraft observed, so that 'they might not encroach on what was called, with shameful falsehood, the *family estate*'.⁵¹ The author of *The Political Crisis*, indeed, felt for the fate of these innocent outcasts who, he exclaimed, were cruelly 'turned loose upon the wide world without the means of support, while the elder brother enjoys the patrimony of his father'.⁵² To society as a whole, its repercussions were even more detrimental. First of all, this swarm of noble outcasts were economically burdensome to the entire community. The disowned children of the nobility, Thomas Paine noted, were always cast upon society, 'to be provided for by the public, but at a greater charge'. To support them, useless posts had been installed, redundant places had been created and unnecessary offices had been set up.⁵³ In truth, *The Political Crisis* complained, society had been forced to assume this unnecessary burden, without whose protection such unfortunate rejectees would be sure to expire for want.⁵⁴ Secondly, the children of noble families were usually sent, in the case of younger

⁴⁷ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature* Part II, p. 110.

⁴⁸ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 104, 105.

⁴⁹ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 278.

⁵¹ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 46.

⁵² *The Political Crisis*, pp. 60-1.

⁵³ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 104, 277.

⁵⁴ *The Political Crisis*, p. 61.

sons, into the church or the army and, in the case of daughters, to 'the gloomy prison of a convent'.⁵⁵ This would produce two adverse effects. On the one hand, the celibate nature of both the religious and military lives might discourage the growth of population. Meanwhile, the fact that most children of noble families preferred military careers also enabled the government of every country to maintain a large standing army which was ever dangerous to public liberty. Thus, Thomas Cooper exclaimed: 'No wonder, therefore, that the military establishment of every European State should be so large, when it serves such useful purposes to the privileged orders, in whose hands are the Governments of Europe.'⁵⁶ Thirdly, the law of primogeniture itself was apt to cultivate in the noble order a character not fit for a free government. Thomas Paine observed that noblemen always started their life by trampling upon their younger brothers, sisters and other relatives and they continued to be educated to do so.⁵⁷ Once children of the same family were taught to believe in the unconquerable distinctions of birth among themselves, Joel Barlow asserted, they would then become ready for an aristocratic society because their minds were already accustomed to all the feudal gradations and degradations that such a society required.⁵⁸

The majority of Burke's critics were, thus, inclined to have this detestable right abolished. Thomas Christie, for instance, approved the general spirit of the new French *Law of Succession* (1791) which granted all children the same title to inherit 'without any distinction of elder or younger, male or female'.⁵⁹ In point of justice, John Thelwall argued, the property of parents should descend to all those whom their passions had 'brought into an appropriated world'. The inheritance of property ought to be based on the principle of 'consanguinity' by which every child would be, all alike, eligible to be the heir.⁶⁰ Mary Wollstonecraft, too, declared her support for the principle of equal inheritance. She expected that the operation of this principle would promote the fluctuation of property and could thus help to shatter this 'everlasting rampart' of

⁵⁵ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, p. 25.

⁵⁶ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, pp. 34, 45-6; Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, p. 26.

⁵⁷ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 105.

⁵⁸ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, pp. 26-7.

⁵⁹ Christie, however, did not entirely support the principle of equal inheritance. He was still prepared to allow the eldest issue a larger share of inheritance, who, he stressed, always had to assume more responsibility of a family. Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 265-8.

⁶⁰ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, p. 111.

barbarous feudalism.⁶¹ To Thomas Paine, the abolition of primogeniture would be the most effective way to exterminate the 'monster Aristocracy, root and branch'.⁶² It was no less than, Thomas Cooper wrote, to lay the axe to the root of the aristocratic genealogy. It would strip the hereditary privileges of their principal coadjutor and would hasten the aristocratic order towards its utter disintegration.⁶³

To most of Burke's critics, in fine, the existence of aristocracy was altogether incompatible with the state of a free society. The feudal aristocracy, one author pointed out, would always be opposed to a liberal order:

It was founded on, and supported by, military principle; and, by consequence, well suited to the condition of those military ages, which were ferocious; and therefore ill adapted to promote, or to secure, the liberty of the present, or any other civilized times.

It was an intolerable source of oppression and only its abolition could help to secure the enjoyment of natural liberty.⁶⁴ From an historical view, James Mackintosh contended that the rise of titled nobility was only a recent phenomenon belonging specifically to modern Europe. Hence it could not be insisted upon as a universal experience of mankind; and even less could it be pretended that it was a thing 'necessary to the order and existence of society':

A titled Nobility, was equally unknown to the splendid Monarchies of Asia, and to the manly simplicity of the ancient Commonwealths. It arose from the peculiar circumstances of modern Europe, and yet its necessity is now erected on the basis of universal experience, as if these other renowned and polished States were effaced from the records of history, and banished from the society of nations.

The nobility, as a corporation, had always been inimical to the freedom of the community. It was therefore necessary for it to be abolished if a democratic order was to be created:

⁶¹ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 50.

⁶² Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 104.

⁶³ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, pp. 65-6.

⁶⁴ *Observations on the Reverent Doctor Hurd's . . . Two Dialogues, on the Constitution of the English Government* (London, 1790), pp. 3, 69.

To give stability to a popular Government, a democratic character must be formed, and democratic sentiments inspired. The sentiment of equality which titular distinctions have, perhaps, more than any other cause, extinguished in Europe, and without which democratic forms are impotent and short lived, was to be revived.⁶⁵

Above all, John Oswald argued, when a society became truly free, there would be no room for the privileged order to survive. 'In a free State, there can be but one class of men, which is that of the citizen; as there is but one will, which is that of the people.' It would be totally alien to the minds of a free people that there should be any absurd barrier between man and man. The fall of the nobility in France soon after the Revolution had well testified the untenableness of this order. And once the people in Britain were able to obtain a democratic order, he added, the aristocracy there 'must also bid adieu to their political existence'.⁶⁶

II

The second object that came under severe attack was the church. The established church, according to George Rous, had, alongside the nobility, constituted the other pillar of despotism.⁶⁷ In almost every country of modern Europe, Joel Barlow pointed out, the established church could be ranked as among the 'surest supporters of arbitrary power'. It had always acted as a sort of standing army, ever ready for both internal oppression and external violence. Indeed, its operations, combined with the privileges of the aristocracy, had 'founded and supported the despotisms of Europe in all their divisions, combinations and refinements'.⁶⁸ James Mackintosh linked the clergy and nobility together, and denounced both of them as the 'strongest fortresses and most faithful troops' of absolutism. He was convinced that the clergy could never be preserved with safety to public liberty: they had formed themselves into a great corporation and become virtually the most 'determined and implacable enemy of freedom'.⁶⁹

The opponents of Burke, it can be readily asserted, were mostly not in favour of

⁶⁵ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* pp. 78-80.

⁶⁶ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain* p. 12.

⁶⁷ Rous, *Thoughts on Government* p. 9.

⁶⁸ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders* Part I, pp. 23-4, 71.

⁶⁹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* pp. 98, 100-1, 102.

the established church, but their anti-clericalism, it has to be acknowledged, does not suggest that they were opposed to religion itself. Joseph Towers, for example, was ready to admit the importance of religion to public felicity: 'there can be no doubt,' he wrote, 'but that real religion. . . tends in a very high degree to advance the best interests of men even in the present world.'⁷⁰ Many critics, in fact, were cautious enough to make a distinction between religion and the civil establishment of it; and they could be as well-disposed to the former as they were critical of the latter. One author had asserted that there was perhaps nothing more necessary than religion in a state. Nevertheless, he stressed, to maintain a religion and to keep priests were things totally different.⁷¹ Joseph Priestley, in his reply to Burke, had once again accused the latter of having confounded religion with its civil establishments.⁷² In essence, religion was useful to all men of all ranks. It could furnish 'an additional motive to good behaviour in every situation'. However, he argued, this function of religion could well be carried out without the aid of any church establishment, which indeed tended rather to hinder its beneficial operation.⁷³ Even Thomas Paine had not been so imprudent as to denounce religion itself: 'All religions,' he admitted, 'are in their nature kind and benign, and united with principles of morality.' If religion had lost its native mildness and become morose and intolerant, its cause could be traced to its union with the state, that is, its becoming a church established by law. Thus, he claimed: 'Persecution is not an original feature in *any* religion; but it is always the strongly marked feature of all law-religions, or religions established by law. Take away the law-establishment, and every religion reassumes its original benignity.'⁷⁴

An established church, as Priestley defined it, was 'a church defended, and even regulated, by the state, which either wholly prescribes, tolerates, or barely connives at, other religions'.⁷⁵ It referred to, Joel Barlow asserted, a code of worship which was declared to be national or which enjoyed some preference in the eye of the law.⁷⁶ This idea of establishment, Samuel Heywood pointed out, implied that the right of private

⁷⁰ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* pp. 112-3.

⁷¹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke* pp. 66-7.

⁷² Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 52, 65, 94.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 93-4.

⁷⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 109.

⁷⁵ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 80.

⁷⁶ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, pp. 56-7.

judgment must be restrained and that civil government could exercise a jurisdiction over the conscience of men.⁷⁷ Thus understood, the institution of a national church became explicitly inconsistent with freedom of conscience, which most of Burke's opponents had defended as among the inalienable natural rights of man. 'Of the natural rights which God has given to man,' George Rous declared,

the most perfect is the freedom of his own mind. This he can not renounce, though he may disguise. He cannot abandon, though he may belie his conscience, and deceive mankind. Of all the employments in which the powers of the human mind can be engaged, the worship of the Divine Being is peculiarly that. . . which always *must belong exclusively to the individual*. As it regards another life, it can affect none but him. As it indirectly affects the affairs of this life, its operation depends solely on the sincerity with which it forms the heart and internal habits of the individual.⁷⁸

Robert Hall, meanwhile, stressed that religion was purely based on the belief of some 'invisible realities' and had for its object 'the good and evil of eternity'. Its power could operate upon nothing but the conscience of men.⁷⁹ On this matter, therefore, every one ought to be left to follow the dictate of his own reason. Thus, Sir Brooke Boothby asserted that no man, or body of men, could assume to govern the beliefs of others without impiously violating the authority of God:

Religion as a rule of faith by which we are to be saved or condemned in another life must be the exclusive private concern of the individual, in which every man has an indisputable right to follow the light of his own reason and to reject all authority founded on the reason of others. Law is a rule of action only and cannot be extended to the sentiments and feelings of men. Those who denounce to us eternal damnation as the consequence of error in faith, and then would force us to hazard our immortal souls upon their judgments who have no concern in the matter, contrary to our own reason who has so deep an interest in it, are the most execrable of all tyrants.⁸⁰

On the whole, Francis Stone insisted, every one ought to have the sacred right to freedom of conscience. Religion, being a purely private concern between man and his

⁷⁷ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 127-8.

⁷⁸ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 24.

⁷⁹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 73.

⁸⁰ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 47-8.

God, was something in which no other party could interfere.⁸¹

Moreover, many critics maintained that political authority was of a civil nature and that therefore it could have nothing to do with such matter as religion. Civil government, Thomas Christie claimed, had no right to meddle with the religious concerns of its subjects. It had been mainly instituted to take care of the civil interests of the community and it was its duty to grant 'equal encouragement and equal protection to every *good citizen*, whatever his mode of faith may be'.⁸² Joseph Priestley pointed out that civil authority was never omnipotent. There were always things which should remain out of its reach and which should therefore be left to the individual himself to handle. Based on this principle, he thus challenged:

Pray, then, what right. . . has any man to complain of me, if I *worship God* in what manner I please, or if I do not chuse to worship God at all? Does my conduct in this respect injure them? What, then, has the state. . . to do in this business, any more than with my food or my medicine?⁸³

Indeed, Benjamin Flower insisted, so long as man had not by any overt act infringed the legal rights of others, he ought to be entitled freely to express his own opinions and, without limitation, to follow that mode of worship he was inclined to.⁸⁴ Religion, Francis Stone added, could never be enforced; and God, all the more, required not a forced worship, but a 'voluntary homage of the heart'. Hence, Stone proposed:

The mind of men ought to be left at liberty to acknowledge and worship God or not; and if it determine in favour of such acknowledgement and worship, to worship him in private, or in public with his neighbours, and to join with them in supporting preachers by voluntary contribution or not, as his judgment shall decide to be most conducive to his own moral improvement or religious edification.⁸⁵

It would be a most partial, arbitrary and unreasonable assumption, another critic claimed, if the state should attempt to force man to embrace a religion and, in the

⁸¹ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 30.

⁸² Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 12-3.

⁸³ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 54-5.

⁸⁴ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 412.

⁸⁵ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 74-5.

case of a refusal, to deprive him of his civil rights.⁸⁶ In the last analysis, Christopher Wyvill concluded, a religion with divine authority would not depend upon the support of force, or fraud, or corruption. It would be improper to use force or corrupt influence to promote the acceptance of religious truth: 'the propagation of Religion by any means, but those of argument and rational conviction, is contrary to the whole tenor of the Gospel, and the practice of our Divine Master.'⁸⁷

The civil establishment of religion was, next, thought to be entirely inconsistent with the fundamental principles of Christianity itself. 'A hierarchy considered as a religious institution,' Sir Brooke Boothby remarked, 'is contrary to the plain precepts of Christ and to the whole tenor of the christian religion.'⁸⁸ An established church stood for the union of church and state; it embodied the alliance between the Christian religion and temporal authority. From a theological point of view, many critics claimed, this mixture of religion and politics clearly ran counter to the explicit teaching of Christ who had declared his kingdom to be not of a worldly nature. Joseph Priestley was one of those who questioned the theological basis of the established church. Neither Christ nor his apostles had ever given instructions calling for a connection between religion and the civil power. In fact, he claimed,

our Saviour declared that *his kingdom was not of this world*, which must mean that it did not resemble other kingdoms, in being supported by public taxes, and having its laws guarded by civil penalties.⁸⁹

Benjamin Flower followed a similar line of argument. According to the New Testament, he remarked, the Christian system, as taught by Christ, was purely spiritual. He pointed out that,

from first to last, it is not of a worldly nature, and that it was never designed to assist mankind in the attainment of those objects, which the majority, in all ages of the world, have been in the pursuit of; but that on the contrary, its grand design is to enlighten the understandings, and purify the passions of men; and turn their attention to those objects which are not of a temporary, but of an eternal duration.

⁸⁶ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke* p. 45.

⁸⁷ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England* pp. 25-7.

⁸⁸ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 50.

⁸⁹ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 67.

The Christian church, that is, had never been intended for temporal dominion; and the gospels ought not to be propagated through force. With this conviction, Flower set at defiance all the church establishments

which have been supported by human authority, guarded by penal sanctions, the members of which have claimed the highest offices and titles, have forcibly deprived mankind of their liberties and properties, and have held the sword in their hand, as the principal means of preserving their wealth, their pomp, their titles, their authority, their CHRISTIANITY.

The civil establishment of religion, he insisted, was not congenial to the 'plain and explicit language of sacred writ' and totally in contradiction to the 'nature and design of Christianity'.⁹⁰

Historical experiences had been employed to confute the claim that church establishments were essential to the growth and spread of Christianity. The Christian religion, Christopher Wyvill observed, had been gradually spread, for three centuries after the death of Christ, without the aid of an established clergy.⁹¹ 'Civil establishments of christianity were altogether unknown in the early ages,' Joseph Priestley agreed. At its primitive stage, the Christian church had been a purely voluntary association. It was then maintained by voluntary contributions and its social influence did not depend upon any civil connection: 'It was the *virtue*, it was the well known piety and extensive benevolence, of the primitive christians. . . that procured respect to themselves, and to their cause.'⁹² Sir Brooke Boothby held the same view: 'If the apostles were obeyed,' he remarked,

it was from reverence of their virtues and not from any obligation; they received the voluntary gifts of the brethren, but they laid no claim to a tenth share in every man's possessions or the produce of his industry. Excommunication was no more at first. . . than expulsion from a club or society; and bishops only men of the wiser and discreter sort, chosen by the brotherhood to preside over their ceremonies and to instruct the ignorant, to whom all submission was entirely voluntary.⁹³

⁹⁰ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 244-5, 248-9.

⁹¹ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, p. 30.

⁹² Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 53, 67-8.

⁹³ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 48-9.

To Robert Hall, the Christian church had been opposed to any alliance with temporal authority during its pristine period. It had not only received no aid from civil power, but had, on the contrary, suffered harsh oppression, which, nevertheless, had hardly prevented it from thriving.⁹⁴ Indeed, Priestley claimed, the primitive Christian church had been itself no other than 'a *sect* or a *heresy*. It was sometimes connived at, but never openly tolerated; and its followers were often frowned upon and violently persecuted. In defiance of such difficult circumstances, however, it had survived and had continued to flourish. It gradually expanded its influence 'till it triumphed over all opposition, and the Roman empire itself became christian'.⁹⁵ On the other hand, Benjamin Flower pointed out, whereas Christianity had previously prospered without the support of civil authority, it had gradually declined after it was established. Since then, he observed, the record of the established church had, for the most part, contained

the ambition, the cruelty, the folly, the villany of men assuming the character of Christian ministers, stiling themselves servants of the church. These servants of the church have robbed sovereigns of their crowns and scepters, kingdoms of their properties and liberties, and devastation and blood have marked their footsteps.⁹⁶

As Robert Hall summed up, the civil establishment of Christianity since the reign of Emperor Constantine seemed to diminish its purity rather than increase its splendour.⁹⁷

Other facts were also added to stress the irrelevance of church establishments to the dissemination of the gospels. One well-known example was the rise of Islam. The Mahometan religion, one critic claimed, had extended much farther, and had converted a great many more devotees, than Christianity had achieved. This great achievement, moreover, had been brought about 'without the aid of a single priest'. Indeed, despite being without a splendid church establishment, the muslims had generally displayed a more fervent zeal for their faith, persevering with more active vigour in their devotion.⁹⁸ The experience of America provided a more manifest example. The United

⁹⁴ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 73.

⁹⁵ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 80.

⁹⁶ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 250-1.

⁹⁷ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 73.

⁹⁸ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 67, 137.

States, Joseph Priestley noted, had kept no established church, but her people, far from becoming atheists or unbelievers, had, instead, nursed a stronger sense of religion than other nations.⁹⁹ In effect, one writer contended, the clergy had become respectable in America because of their independence. Their exclusion from politics had rendered them more attentive to their principal duty, as ministers, 'of reforming the manners of the people, thereby making them good subjects'.¹⁰⁰ It was this lack of an established church, Joel Barlow stressed, that had secured to Americans the unembarrassed exercise of religion and the continued public instruction in 'the science of liberty and happiness'.¹⁰¹ The religious dedication of the Dissenters in England could all the more prove that religion could well be promoted without being established. Christopher Wyvill called attention to the success which attended the labours of the Dissenting Ministers who, he noted, had 'devoted themselves to the service of Religion, without a prospect of legal provision'.¹⁰² It was noticed, after all, that, notwithstanding the lack of priests, the devotion, the piety, and the purity of manners among the Dissenters had remained as good as those of any other sect.¹⁰³ With regard to the general situation of the church, Robert Hall made an illuminating comparison:

In France, where the establishment had attained the utmost splendour, piety had utterly decayed; in England, where the hierarchy is less splendid, more remains of the latter; and in Scotland, whose national church is one of the poorest in the world, a greater sense of religion appears among the inhabitants, than in either of the former.

So far as England herself was concerned, the spirit of religion seemed to have flourished 'much more among dissenters, than among the members of any establishment whatever'.¹⁰⁴

The union of church and state, at length, would prove totally destructive to both religious concerns and political interests. To the cause of the church, it would be

⁹⁹ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. v.

¹⁰⁰ *Letters on the Present State of England and America* (London, 1794), pp. 31-2.

¹⁰¹ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, pp. 69-70.

¹⁰² Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, p. 30.

¹⁰³ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 67, 137.

¹⁰⁴ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 75.

detrimental. On the one hand, the civil establishment of faith could hardly ensure that those doctrines sanctioned would be the true ones. The magistrate, Robert Hall noted, was no better a judge of religious opinions than anyone else. Should, therefore, he assume to establish some article of faith, the risk would be great that a false system might be wrongly defended. If this should be the case, he warned, error would be perpetuated; and

that set of opinions which happens to prevail when the establishment is formed, continues in spite of superior light and improvement, to be handed down without alteration from age to age. Hence the disagreement between the public creed of the church and the private sentiments of its ministers.

Its outcome would be the 'rapid spread of infidelity'.¹⁰⁵ On the other hand, a church, when established, was apt to be susceptible to abuse and dilapidation. In the beginning, Christopher Wyvill observed, an established church might have been wisely planned and its functions faithfully carried out. After the primitive zeal passed away, however, its professional duty would become an irksome routine. It was bound to be 'gradually relaxed, neglected, and at length wholly abandoned', though

the emolument originally annexed to the actual discharge of duty, will frequently be retained, and even increased to the highest amount, when little or no professional duty has been performed.¹⁰⁶

In truth, another critic pointed out, the priests of the established church had often neglected their religious duties, leaving the people generally 'in a torpor of supineness and indifference'.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, the splendid establishments of the church were themselves able, Joseph Priestley noticed, to corrupt the minds of the clergy, to whom people would look for an example of religious piety.¹⁰⁸ When priests were excessively exposed to secular attractions, they would be more occupied with temporal concerns than with spiritual pursuits. There was great danger that they would be utterly infected by all 'the contagious distempers of ambitions, corruption,

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-5.

¹⁰⁶ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁷ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 138.

¹⁰⁸ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 96.

flattery, intrigue and dissimulation'.¹⁰⁹ On the whole, Robert Hall remarked, in the established church the truth of religion was often lost amidst the splendour, opulence and power of the church.¹¹⁰ Hence, another writer echoed, one could find in it little essence of religion, but, instead, 'occasional form, ceremony, show and parade'. It was not so much the religious truth as the civil interest which had mainly formed most of the established church.¹¹¹ In fine, Joseph Priestley concluded, splendid establishments, far from procuring respect for religion, tended rather to render it contemptible.¹¹² 'It will always ultimately debase the clerical character, and perpetuate both in discipline and doctrine, every error and abuse,' Robert Hall added.¹¹³

The established church also proved no less mischievous to public felicity. Sir Brooke Boothby pointed out that the confederation between civil power and ecclesiastical authority created a complicated regime of tyranny, fatal to both the bodies and souls of men. It brought about a system of despotism, under which 'the mind is first to be enslaved and then the body delivered over to the secular arm with its active principle, the spring of all its virtues and faculties, bound up in chains'.¹¹⁴ Robert Hall claimed that a church, once united with the state, would become an execrable coadjutor of despotism and yield to it a 'powerful support':

To select. . .and endow a *particular order* of clergy to teach the duties of submission is. . . a means. . . well fitted to produce a slavish subjection. Ministers of that description, considering themselves as allies of the state. . . will be disposed, on all occasions, to strike in with the current of the court; nor are they likely to confine the obligation to obedience within any just and reasonable bounds. They will insensibly become an army of spiritual janizaries. Depending, as they everywhere must, upon the sovereign, his prerogative can never be exalted too high for their emolument, nor can any better instruments be contrived for the accomplishment of arbitrary power.

It became the mission of the church to exact from the people a spiritual submission, thus preparing them 'for a servile acquiescence in the encroachments of civil

¹⁰⁹ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, p. 32.

¹¹⁰ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 76.

¹¹¹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon Mr. Burke*, p. 138.

¹¹² Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 96.

¹¹³ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 75.

¹¹⁴ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 49.

authority'.¹¹⁵ But an established church might not even always be favourable to the civil authority itself. One critic warned that a church exclusively supported by, and possessed of, any political power would form an unpleasant burden on the state. History witnessed that the state

has long borne the church, like a sickly brother, on its back; has humoured its peevishness, and indulged its intolerant whims. . . with no return but ingratitude; it has been distracted by plots and cabals, from the very object of its indulgence and protection.¹¹⁶

When the church was suffered to take part in politics, Joseph Priestley was persuaded, it developed a sort of 'totally *new power*', which could in due course grow so strong as able to stand on a par with the state. Since these two powers could not be easily balanced, their mutual struggle must then become incessant. In effect, Joseph Priestley noted, this kind of conflict had produced 'the worst effects, for many centuries, in all parts of Christendom'.¹¹⁷

The most catastrophic consequences of the union of church and state were perhaps the religious persecutions and wars which had previously afflicted European society. According to Robert Hall, the interference of civil power in religion had provoked and inflamed violent sectarian conflicts which had almost shaken Europe 'to its base'. It was because of this alliance that the history of the church was filled with a chaos of crimes and the progress of religion was to be traced in blood.¹¹⁸ Joseph Priestley also blamed the government's meddling with religion for all the evils of persecution that had happened in the past and for all the hatred and animosity that had arisen among the different sects of Christians.¹¹⁹ In Joel Barlow's eyes, the church had always appeared 'like a giant, stalking over society, and wielding the sword of slaughter'. It had been turned into an engine which, under the assumption of Christianity, had committed 'greater ravages than any other of its dreadful denomination':

¹¹⁵ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 77-8.

¹¹⁶ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 21.

¹¹⁷ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 138.

¹¹⁸ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 76-7.

¹¹⁹ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 138.

This fatal deviation from the principles of the first founder of the faith, who declared that his *kingdom was not of this world*, has deluged Europe in blood for a long succession of ages, and carried occasional ravages into all the other quarters of the globe. The pretence of extirpating the idolatries of ancient establishments and the innumerable heresies of the new, has been the never-failing argument of princes as well as pontiffs, from the wars of Constantine, down to the pitiful, still born rebellion of Calonne and the Count d'Artois.

The church, in short, was often made a terrible instrument of destruction and devastation: 'Could we form an estimate of the lives lost in the wars and persecutions of the Christian Church alone,' Barlow remarked, 'it must be nearly equal to the number of souls now existing in Europe.'¹²⁰ Thomas Paine, in addition, drew attention to the economic consequence of intolerance. The persecution of nonconformity had deprived many countries of their best entrepreneurs and thus depressed their industries: 'The union of church and state has impoverished Spain. The revoking the edict of Nantes drove the silk manufacture from France into England; and church and state are now driving the cotton manufacture from England into America.' It brought about great ill effects upon the prosperity of many nations.¹²¹

Viewed from every angle, the alliance between church and state was utterly baneful. The following comment thrown out by Robert Hall could perhaps represent the general opinion of Burke's opponents concerning the established church:

Turn a christian society into an established church, and it is no longer a voluntary assembly for the worship of god; it is a powerful corporation, full of such sentiments, and passions, as usually distinguish those bodies; a dread of innovation, an attachment to abuses, a propensity to tyranny and oppression.¹²²

What, then, ought to be the proper relation between church and state? In principle, most critics would have liked them to be separate. Benjamin Bousfield proposed that religion and politics were matters which should be kept 'as much apart as possible'. The great object of religion had originally consisted of the 'worship of the deity, and the hope of salvation'. Political involvement, he believed, had only served to debase

¹²⁰ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, pp. 49-50, 51, 53-4, 57.

¹²¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 110.

¹²² Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 75-6.

the spirit of Christianity and pervert the true principle of religion.¹²³ Joseph Priestley insisted that the Christian church had to be disengaged from any connection with civil power. Only when this was completed, could the church be 'restored to its pristine state, and recover its real dignity and efficiency'.¹²⁴ Christianity, Joseph Towers stressed, would be more cheerfully received and more cordially embraced if it could be exhibited 'unadulterated and uncorrupted, with its native excellence, in the original beauty and simplicity with which it was delivered by its divine author'.¹²⁵ To *The Political Crisis* above all, once their union was dissolved, church and state could each be left to 'progress forward in its proper sphere'. Hence, 'Religion would be the more carefully attended to, and the civil politics of the State appear with a brighter aspect.'¹²⁶

With regard to religious policy, Burke's critics were generally disposed to support the universal toleration, and impartial protection, of different religious opinions. George Rous, for instance, had argued in favour of toleration. The sentiments of men would always remain divergent on the 'metaphysical subtlety' of faith. On this concern, therefore, everyone ought to show mutual forbearance, allowing other people 'to render his service most acceptable to the Deity'. Intolerance, he warned, could but serve to engulf the community in convulsion and bloodshed.¹²⁷ The author of *Political Correspondence* tried to provide toleration with a rational foundation. He declared that the truth of faith was not 'as demonstrable as a problem of Euclid' and that hence religious opinions could never be expected to be uniform. Everyone hence ought to be free to adopt such a system of religion as best satisfied his own conscience; and no man had the right to impeach others for having imbibed different opinions.¹²⁸ Another critic condemned the attempt of any state to regulate the religions of its people. Magistrates, he claimed, were 'as blind as the rest' and could be no more competent to decide upon questions of religion. It would be better if everyone was left to choose his own religion:

¹²³ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 33.

¹²⁴ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 83.

¹²⁵ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 112.

¹²⁶ *The Political Crisis* p. 71.

¹²⁷ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 25.

¹²⁸ *Political Correspondence* p. 80.

No human authority can have a right to bend my conscience to his religion, because it cannot determine which system of religion is the purest; therefore, . . . let every man go as his conscience directs; not for the sake of opposition, but for the conscience sake.

If any one was dissatisfied with the doctrines delivered in one place, he could resort to another more agreeable to his own persuasion. In sum, he stressed, civil power must be always dictated by the spirit of toleration. It ought equally and impartially to protect all sects, punishing 'only such as are refractory and destroy the public peace'.¹²⁹

There were, however, different opinions about how far toleration should extend. It is interesting to note, first of all, that the radical author of *The Political Crisis*, though advocating the right of everyone to choose his own mode of worship, was not prepared to tolerate the unbelievers: 'I have no doubt,' he declared,

that government has a right to make laws sufficient to oblige the people to provide themselves with ministers of religion, and in case of a non-compliance, to impose a suitable penalty: for it is evident, that society is greatly promoted by the preaching of the gospel, its bonds are strengthened by it, and morality encouraged.

Such compulsion, he insisted, was necessary and justifiable. It would constitute no infringement on the natural rights of man.¹³⁰ Some critics, on the other hand, were disposed to defend a full and complete toleration. Samuel Heywood, appealing to the ideas of Locke, set out to take toleration to mean an unrestrained enjoyment of religious liberty.¹³¹ The author of *Political Correspondence* going further, proposed that toleration should not only apply to every sect of Christian, but ought to 'extend to infidels, and even to Atheists'. He was to apprehend nothing from the philosophical infidelity of speculative atheists:

Speculative Atheists have been studious, retired, and inoffensive men, whose minds, elevated above the rank of common intellect, have pursued enquiries into subjects too grand for the limited sphere of human faculties to embrace, and, involved in metaphysical intricacies which mortals cannot solve, have ended in a disbelief of the existence

¹²⁹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 44-5, 47, 111-2.

¹³⁰ *The Political Crisis*, p. 70.

¹³¹ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 124-6.

of God, the original cause of all things. Puzzled by the extreme difficulty of conceiving how any Cause can possibly have been self-existent, and yet forced to admit the necessity of some such principle, or to re-trace causes to *their* causes without end, they have adopted Nature as their self-existent subject, and imagined their hypothesis to profess most truth, because possessing most simplicity.

This kind of speculation might preclude the atheists from the mental pleasure of religious contemplation, but it was by no means incompatible with 'pure intentions, and a strict discharge of the duties of life'.¹³² Thomas Paine and Francis Stone both took a step even further. Paine was resolved to defend the universal right of conscience. He was not even amused with the very idea of toleration, which, in his opinion, was but despotism in disguise: 'Toleration is not the *opposite* of Intolerance, but is the *counterfeit* of it.' It audaciously usurped to itself the power to grant a liberty which was the natural right of man. Thus, he satirised:

Man worships not himself, but his Maker; and the liberty of conscience which he claims, is not for the service of himself, but of his God. . . Toleration, therefore, places itself, not between man and man, nor between church and church, nor between one domination of religion and another, but between God and Man; between the being who worships, and the BEING who is worshipped; and by the same act of assumed authority by which it tolerates man to pay his worship, it presumptuously and blasphemously sets itself up to tolerate the Almighty to receive it.¹³³

With Francis Stone, the right of conscience was man's inalienably just claim. Its exercise must be unconditional: 'I detest the idea of man's presumption,' he wrote, 'in only tolerating that which God freely grants, namely, that every man should worship him according to his knowledge and dictates of his conscience.'¹³⁴

Amidst this universal call for the liberty of conscience, however, not all of Burke's opponents desired the immediate abolition of the established church. Notwithstanding his wide disagreement with Burke, the author of *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections* accepted Burke's opinion that it was necessary to keep a church establishment and maintain it in dignity and independence. 'Such an establishment,' he claimed, 'is the pride of this country, where the clergy enjoy their

¹³² *Political Correspondence*, pp. 81-2.

¹³³ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 107-8.

¹³⁴ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 77.

just importance in the State, and are secured in a revenue which gives comfort and consequence to the order.¹³⁵ Christopher Wyvill, likewise, contended that it would still be important to preserve some church establishments 'in the present very imperfect state of knowledge and virtue in the World'. He acclaimed, in particular, the good example of the English parochial clergy, who, he noted, were mostly learned and useful men, 'exemplary in the performance of their duty, and successful in promoting good morals and a serious sense of Religion'. It was mainly their efforts which contributed to promote good order, decency and civility even in the most remote parts of the country.¹³⁶ To these critics, in fact, there was no fault to find with the established church so long as it was maintained in line with justice. George Rous, 'a churchman and friend to establishment', believed that church establishment was useful, and justifiable upon the broad basis of public utility. But he would not suffer it to combine its safety with injustice to others.¹³⁷ Samuel Heywood professed himself to be harbouring no particular hatred of the established church:

I am not yet an enemy to church establishments in general, especially in countries where they have long prevailed. I am not inclined to object to state's giving a preference to that religion which is approved of by the majority of the people; nor have I discovered that there is any thing sinful in an episcopal form of church government.

He made it clear, however, that an established church, whatever its form, ought to be 'accompanied with the enjoyment of religious liberty, in the fullest extent, by those who dissent from it'.¹³⁸ Benjamin Flower meanwhile opposed any violent approach to the issue of the established church. Under the present situation of men, he argued, any attempt by force to overthrow the church would be imprudent:

The major part of mankind are yet in ignorance. . . Men have every where been taught by priests, that some NATIONAL religion is essential; it is to the religion already established, that the majority in almost every country are attached.

The chief duty of reformers, for the moment, was to enlighten the people, encouraging

¹³⁵ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, pp. 36-7. His opinion of the Gallican church, however, was not favourable.

¹³⁶ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 31-2.

¹³⁷ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 29-30.

¹³⁸ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 8-9.

them to investigate. Until the people became enlightened enough, any attempt to change the established church would be reckless: 'Reformation should only be carried on, as the majority of the people will bear it.' To avoid violence, moreover, all reforms ought to proceed through a legislature 'fairly elected by the people'. Flower contended that the legislature was the only body that had the power to 'reform, model, or new model the National church'. After all, he did not rule out the possibility of a state church: 'If the people choose to have an established church, nobody can dispute their right to one.'¹³⁹

III

Finally, it is necessary to examine the opinions of the radical writers on the political systems of Europe. Most of Burke's critics, as might be expected, were dissatisfied with the ancient governments which had hitherto existed in European nations. David Williams, for one, complained that, for all the boasted learning and improvement of mankind, there had never been any society which had been so constituted that the security and happiness of the whole community could be properly promoted.¹⁴⁰ Thomas Paine's assessment was just as damaging as it was contemptuous. What the present governments of Europe presented, he declared, was but a scene of iniquity and oppression. Even the much acclaimed British system of government did not escape his stricture. 'What is that of England?' he asked: 'Do not its own inhabitants say, It is a market where every man has his price, and where corruption is common traffic, at the expense of a deluded people?' He was convinced that, with perhaps the exception only of new France, European governments were all founded upon a defective system, which rendered them generally inclined to create wretchedness rather than happiness:

If, from the more wretched parts of the old world, we look at those which are in an advanced stage of improvement, we still find the greedy hand of government thrusting itself into every corner and crevice of industry, and grasping the spoil of the multitude. . . It watches prosperity as its prey, and permits none to escape without a tribute.

With obvious exaggeration, he asserted that the people under the ancien regime were usually sunk into a state of 'poverty and wretchedness, far below the condition of an

¹³⁹ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 253-4, 256-7.

¹⁴⁰ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 39.

Indian'.¹⁴¹

From a political angle, many radical writers came to denigrate the old order as but a deplorable world of despotism. Ever since the middle ages down to modern times, one critic claimed, the governments of Europe were, generally speaking, absolute and, as a result, prejudicial to liberty.¹⁴² In the same vein, Benjamin Flower charged that the majority of the old governments in the world were little more than systems of despotism. It turned out to be a group of 'shocking usurpations on every thing that ought to be dear to men'.¹⁴³ To David Williams, all the present regimes were merely the different variations of absolutism, ranging largely between 'moderate oppression' and 'cruel tyranny'.¹⁴⁴ John Thelwall, above all, asserted that the old systems were generally corrupt and oppressive. There existed in them much that was 'injurious to the comfort and morals of mankind, repugnant to his nature, and hostile to his very existence'.¹⁴⁵

The most notorious aspect of the old order was that under it the natural rights of man had suffered extensive abuses. Mary Wollstonecraft was infuriated at the appalling state in which the rights of man were placed under the ancien regime. Most of the existing governments, she wrote, were apt to encroach upon the sacred rights of man and to fence around unjust laws 'with awful pomp'. She remarked that liberty in its simple and unsophisticated sense seemed to remain a fair idea which had 'never yet received a form in the various governments that have ever been established on our beauteous globe'.¹⁴⁶ For John Oswald, no old regime had ever shown the least concern about the rights of man:

To a certain artificial system of morals they pay a profound respect; but the real and indefeasible rights of humanity they are ever ready to sacrifice to every sordid interest, or ridiculous caprice. The regulations of the banditti must implicitly be obeyed; but the eternal bonds of nature, the tender sympathies of the heart, may be cut

¹⁴¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 136, 182, 232-3.

¹⁴² 'A Short Essay on Whigs and Tories', *Essays on Political Subjects*, p. 46.

¹⁴³ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 152.

¹⁴⁴ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 40.

¹⁴⁵ Thelwall, *The Rights of Nature*, Part II, p. 33.

¹⁴⁶ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 8.

asunder with impunity.¹⁴⁷

'[W]e cannot point out the country where equal rights are possessed by the inhabitants,' Benjamin Flower echoed. Of all the governments on earth, none had been framed in accordance with the principle of natural rights. It would be futile if any one should intend to track down these rights by referring to the old regimes where they had been 'generally lost or obscured'.¹⁴⁸ In truth, it was added, there appeared to be, at this moment, scarcely any nation which deserved to be consistently proclaimed free because none of them had yet been found erected upon 'the inherent and indefeasible rights of man, resulting from his nature'.¹⁴⁹

The ancien regime was also thought to be bent upon overlooking the general interests of the people. The old form of government, according to Thomas Cooper, was mostly no other than an oligarchy of 'the Few governing the Many, with permanent Authority held in life-tenancy or inheritance'. It was ever ready to sacrifice the welfare of the nation to the partial interest of a ruling caste, which had generally flourished at the expence of the people who had been universally regarded 'merely as the Footstools of their pride, and the means of their gratification'.¹⁵⁰ Joseph Priestley made a similar point. Hitherto, he observed, the old order had been little else than 'a combination of *the few*, against *the many*; and

to the mean passions and low cunning of these few, have the great interests of mankind been too long sacrificed. Whole nations have been deluged with blood, and every source of future prosperity has been drained, to gratify the caprices of some of the most despicable, or the most execrable, of human species.

All those in power, he stressed, had been either weak or wicked; hence what they had brought upon mankind was but vices and miseries.¹⁵¹ To Samuel Waddington, indeed, the existing regimes throughout Europe were mainly fed upon the depravity of the people. They proved to be systems absolutely incompatible with the improvement of

¹⁴⁷ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁸ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 111, 243.

¹⁴⁹ *Observations on the Rev. Doctor Hurd's. . . Two Dialogues*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, p. 27.

¹⁵¹ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 144.

mankind.¹⁵²

For many critics, moreover, the ancien regime implied war and violence. The old order of Europe, John Oswald pointed out, was founded upon a 'system of violence'. It was permeated with a 'proud spirit of domination' and its operation became perversely inconsistent with the principle of society and utterly repugnant to the sentiments of universal brotherhood.¹⁵³ Thomas Paine was convinced that the ancient governments had never allowed the principles of civilisation to have a universal operation. The old order had, as a result, generally sunk into a 'perpetual system of war and expense, that drains the country, and defeats the general felicity of which civilization is capable'. In Paine's view, violence had already been established into a common trade in the old regimes: 'The vice is not peculiar to one more than to another, but is the common principle of all.'¹⁵⁴

If the ancien regime was defective, its cause, according to some writers, could be traced to the unsatisfactory state of its origins. Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out that the present regimes were all settled during the dark ages of ignorance when the minds of men were still 'shackled by the grossest prejudices and most immoral superstition'. Their forms, that is, were mostly taken in those days when the rights of man were yet little understood. This circumstance, she insisted, served to account for the imperfection of all modern governments.¹⁵⁵ Vicesimus Knox was prepared to attribute the defects of old regimes to the lack of wisdom in their original constructions: 'In most of the states of Europe,' he claimed,

their original governments were formed when their legislators could neither *read* or *write*, when the works also of the elder ancients literally lay buried in dust; when history, art and science were alike unknown or unnoticed, and when conquests also were much in fashion.

The ancient governments, indeed, had been mainly fixed while their legislators had possessed neither enlightenment nor experience and 'when the few lorded it over the many, and force stood in lieu of right'. From this dark source, Knox contended, nothing

¹⁵² Samuel Ferrand Waddington, *Remarks on Mr. Burke's Two Letters* (London, 1796), p. 11.

¹⁵³ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 40.

¹⁵⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 191, 233.

¹⁵⁵ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, pp. 18-9.

could be expected but injustice, ignorance, war and intolerance.¹⁵⁶ With Thomas Paine, the origins of the present old regimes were murky and invidious: 'IT is impossible,' he claimed,

that such governments as have hitherto existed in the world, could have commenced by any other means than a total violation of every principle sacred and moral. The obscurity in which the origin of all the present old governments is buried, implies the iniquity and disgrace with which they began.

These governments had historically arisen out of violence and iniquity, which, despite the passage of time, remained to be their essential nature:

As time obliterated the history of their beginning, their successors assumed new appearances, to cut off the entail of their disgrace, but their principles and objects remained the same. What at first was plunder, assumed the foster name of revenue; and the power originally usurped, they affected to inherit.

Under such situation, the prevalence of war and extortion within the old order was but a matter of course.¹⁵⁷

Monarchy was fundamental to the framework of the ancien regime; naturally, it formed the chief target of the radical attack. A system of government which allowed a monarch to monopolise all political power, William Belsham alleged, would become the very worst species of despotism.¹⁵⁸ The monarchical states, Thomas Cooper claimed, were based on the combination and monopoly of power, which rendered them more able to suppress completely the complaints of the people, break their spirits and deter them from pursuing their own interests. Cooper harboured a deep hatred of monarchy and he was ready to deprecate monarchs as the execrable mischief-makers of mankind:

The Sum of Misery produced by the Pride, the Revenge, the Ignorance, and the Ambition of Kings exceeds the utmost Stretch of human Calculation. The unfeeling *Systematic* devastation of the human race, which this class of Beings have unremittingly and unrelentingly

¹⁵⁶ Knox, *The Essence of the Calm Observer*, p. 38.

¹⁵⁷ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 190-1.

¹⁵⁸ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 233.

pursued, is almost incredible, even to those who read with astonishment the undeniable evidence of facts which compose the bulk of antient and modern History.

He went on to assert that the fancied utility which had been attached to monarchy from the beginning of time to the present hour had been far outshone by the 'Mass of Evils occasioned by the Sovereigns of Europe collectively within this half Century'.¹⁵⁹

Thomas Paine launched by far the most savage attack upon the monarchical system. He set out to taunt monarchy with vicious ridicule. To embarrass the monarchical system, Paine chose first to make a butt of the 'crown': 'But, after all,' he satirised,

what is this metaphor called a crown, or rather what is monarchy? Is it a thing, or is it a name, or is it a fraud? Is it 'a contrivance of human wisdom,' or of human craft to obtain money from a nation under specious pretences? Is it a thing necessary to a nation? If it is, in what does that necessity consist, what services does it perform, what is its business, and what are its merits? Doth the virtue consist in the metaphor, or in the man? Doth the goldsmith that makes the crown, make the virtue also? Doth it operate like Fortunatus's wishing cap, or Harlequin's wooden sword?

It continued to be derided as 'a something' which was 'going much out of fashion, falling into ridicule, and rejected in some countries both as unnecessary and expensive'. In another place, Paine again spurned monarchy as 'a silly, contemptible thing': 'I compare it,' he wrote,

to something kept behind a curtain, about which there is a great deal of bustle and fuss, and a wonderful air of seeming solemnity; but when, by any accident, the curtain happens to be open, and the company see what it is, they burst into laughter.

He had once gone so far as to harass the English crown, jeering at it as 'a *metaphor*, shown at the Tower for sixpence or a shilling apiece'.¹⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the principle and practice of the monarchical system itself also fell under his attack. First of all, Paine came to question the rationality of monarchical succession, which, being hereditary, was in his opinion incompatible with the needs of a regular government, that required

¹⁵⁹ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* pp. 26, 28.

¹⁶⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man* pp. 99, 146-7, 204.

'talents and abilities':

Hereditary succession is a burlesque upon monarchy. It puts it in the most ridiculous light, by presenting it as an office which any child or idiot may fill. It requires some talents to be a common mechanic; but, to be a king, requires only the animal figure of man - a sort of breathing automaton.

It was, in sum, a measure that counteracted nature: 'It turns the progress of the human faculties upside down. It subjects age to be governed by children, and wisdom by folly.'¹⁶¹ Secondly, the monarchical system was believed to have lived entirely upon the ignorance of the nation. Monarchy, Paine exclaimed, was 'all a bubble, a mere court artifice to procure money'. It had been deliberately rendered mysterious in order to baffle the understanding of men and thereby beguile them into its imposition. 'It is the popery of government; a thing kept up to amuse the ignorant, and quiet them into taxes.' The more ignorant a nation became, he added, the better would it be fit for a monarchical system.¹⁶² Thirdly, Paine argued that monarchy was actually by no means essential to a well-regulated civil government. America was a large country, he observed, yet her government worked regularly without being monarchical. The tasks of the local governments of England, from the office of constable to trial by jury, were all properly carried out without the least appearance of monarchy in their processes. To Paine, the existence of monarchy was only to benefit a throng of court parasites: to common folks, it appeared 'something like a sinecure'.¹⁶³ Lastly, monarchy was further denounced as a vicious system apt to nurture corruption:

When extraordinary power and extraordinary pay are allotted to any individual in a government, he becomes the centre, round which every kind of corruption generates and forms. Give to any man a million a year, and add thereto the power of creating and disposing of places, at the expense of a country, and the liberties of that country are no longer secure. What is called the splendour of a throne is no other than the corruption of the state. It is made up of a band of parasites, living in luxurious indolence, out of the public taxes.

Paine contended that the monarchy would always find it in its interest to connive at certain inferior abuses, which would serve as so many outworks to shield its own

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 162, 196, 204-5.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 162, 205-6.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-8.

great corruption: 'Monarchy would not have continued so many ages in the world, had it not been for the abuses it protects.' It was the master fraud which sheltered all others. The existence of the monarchical system, in the final analysis, was in complete contradiction to the liberty of the people. It would ever be 'the enemy of mankind, and the source of misery'.¹⁶⁴

Few radical writers, it is obvious, would be so disposed as to recommend pure monarchy as a plausible political system. For what kind of government, then, would they be prepared to contend? There were two alternatives here. On the one hand, those pamphleteers of moderate mind tended to argue in favour of a mixed form of government. Samuel Parr, for instance, professed his admiration for the wisdom and utility of the principles that distinguished a mixed government. He was determined to resist both the tyranny of republicanism and the despotism of monarchy.¹⁶⁵ Robert Hall would not support pure democracy. A mixture of monarchy and nobility, he proposed, was essential to a good government because it could operate to give regularity, order, and stability to popular freedom.¹⁶⁶ One anonymous critic likewise contended that, while democracy must be accepted as the basis of a government, monarchy and aristocracy were not without their respective merits. The most admirable system of government was the one that was able to integrate these various parts into a whole. He was, that is, inclined to defend 'limited monarchy' which he believed had contained 'the wisest principles of government that are reducible to practice'. It was a system in which the people could maintain an ample share of power, while, meantime, a body of nobility would be set up to lessen the immense distance which the splendour of rank placed between the king and his subjects.¹⁶⁷ From the socio-political perspective, Capel Lofft explained that a government ought to be so devised as to be able to regulate all the different social forces:

in every flourishing and long subsisting Society, continued prosperity and eminent desert, in certain families, will always tend to something of aristocratic interest; accumulation of wealth, by commerce or manufacture in others, in a remarkable degree, to an Oligarchy, and these will require to be controlled by the equal virtue and social spirit

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 143, 166, 225-6.

¹⁶⁵ Parr, 'A Letter from Irenopolis to Inhabitants of Eleutheropolis', *Works*, iii, 302; *idem* 'Miscellaneous Remarks', *ibid.*, iii, 225n.

¹⁶⁶ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 84.

¹⁶⁷ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, pp. 38-9.

of a Democracy, which also requires to have its tendency to unadvised determination, balanced by the gravity and prudence of the other descriptions.

A mixed government, he was convinced, was the only political system that could have all these powers and principles maintained in their due distinctness, and 'the preponderancy preserved to the more general interests, without hazarding the security of the others'. It provided the elements and form of a constitution best able to guarantee the largest extent of stability, efficiency, private security and public freedom. It was, above all, a safe and effective system, developed to incorporate all the partial interests and prevent any of them from 'obtaining an ascendancy to the detriment of Society'.¹⁶⁸

The political experience of Britain was naturally induced as the best example to prove the excellence of mixed government. The English constitution, Sir Brooke Boothby pointed out, was a system that had blended into an excellent whole the best parts of all the principles of government.¹⁶⁹ Due to many accidental circumstances, another author claimed, Britain was able to secure a government whose constitution was 'as beautiful in its parts, and systematically regular in the whole, as could have been produced by the brightest efforts of foederative wisdom'. It was a moderate monarchy that had worked with superior efficacy and that had produced happy results.¹⁷⁰ The British constitution, another writer claimed, was made up of three different branches: King, Lords and Commons. It had been widely acclaimed as 'a just, as well as an excellent form of government'.¹⁷¹ To these moderate authors, indeed, though small flaws might lamentably appear in its operation, the principle of the British constitution was fundamentally sound. Thus, one critic remarked:

The British Constitution is admitted to be a system of liberty. It is a strong and capacious building, fitted both for convenience and for defence; and, though it may have suffered a little from the injuries of time, or from accidents, it is capable, by a small but timely reparation, of being perfectly accommodated to all the purposes of its inhabitants.

¹⁶⁸ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 43-4.

¹⁶⁹ Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and on Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, pp. 209-10.

¹⁷⁰ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, pp. 14, 36.

¹⁷¹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 23.

It would always remain a 'venerable structure'.¹⁷²

Those critics on the extreme radical wing, however, were not prepared to support such a much acclaimed mixed system. According to Thomas Paine, a mixed form of government always looked like a 'continual enigma'. It was a political system whose constituent parts were apt to cover each other until responsibility was lost. It turned out to be, moreover, an apparatus which could never be set in motion without some sort of corruption:

However imperfect election and representation may be in mixed Government, they still give exercise to a greater portion of reason than is convenient to the hereditary part; and therefore it becomes necessary to buy the reason up. A mixed Government is an imperfect everything, cementing and soldering the discordant parts together by corruption, to act as a whole.

Corruption, Paine complained, would ever become the moving power behind this kind of government. Due to the scale of corruption necessary for such a purpose, one could be sure, the nation would be plagued with the enormous expense of 'supporting all the forms of Government at once'.¹⁷³ James Mackintosh was another critic who dismissed the merit of balance and control claimed for mixed government as but 'the vision of theorists'. The reality of British politics proved that the alleged principle of control was merely imaginary. In England, he pointed out, the supposed counteraction of interests, which was thought to be able to prevent 'all conspiracy against the people', had never existed:

That this is the state of England, the most superficial observation must evince. The great proprietors, titled and untitled, possess the whole force of both Houses of Parliament that is not immediately dependent on the Crown. The Peers have a great influence in the House of Commons. All political parties are formed by a confederacy of the members of both Houses. The Court party, by the influence of the Crown, acting equally in both, supported by a part of the independent Aristocracy. The Opposition by the remainder of the Aristocracy whether Commoners or Lords.

The history of England had never provided any undisputed example of the pretended balance: her politics, he insisted, had betrayed every symptom of collision but no

¹⁷² A. B. *Letters on the Character and Writings of Mr. Burke* (1797?), p. 21.

¹⁷³ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 162-3.

vestige of control.¹⁷⁴ Upon the whole, Francis Stone exclaimed, it would be a great folly to chant the praises of the 'nominal tripartite constitution' of Britain while the crown and the nobility could still command so decisive an influence in the House of Commons.¹⁷⁵

To this circle of critics, therefore, a more radical option seemed desirable. John Oswald should not be thought to be contending for an ordinary mixed government when he proposed that the best political system should be the one that could unite in one 'a pure democracy, a pure aristocracy, and a pure monarchy'. He had in effect invested this enigmatic proposal with an essentially radical interpretation:

the government must consist in a pure democracy, inasmuch as the power of the *whole* must be omnipotent over all its *parts* . . . In the second place, a pure aristocracy must be established (that is to say, an aristocracy in the proper and primitive sense of the word, which signifies *pre-eminence of the best*). But who are the *best*? Those certainly who are *chosen* by the people. . . . In the third place, a pure monarchy is necessary to good government; or, in other words, it is necessary that *one will* should reign supreme over all. . . . In a good government, there can be but *one will*, or monarchy, which is the *will of the people*.

It was ultimately styled a 'POLITICAL TRINITY', whose foundation, none the less, was explicitly laid on the radical principle of popular sovereignty.¹⁷⁶ Francis Stone argued in favour of 'a *simple government*, to be based on a scrupulous attention to the equal rights of man. In this government, he suggested, the executive power would reside in 'an *annually-elected king*', freely and fairly chosen by the people at large, 'from among the numerous individuals of their collective body'. There would also be a 'democratic legislature' in the choice of which every man would have a voice, and for which he himself could be eligible as a legislator whose term was to be no longer than a year. Most important of all, its whole structure would be so devised that its legislative, judicial and executive powers could achieve a permanent equilibrium.¹⁷⁷ This bordered on a radical democracy.

Other writers preferred to appeal directly to republicanism. According to

¹⁷⁴ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 265-6.

¹⁷⁵ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 122, 124.

¹⁷⁶ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, pp. 59-60.

¹⁷⁷ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 121, 186-7.

Mackintosh, democracy in its etymological sense implied the power of the people. Thus understood, he claimed, all governments, to be legitimate, ought to be democratic.¹⁷⁸ David Williams argued that a republic must be insisted upon as the only lawful form of government. There was no other system which was able to set the interests of the people as its object.¹⁷⁹ Indeed, Joel Barlow was quite optimistic that republicanism would soon prevail. It would not be long, he was convinced, before the opinion was universally accepted that

the republican principle is not only proper and safe for the government of any people; but, that its propriety and safety are in proportion to the magnitude of the society and the extent of the territory.¹⁸⁰

Thomas Paine was perhaps the most straightforward among the supporters of republicanism. All civilised nations needed some kind of civil government, but, he stressed, the republican system must be deemed the only legal form of government. What was called a '*republic*', he explained, was a body politic which took as its object the 'RES-PUBLICA' – that is, the public affairs, or public good, or public things. He continued to assert:

Every government that does not act on the principle of a *Republic*, or in other words, that does not make the *res-publica* its whole and sole object, is not a good government. Republican government is no other than government established and conducted for the interest of the public, as well individually as collectively.

A well-constituted republic, moreover, must always derive its legitimacy from the people. Based on popular sovereignty, all its constituent parts, whether executive or legislative, would share 'one and the same natural source'. They would then not be foreign to each other, thus making it easier for them to coordinate without the necessity of corruption:

As there are no discordant distinctions, there is nothing to corrupt by compromise, nor confound by contrivance. Public measures appeal of themselves to the understanding of the Nation, and, resting on their

¹⁷⁸ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 222.

¹⁷⁹ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁰ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part II, p. 6.

own merits, disown any flattering application to vanity.

It would be the only political system which could be consistent with reason, and in which nation and government would always appear 'in their proper character'.¹⁸¹

The republican government here proposed, it must be noticed, was generally asserted to be a system radically different from those which had previously been denominated a republic or a democracy. Ancient democracy, according to Paine, was merely a simple system of government in which the mass of people could assemble together to rule 'in the first person': 'Simple democracy was no other than the common-hall of the ancients.' Though possessed of the form, as well as the principle, of a republican system, it was not fit for a country of large population and extensive territory.¹⁸² David Williams was persuaded that those states which had so far been styled republics could hardly be consonant with the reason of modern politics. 'Athens, Lacedemon, and Rome were ruled by idle and profligate mobs in contention with privileged senates.' It was not truly democratical and it had never attempted to promote the public welfare.¹⁸³ James Mackintosh, indeed, regarded this kind of government 'rather as an ochlocracy than a democracy, as the despotism of the rabble, not the dominion of the people'. The ancient democracies, he claimed, were always dominated by a corrupt and tumultuous populace: 'The rabble legislated, judged, and exercised every political authority.' It was at most a degenerate democracy.¹⁸⁴ On the other hand, Thomas Cooper was of the opinion that the old-style republics were by no means governments by the people:

In the Republics (as they are falsely called) antient and modern, such as those of Greece and Rome, Holland, Venice, Genoa, &c. there has always existed a Nobility: the Government has always been in the hands of a permanent Aristocracy, in conjunction with a certain portion only of the People, more or less large, more or less subjected.

Since the aristocracy and the people would be always divided on their interests, there existed a perpetual tendency 'to intestine Commotion; to struggles and quarrels between the Governors and the Governed'. On the whole, he stressed, the old

¹⁸¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 148, 162, 164, 200, 224.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁸³ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁴ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 222-3.

republics could never be sure of promoting the interest of any class of men: 'Such Governments are bad for the few, in proportion to the share of power possessed by the many – and for the many, in proportion to the power possessed by the hereditary few.'¹⁸⁵

It can, at last, be enquired: what then was the nature of the republican government proposed by these radical writers? In the ancient democracies, James Mackintosh observed, there was 'neither representation nor division of powers'.¹⁸⁶ Here, he hit upon an essential point about this question. According to David Williams, the nature of modern politics required that the general voice of the people should be heard and that a proper mode for its expression had to be made a part of its constitution. This demand, he noted, had given rise to the specific principle of 'representation and appointment of deputies'.¹⁸⁷ For Thomas Cooper, the most important aspect of a republican government, properly so-called, consisted not so much in the fact that there would be no king, as in the principle that the people would be their own governors. It must then adopt a system which could embody the 'government of the MANY by the MANY'. For a country of extensive territory and numerous inhabitants, where the people were not able by themselves to take charge of public affairs, this ideal could only be realised through a properly planned scheme of representation:

The many. . . can only govern themselves by means of Agents or Representatives appointed for the purpose; and that these Agents or Representatives may be truly such – that they may not introduce gradually and effectually the other division of Government, viz. that of the many by the permanent few – they must be either removable at pleasure, at short periods, or by rational exclusion.

This form of republican government, he emphasised, would have the merits of simplicity, tranquility and cheapness that the example of America had recently evinced.¹⁸⁸

The republican system which Thomas Paine worked out was perhaps the most typical of all. It adopted a constitution which was essentially different from both

¹⁸⁵ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* pp. 27–8.

¹⁸⁶ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 222.

¹⁸⁷ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 23.

¹⁸⁸ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* pp. 28–9.

monarchy and aristocracy. It was not even a simple democracy, but turned out to be a delicate combination of democratical principle and representative system. An old democracy, Paine pointed out, was a direct government by the people. Though excellent in its principles, it was not, due to the inconvenience of its form, suitable for a government on a large scale. Paine was confident, however, that this deficiency could well be made up through the introduction of a representative system which he believed could transform the original simple democracy into a system applicable to a society which became 'too populous, and too extensive for the simple democratical form':

Simple democracy was society governing itself without the aid of secondary means. By ingrafting representation upon democracy, we arrive at a system of government capable of embracing and confederating all the various interests and every extent of territory and population.

This combination, he insisted, was properly what a viable modern republic ought to be. Hence, the political system of America was cherished as the 'only real republic in character and in practice, that now exists':

It is on this system that the American government is founded. It is representation ingrafted upon democracy. It has fixed the form by a scale parallel in all cases to the extent of the principle. What Athens was in miniature, America will be in magnitude. The one was the wonder of the ancient world; the other is becoming the admiration and model of the present.

It was the easiest system of government to understand and the most eligible to be put into practice. It would exclude at once 'the ignorance and insecurity of the hereditary mode, and the inconvenience of the simple democracy'. Upon the whole, Paine concluded, this would be a government which would take 'society and civilization for its basis; nature, reason, and experience, for its guide'. It would be able to meet the reason of men everywhere, and become 'always parallel with the order and immutable laws of nature'.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 197, 199, 200, 202-5.

CHAPTER 7
VINDICIAE GALLICAE

I

Writers critical of Burke, whether moderate or radical, seemed almost unanimously inclined to defend the Revolution in France. In defiance of Burke's attack, these British friends of French liberty generally felt jubilant at what was going on across the Channel, with high expectations of its beneficial effects. In a survey of the recent progress of history, Joseph Towers pointed out:

Few periods in the history of mankind have been more distinguished than the present, by great, important, and interesting events. The most signal, and the most unexpected revolutions have taken place. An ardent and enlightened zeal for the great interests of mankind has been manifested, in different parts of the globe, and has produced the most salutary consequences.

Of all these great events, he emphasised, the French Revolution was the most striking. It exhibited many noble and patriotic sentiments never before observed and it made great strides towards the formation of a free constitution based on the natural rights of man.¹ One anonymous writer marvelled at the uniqueness of the occurrence: 'The records of ancient and modern times,' he claimed,

furnish not an instance of any other Revolution so peculiar in its circumstances, – of so much moment in its consequences. One of the most powerful and populous nations upon the face of the globe has effected, not a partial reform, – not the correction of a system, – but a complete and perfect change, by which a subsisting government is demolished, and a new form, differing in every principle, established.

It formed an example so illustrious that every nation in the world must be affected.² In William Belsham's opinion, no nation had ever attempted 'so great, so extensive, and so beneficial a reformation'. The French people had, in a short time, accomplished more for the glory and happiness of their community than it 'could previously have been imagined possible for the highest efforts of wisdom and perseverance to effect'.³

¹ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* pp. 1-2, 82.

² *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections* p. 2.

³ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 215.

From many aspects, Joseph Priestley echoed, the French Revolution stood for a wonderful and significant change that could find no parallel in history:

It is. . . a change from dark to light, from superstition to sound knowledge, and from a most debasing servitude to a state of the most exalted freedom. It is a liberating of all the powers of man from that variety of fetters, by which they have hitherto been held.⁴

France was, that is, transformed from a most despicable despotism to an admirable system of freedom. And the transition was so tremendous, and so extraordinary, that, Joseph Towers was convinced, it must arrest the attention of all those who were concerned about the general interests of mankind.⁵ Thus, Benjamin Flower exclaimed:

When we consider the manner in which it has been accomplished, the effects it has already produced, and the greater effects which it probably will produce, . . . we may safely assert, that it demands the very serious consideration of every friend to those best interests of mankind, Truth and Liberty.

He maintained that there was, since the Christian era, no other event which had been 'more unexpected, more astonishing, or more worthy the attention of mankind, than the late Revolution in France'.⁶

To the British radicals, therefore, the French Revolution became an heroic moment that evoked delight and admiration. The glorious march of freedom in France, Philip Withers exclaimed, had unfolded a scene bound to fill every enlightened mind with rapture. It was a spectacle which patriots would 'behold with admiration, and angels with applause'.⁷ William Augustus Miles pointed out that the emancipation of a great nation from a regime of despotic dominion and vexatious oppression would be always a subject of rational triumph to those whose minds had not yet suffered corruption.⁸ It afforded a sublime pleasure to the friends of liberty, Joseph Towers echoed, to perceive a great nation 'shaking off its fetters, compelling its rulers to acknowledge the just claims of the people, and asserting the rights of men, in the noblest and the

⁴ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 143-4.

⁵ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, p. 2.

⁶ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 1.

⁷ [Philip Withers], *Philo-Theodosius* (London, 1790), pp. 7, 10.

⁸ [William Augustus Miles], *A Letter to the Duke of Grafton, With Notes* (London, 1794), p. 83.

fullest manner'.⁹ Indeed, George Rous admitted:

He must be dead to all the finer feelings of humanity; he must wish to degrade man from a rational nature to brutal instinct, who can contemplate, without joy and exultation, this grand effusion of a Philosophic spirit illuminating all Europe, this improving progress of the human mind. . .¹⁰

Upon the whole, one tract proclaimed, the French Revolution was an endeavour which merited the admiration of the world.¹¹ It would be to plead against mankind, Thomas Christie added, if any one should attempt to arraign such an effort.¹²

The French Revolution, no doubt, would produce widespread consequences. It had, first of all, effected a fundamental change within France herself. Here, the most vital aspect was of course the downfall of despotism. Through a great exertion of heroic valour, William Belsham claimed, the people of France had smashed 'a vile and oppressive yoke':

they, by one grand effort, annihilated the despotism of a thousand years, and established, by general consent, that form of government which appeared to them most equitable and eligible.¹³

The *Political Correspondence* acclaimed the new achievement of freedom in France. The French people were long despised as the 'patient slaves of the most shameful tyranny'; but they were now awakened to a sense of their humiliating situation and were determined to be free: 'they assert their rights, and they are free.'¹⁴ It amounted to a victorious liberation. After many centuries of oppression, Matthew Campbell Browne declared, the French nation had at last 'emancipated themselves from the voracious jaws of a devouring despotism, and shivered their tremendous shackles against the heads of his oppressors'.¹⁵ George Rous asserted that the French people

⁹ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p.2.

¹⁰ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 9.

¹¹ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 6.

¹² Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 59.

¹³ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays*, ii, 282.

¹⁴ *Political Correspondence*, p. 69.

¹⁵ Matthew Campbell Browne, *A Leaf out of Burke's Book* (London, 1796), p. 52.

had broken the old fetters of tyranny, aiming to establish a new system of freedom. They overthrew a despotism '*in its nature subversive of all the rights of man*' and founded a new order upon the '*natural rules of justice*'.¹⁶ Indeed, one author noted, no sooner had the French nation awoken from their long 'dream of ignoble slavery' than the old despotism glided away like a phantom and liberty was erected as an eminent monument.¹⁷ It was remarkable that France was able to throw off the rule of iron power, break down the chain of servitude and start 'at once into a new and self-created existence'.¹⁸ To Benjamin Bousfield, before the Revolution, France was a nation spoiled and ruined; and she now turned out to be the 'greatest school of moral, and political wisdom ever opened in the world'.¹⁹

The universal implication of the Revolution, meanwhile, became all the more obvious. The fall of the ancien regime in France, Joel Barlow remarked, was a change that could not be limited to 'the concerns of a nation, or the improvements of an age'.²⁰ Benjamin Bousfield, while he rejoiced at the emancipation of France, had, at the same time, cherished great hopes for the general spread of the Revolution:

I glory at seeing liberty, the best and first gift of God to man, extended to 24 millions of my species; and I cherish the animating hope, that it will irradiate every part of the habitable globe, which has not, as yet, felt its invigorating influence.²¹

Earl Stanhope was persuaded that the Revolution in France, when it was once completed, would become the source of happiness to that nation. Moreover, since the Revolution must set an unparalleled example, for other enslaved nations, of the triumphant upsurge of public spirit, it would help to spread that happiness to the whole of Europe and even beyond:

That great and glorious Revolution will, in time, disseminate throughout Europe, liberality of sentiment, and a just regard for Political,

¹⁶ Rous, *Thoughts on Government*, pp. 3-4; *idem*, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 50.

¹⁷ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁸ *Thoughts on a Peace with France*, p. 7.

¹⁹ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, p. 29.

²⁰ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, p. 2.

²¹ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, p. 38.

Civil, and Religious Liberty. It will, in all probability, make the World, for Centuries, prosperous, free, and happy.²²

Other supporters of the Revolution were even more certain about this general impact. The freedom of France, Charles Pigott claimed, could not fail to set a flame of revolution spreading over Europe. It would teach all nations to vindicate their natural rights.²³ The *Political Correspondence* predicted that the example of France would exert 'a powerful influence over the conduct of other Nations':

We shall have witnessed the success of a grand experiment, viz, a Government founded on goodness, that will either induce a reform in those States which are intrinsically good, but disgraced by abuses, and a complete subversion of those of which the principles and the practice are despotic; or finally, render all the Governments of this little Globe, Republics, divided from each other by sections, less for the purpose perhaps of national distinction, than that of universal convenience.

It was expected that the French Revolution would soon touch off a wave of universal amelioration which would work to render governments endearing to their people, thus bringing the whole world to 'smile under the mild reign of Civil and Religious Liberty'.²⁴ At any rate, one writer commented, the Revolution in France was bound to sap the foundation of the ancien regime in every state of Europe and 'point them out the road to the enjoyment of equal freedom'.²⁵

Many critics of Burke, ultimately, were inclined to deem the Revolution in France as a great victory for the rights of man. William Belsham pointed out that the object for which the French people contended was favourable to 'the interests of liberty and the natural rights of humanity'.²⁶ The Revolution, James Mackintosh claimed, had made a great contribution to the cause of humanity: 'amid the long catalogue of calamities and crimes which blacken human annals,' he wrote, 'the year 1789 has furnished one spot on which the eye of humanity may with complacence dwell.' From this angle, the French Revolution could be regarded as the 'greatest *attempt*' ever made in the

²² Earl Stanhope, *A Letter from Earl Stanhope, to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 13, 34.

²³ Pigott, *The Jockey Club*, Part 3rd, p. 195.

²⁴ *Political Correspondence*, pp. 117-9.

²⁵ *Letters on the Present State of England and America*, p. 21.

²⁶ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays* ii, 211.

course of human history.²⁷ It completed, Joel Barlow stressed, an eminent edifice which had long been contemplated, but which had never before been exhibited in Europe.²⁸ Thomas Christie, after all, asserted that the French Revolution was the only revolution that had completely respected the rights of mankind. 'It is the only revolution,' he continued, 'that is likely to . . . enlighten the darkest corners of the globe, and diffuse every where the salutary rays of freedom and happiness.'²⁹ To Thomas Paine, in sum, the Revolution represented the solemn and majestic effort of the French people to establish the natural rights of man. It was a scene so new, and so unique, that 'the name of a Revolution is diminutive of its character'.³⁰

II

To vindicate the French Revolution, the first and foremost task was, of course, to explain its origins. For an event of this nature, Burke's critics generally acknowledged, there could be no simple explanation of its sources. James Mackintosh, for instance, had dismissed as fallacious Burke's allegation that the Revolution in France had chiefly resulted from the 'conspiracy of individuals, or bodies': a change with such a momentum, he suggested, could only be occasioned 'by general causes, where the most conspicuous individuals produced little real effect'.³¹ Thomas Christie, too, pointed out that the French Revolution, though it looked as if it had taken place all of a sudden, could not have been the work of a moment. It was, in truth, an event which the French 'had been preparing for a century before'.³² What happened in France, another writer stressed, had its origins in a combination of causes moral and physical: 'there is a chain of causes existing in the moral as well as political world, that may lead to such events.'³³ There existed, first of all, among the radical writers a disposition to trace the source of this great change to a profound intellectual revolution which had been going on for some time inside French society. Paine's observation here was perhaps quite typical: the French Revolution, he wrote,

²⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 125.

²⁸ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, p. 1.

²⁹ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 58-9.

³⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 136.

³¹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 17-8.

³² Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 62.

³³ Bolingbroke, *A Letter addressed to a Noble Lord* (Dublin, 1796), p. 34.

has apparently burst forth like a creation from a chaos, but it is no more than the consequence of a mental revolution priorly existing in France. The mind of the nation had changed beforehand, and the new order of things has naturally followed the new order of thoughts.³⁴

No less than Burke, then, many of his critics seemed prone to link the Revolution in France with the intellectual movement of the Enlightenment.

The French people were shown to have been long subject to the arbitrary rule of an absolute monarchy notorious for its domestic oppression and foreign conquest. The monarchical despotism of France had reached its meridian during the reign of Louis XIV when, James Mackintosh thus pointed out, the 'intrusion of any popular voice was not likely to be tolerated'. Paradoxically, however, it was the despotic monarchy itself which had, at its zenith, sown the seeds of its own destruction: 'It fostered that literature which was one day destined to destroy it.'³⁵ Here, Mackintosh struck upon an important point respecting the intellectual background of the French Revolution. According to the *Political Correspondence*, Louis XIV, while he was building up his empire, had not neglected the promotion of letters – a measure intended to adorn the splendour of the monarchy. But this literary policy had brought about an unexpected consequence. It led gradually to the calling forth of the social conscience of the literary world: 'as it is the peculiar property of great minds to act only for the general good, that genius which had been first encouraged for the basest purposes, was exerted for the noblest.' The men of letters, originally sponsored with a view to guilding despotism, soon became awakened enough to commit themselves to 'the various offices of *enlightening the People*, encouraging them to 'sigh for the dignity and happiness of freedom'.³⁶ To be sure, William Belsham noted, since the era of Louis XIV a new class of illustrious writers had arisen, and 'Voltaire, Helvetius, Montesquieu and Rousseau appeared most conspicuous in the band'. These authors devoted themselves to spreading radical ideas about the theory of government, the social contract, the right of toleration, and the spirit of laws; and their works, possessed of great and potent charm, had conduced to dispel the clouds of darkness, ignorance and bigotry in which the nation had been so long enveloped.³⁷ Thomas Paine's

³⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 115.

³⁵ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* pp. 19, 21.

³⁶ *Political Correspondence*, pp. 46-7.

³⁷ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays* ii, 196-7.

observations were along the same lines. During the two reigns before that of Louis XVI, he wrote, the only signs of the spirit of liberty in France were to be found in the writings of the philosophes. Notwithstanding their different motives, these philosophes, from various angles, had all made their contributions to help bring the French people back to their political consciousness:

by the different manner in which they treated the subject of government, Montesquieu by his judgment and knowledge of laws, Voltaire by his wit, Rousseau and Raynal by their animation, and Quesnay and Turgot by their moral maxims and systems of economy, readers of every class met with something to their taste, and a spirit of political inquiry began to diffuse itself through the nation.³⁸

Thomas Christie contended that all the popular writers of France had made different efforts to disseminate the idea of liberty and the rights of man, which had been hence 'slowly and silently gaining ground in the nation'.³⁹ Due to such efforts, another author added, the French people were gradually enlightened and became more able clearly to discern, and to assert, their rights.⁴⁰ Hence, William Belsham pointed out, at the time when Louis XVI ascended to the throne a 'mighty revolution' had already taken place in the mind of the nation. As a result, the enlightened part of the nation became 'fully sensible of their own dignity and importance, and resolutely determined to preserve their rights and privileges sacred and inviolate'.⁴¹

The intellectual revolution, no doubt, had helped, as Mark Wilks remarked, the people of France to escape from their previous 'political darkness'.⁴² The outbreak of the American Revolution, moreover, reinforced this newly awakened political consciousness in France. It furnished an unprecedented case exemplifying the success of a nation in carrying into practice the principles of liberty. This experience, through the French volunteers of the American War, had spread over in time to make its impact on the political development of France. Thus, Benjamin Bousfield pointed out: The seeds of French liberty were sown in the forests of America - removed from

³⁸ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 115-6.

³⁹ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 62.

⁴⁰ *Letters on the Present State of England and America* p. 19.

⁴¹ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays* ii, 195-6.

⁴² Wilks, *The Origin and Stability of the French Revolution*, pp. 69-70.

thence, it has sprung up a mighty oak.⁴³ In Paine's eyes, the American struggling for liberty formed a great 'school of Freedom'. The French soldiers sent there were unwittingly placed in an environment where they became susceptible to the influence of the principle, as well as the practice, of liberty.⁴⁴ It afforded them a good opportunity to see their speculative principles put into action; and, William Belsham contended, an indelible impression was thereby made on their minds 'in favour of liberty'.⁴⁵ Once these soldiers returned after the war, Paine claimed, the cause of liberty in France soon gained a vast reinforcement: 'A knowledge of the practice was then joined to the theory; and all that was wanting to give it real existence, was opportunity.'⁴⁶ In fact, one author noted, the French soldiers, having imbibed the spirit of freedom, were apt to help fan the flame of freedom which had already been kindled at home.⁴⁷ With regard to the impact of the American War on France, the *Political Correspondence* thus commented:

The effect of this War could be nothing else than to import from America those sentiments of independence which the troops had naturally imbibed there, and, when it thus tended to confirm the people in just and liberal sentiments, it rendered their humiliated situation less tolerable.⁴⁸

The French volunteers, David Williams added, were charged with the 'electric fire' of freedom during their stay in America; their coming back to France, therefore, was like a spark falling on touchwood, and the 'whole at once blazed into ashes'.⁴⁹

The intellectual revolution was, of course, to have a profound impact on the later development of French politics. It helped, in particular, to awaken the political consciousness of the French people, preparing thereby the mind of the nation for change. Its importance admitted, however, the intellectual movement, by itself, could not occasion such a momentous event as the French Revolution. 'All the theories of

⁴³ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 37.

⁴⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man* p. 116.

⁴⁵ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays* ii, 197.

⁴⁶ Paine, *Rights of Man* p. 118.

⁴⁷ *Letters on the Present State of England and America* pp. 19-20.

⁴⁸ *Political Correspondence*, p. 47.

⁴⁹ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, pp. 69-70.

speculative men, and all the oratory of republican writers', Thomas Christie declared, were not the direct factors that 'persuaded the people of France to this great and general revolt against their government'. He would impute them more to the social distress which France suffered under the ancien regime.⁵⁰ William Belsham, too, asserted:

Popular insurrections have invariably arisen from the most grievous oppression, on the most deplorable prejudice; and the French historians give no hint that any speculative reasonings had the slightest influence in exciting the insurrection in question. . . We see, therefore, that these poor wretches were not enlightened, but exasperated into resistance.⁵¹

The origins of the French Revolution, to be sufficiently explicated, must, that is, be traced back to the reality of the old order itself. Many opponents of Burke tended to suggest that, to a large extent, the French people had revolted because they could no longer endure the ever miserable state of the nation. France, Sir Brooke Boothby moaned, had foundered under the dreadful load of a despotic regime:

that fine country has always appeared to languish under the evils of a vicious constitution; presenting an odious contrast between the higher and lower orders, an insolent and imperious nobility, and an oppressed and suffering people.

It was a nation grossly divided into two extremes of 'penury and privation' on one side and the 'fastidious, offensive luxuries' on the other.⁵² The old government of France, William Cuninghame declared, was a 'corruption of the feudal system'. It had degenerated into a situation in which the ruling class grew arbitrary and tyrannic, while the people were despised, oppressed and utterly sunk into nothing.⁵³ Thus, one French critic of Burke confirmed, previous to the revolution France had already been crushed under the remains of a vexatious feudalism. There was then 'nothing left from the rights of men', and the whole country fell into an hopeless state.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 31-2.

⁵¹ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays*, ii, 346-7.

⁵² Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and on Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, pp. 47-8.

⁵³ Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings*, pp. 37-8.

⁵⁴ *An Address to the National Assembly of France* (Cambridge, 1791), p. 41.

To the defenders of the Revolution, indeed, the ancien regime in France was fundamentally defective. Earl Stanhope had attacked the old order of France, claiming that it contained nothing that could bear 'even the semblance of a *free* Constitution': 'You know, Sir,' he reminded Burke,

at *that time*, the Bastile existed, the practice of Arbitrary Imprisonment existed, no *Habeas Corpus* was then established, no Trial by Jury was then known in that Country; . . . there was then no *Declaration of Rights*, no Liberty of the Press.

All that could then be found was but a despotism of the most 'horrid extent'.⁵⁵ In fact, George Rous claimed, the ancient government of France consisted of an absolute monarchy, which was supported by a pampered nobility and a dependent clergy, defended by a mercenary army, and, most of all, consolidated by a landed revenue of 'five millions sterling'.⁵⁶ It relied on, another author noted,

a body of 200,000 nobility, and an army of 150,000 men; they were supported by as many collectors of the revenue, and a multitude of spies; against any of this vast body of oppressors, an individual of any other class of the community, scarcely ever. . . could obtain impartial justice.

The entire system formed a severe and complicated apparatus of absolutism, which brought oppression, extortion and insult to the door of every people, and banished all confidence and comfort from the whole society.⁵⁷ The nature of the ancien regime in France, thus, became manifest enough. 'What was that Government?' one pamphleteer enquired:

A state of despotism, where the lives and fortunes of millions were liable to be sacrificed to the resentment of a favourite, the caprice of a mistress, or the interest of a despicable minion. Where a Nobility and Clergy, forward in supporting the most arbitrary measures of the Crown, were, in recompense, maintained in exemption from public burdens, and many other privileges galling and oppressive to the people: - where the inhabitants were drained to support the matchless extravagance of the voluptuous and dissipated adherents of a licentious court, money being taken without consent, and squandered without account, in most

⁵⁵ Earl Stanhope, *A Letter from Earl Stanhope, to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁶ Rous, *Thoughts on Government* pp. 7-10.

⁵⁷ *An Answer to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections* p. 31.

scandalous profusion: – where the execution of the laws was perverted to the purposes of the great, and the regular administration of justice withheld: – where a quiet and harmless life, with industry and integrity, were not any security against the misery of chains and the horrors of a dungeon; as the least opposition to the unwarrantable will of a worthless woman, the intolerable pride of an imperious lord, or the grasping spirit of a rapacious priest, might draw down a *lettre de cachet* by which the wretched object would be forever secluded from the light and every comfort.

It bordered on an unlimited tyranny.⁵⁸ Other writers held similar opinions. The old order of France, one of them asserted, was a system despotic both in theory and practice. Under such a regime, he added, the people were never able to 'enjoy their liberty, life, and property in as full and ample a manner, as of right they ought to do, and would have done under a just, wise, and equal government'.⁵⁹

But Burke had argued that the ancien regime of France could not have been so baneful because, he claimed, under it the French population had steadily increased and the nation in general had become prosperous.⁶⁰ To his critics, however, this observation seemed rather superficial. On the one hand, many writers suspected that the growth of population could not have much to do with the excellence of a government. The population of a nation, Joseph Towers pointed out, could not be deemed as a proper criterion to assess the merits of its government. It could prove, least of all, that it was a system of freedom: the history of mankind, he stressed, showed that 'the human species may subsist, and even increase in numbers, under the very great degrees of oppression'.⁶¹ The population of the Roman Empire, Francis Stone instanced, had grown despite the fact that its governments were the most execrable.⁶² The political system of Persia was highly despotic, another author added, yet that country was full of inhabitants. In his opinion, political power was not the major factor that affected population. It was often the case that natural causes such as climate, nutrition, employment, etc. played much more positive roles.⁶³ Joseph Towers shared this opinion: 'Whenever, from the fertility of the soil, or any other causes, the means of

⁵⁸ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 37.

⁶⁰ See, *supra*, chapter 2, pp. 51–2.

⁶¹ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, pp. 99–100.

⁶² Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 170.

⁶³ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 36.

subsistence are easily afforded to the common people, population will naturally increase, though the government may be oppressive and despotic.⁶⁴ With respect to the population of France, Thomas Christie thus commented:

Men increase by the laws of Nature, not by the laws of States. Civilization was highly advanced in France, and it obviated many of the effects of a bad Government. The Government had no share in augmenting the population of France. So far as its influence extended, it was hostile to it; but, bad as it was, it could not overpower the strong effects of natural causes.

Its growth, indeed, could not conceal the rude fact that its government was essentially a bad one.⁶⁵ To Francis Stone, after all, the natural propensity of mankind to propagate itself had been, by the all wise Author of Nature, so strongly implanted in both sexes that not even the power of the most despotic government could stop it.⁶⁶

The radical observers, similarly, showed no intention of contradicting Burke's claim that prior to 1789 France had been, generally speaking, in a rather prosperous condition. But, again, most of them were reluctant to credit this prosperity to any beneficial effects of her old system. Joseph Towers, for instance, accepted that France under the ancien regime had indeed made progress in her economy, in her culture, and in her national prestige. Nevertheless, he stressed, these achievements seemed to have resulted, not so much from the absolute system of government itself, as from the sometimes clement and moderate exercise, by the French monarchs, of their powers, and the occasionally excellent administration of 'some very wise and able ministers'.⁶⁷ In the opinion of Thomas Christie, France had flourished, but she had achieved this 'in spite of her Government':

Much of the prosperity of the kingdom was owing to its ancient state, and to the remains of original freedom. For it is a position never to be forgotten, that France was originally free. The influence of a good Monarch, or a wise minister, served further to check the operation of malignant causes.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, p. 100.

⁶⁵ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 86.

⁶⁶ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 170.

⁶⁷ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, p. 101.

⁶⁸ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 87-8.

Moreover, Francis Stone claimed, even though the old regime of France had paid some attention to the improvement of the nation, its purpose was mainly to serve the selfish interests of the ruling classes:

The old, absolute monarchy of France, abetted by its aristocracy and hierarchy, did certainly promote the improvement of agriculture, manufactures, and commerce, from this principle of policy, that, without them, they would want the means of gratifying their own luxurious. . . style of living. But the people at large, the industrious bees, plundered of their lives by the swarms of drones and hornets issuing from these three destructive nests, enjoyed but a very small portion of the honeyed fruits of their labours.⁶⁹

'It is true,' Christie echoed, 'great men cannot live without poor men.' The common people, because of necessity, were indeed maintained '*in existencé*', but they were always kept in a miserable state of ignorance, poverty and depression: 'They were deprived of the rank and dignity of man; they seemed to exist only as *animals*.'⁷⁰

Some writers, on the other hand, suspected that the professed prosperity of monarchical France might be more apparent than real. It was widely maintained that throughout the ancien regime there had existed serious social and economic injustices. Prior to the Revolution, Joseph Towers claimed, the French nation had suffered the combined oppression of the crown, the nobility and the clergy: 'the commonality and peasantry groaned under the weight of unequal and unjust taxes, and of burdensome and unreasonable feudal services.'⁷¹ It became then a country where the nobility grew too rich, while the multitude were almost ground down by 'arbitrary exactions'.⁷² One critic thus depicted the miserable situation of the lower classes:

The poor peasant paid a variety of taxes from which the opulent noble was exempt. He dare not use sea-water to dress his meat, or even dip his vessels in the ocean, lest the king should want a customer for the salt, which he forced on him to what quantity he pleased, and at four times the value; he was enjoined on pain of death, to suffer the animals reserved for the amusement or the luxury of his lord, to destroy with a delegated despotism, the labour of his hands, and the hopes of

⁶⁹ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 171.

⁷⁰ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 86-7.

⁷¹ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 98.

⁷² Bolingbroke, *A Letter addressed to a Noble Lord* p. 33.

his children's subsistence.⁷³

For all the professed prosperity, Joseph Towers stressed, a great extent of poverty could still be detected among the 'middling and inferior classes'.⁷⁴ Sir Brooke Boothby, indeed, had witnessed a more deplorable scene: 'If at your return from Versailles,' he told Burke,

you had looked into the *Marne* where the bodies of those unfortunate wretches whose miseries had driven them to seek the last refuge from their despair were daily exposed to frightful numbers; if you had followed the peasant or the artisan to his scanty meal or a morsel of black unsavoury bread, such spectacles would not have been lost upon a heart like yours.⁷⁵

It was a truly bleak picture.

The state of France on the eve of the Revolution was, in general, asserted to have been radically defective. The ancien regime in France, one author remarked, had, in all its parts, constituted a connected system of despotism and oppression.⁷⁶ It turned out to be, in essence, a body politic in which the spirit of despotism was pervasive. 'It has its standard everywhere,' claimed Thomas Paine:

Every office and department has its despotism, founded upon custom and usage. Every place has its Bastille, and every Bastille its despot. The original hereditary despotism resident in the person of the King, divides and subdivides itself into a thousand shapes and forms, till at last the whole of it is acted by deputation.

This formed a kind of despotism against which, he warned, there was no mode of redress.⁷⁷ In Thomas Christie's opinion, the old government exerted a widespread oppression which extended 'from the highest down to the lowest ranks of society'. Under such a tyrannic rule, the nation as a whole had suffered severe dilapidation:

⁷³ *An Answer to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 31-2.

⁷⁴ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* pp. 101-2.

⁷⁵ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p.44.

⁷⁶ A. B., *Letters on the Character and Writings of Mr. Burke*, p. 20.

⁷⁷ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 70.

The picture of *ancient France* exhibits. . . the melancholy view of a great and enlightened people, deprived of almost all the advantages Nature had given them, by an oppressive and arbitrary government: – without *agriculture*, for the people (who are the cultivators) were despised and kept in the state of the lowest servitude: – without *commerce*, for it was reckoned dishonourable: – without *liberty*, for the life and property of every individual was constantly at the mercy of a minister, or of his mistress: without *laws*, for where arbitrary will can suspend any thing, there the laws are a mere fiction: and lastly – without *morals*, for these depend on laws and a fixed constitution.⁷⁸

Viewed from every respect, the ancien regime in France was depraved. It looked, Samuel Parr thus observed, 'morbid in its aspect, morbid in its extremities, and morbid in its vitals'. He was convinced that, shortly before the Revolution, the maladies of the nation had reached 'almost the last stages of malignity' that its entire edifice 'threatened a speedy dissolution'.⁷⁹ Thus, Benjamin Flower moaned: 'The situation of the French, antecedent to the revolution, was almost hopeless. The government was despotic. The whole system was most wretchedly mismanaged.' It had sunken into such a miserable state that a total regeneration became necessary.⁸⁰

III

Those who attended to the state of the old order would perhaps all agree that France needed a certain kind of change; but between reform and revolution there existed wide difference of opinion. Burke had contended against the necessity of revolution. The ancien regime in France, though suffering dilapidation, he insisted, was far from being incorrigible. It could still be reformed into a viable system: 'I must think,' he asserted, 'such a government well deserved to have its excellencies heightened, its faults corrected, and its capacities improved into a British constitution.'⁸¹ Was, then, drastic change unavoidable? Could France go through a reformation without revolution?

Despite Burke's argument to the contrary, most of his critics believed that France could hardly be salvaged from a total wreckage without some radical change timely carried out. The French government would collapse, one pamphlet pointed out, if

⁷⁸ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 119–20.

⁷⁹ Parr, 'Miscellaneous Remarks', *Works*, iii, 228, 230.

⁸⁰ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 99–101.

⁸¹ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 402.

essential changes were not made in its constitution. It required a thorough revolution, rather than a mild reform, before its vices could be eradicated.⁸² William Cuninghame argued in favour of the justice of the Revolution. The ancien regime of France was hopelessly incurable. It had deteriorated into a system in which abuses were rampant: 'the whole body was infected; every limb required regeneration.' The French people, hence, could not be accused of having gone to 'too great lengths' when they chose to abolish the old order in its entirety.⁸³ Without drastic measures, Thomas Paine insisted, there would be no way to resurrect a system such as the old government of France, whose despotic principles had become so deep-rooted as not to be easily removeable. He was to compare the French monarchy to an 'augen stable of parasites and plunderers', which he insisted had become 'too abominably filthy to be cleansed, by anything short of a complete and universal revolution'.⁸⁴ With Thomas Christie, revolution seemed to become the only measure left that was effective enough to extricate France 'from the complicated evils into which she was plunged':

It is impossible to review the ancient state of things in France, without being convinced that the abuses were too inveterate to yield to any *palliative*, that no half measure would have been effectual; that nothing but a total revolution was equal to the cure. They wanted amongst them, the very principles of a Constitution.

The body politic of France, he declared, was desperately in need of radical reform which could never be achieved if the ancient establishments of the kingdom, with all their old habits and prejudices, were kept up.⁸⁵ In the end, another writer thus asserted, the old established government of France was of such a texture that only its total abolition was able to help the people to lift the burden of slavery, and that 'nothing less than another substituted in its room, calculated to force the growth of freedom, could in any means satisfy a nation, determined to be free'.⁸⁶

The supporters of the Revolution, to strengthen their case, went further in order to confute Burke's claim that the ancient edifice of the French monarchy should have been retained as the foundation upon which the new order could be established.

⁸² *Political Correspondence*, pp. 55, 76-7.

⁸³ Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings*, pp. 38-9.

⁸⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 69.

⁸⁵ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 81-2, 90.

⁸⁶ *Letters on the Present State of England and America* p. 20.

Catharine Macaulay, for one, had contended that, when the old vessel of a commonwealth was once shattered to pieces, the new builders could be under no law of duty or reason to make use of those old materials, which were considered to be of an injurious tendency, in the structure of their new constitution. The French people, that is, were completely justified in their attempt to form a new government for themselves:

The leaders of the French Revolution, and their followers, see *none of those striking beauties* in the old laws and rules of the Gallic institutions of Europe. . . In such a view of things, they have chosen a simple rule for the model of their new structure.⁸⁷

In truth, Sir Brooke Boothby claimed, no free and equal constitution could ever be engrafted upon the ancient establishment of France. The political order in that country had long been warped by despotism. It included an unqualified monarchy, a feudal nobility, a domineering hierarchy, and an impoverished and servile people. There was nothing there that was worth preserving. The French determination to level the whole old edifice without distinction, then, could not, with justice, be denounced as a rash and dangerous experiment.⁸⁸ To another critic, the ancien regime of France looked like an old castle whose walls were almost obsolete beyond repair:

Corruption, despotism, and other vicious qualities had not only completely sapped the foundations of the ancient fabric, but had rotted most of the materials, so that they became useless in their present form, and a new edifice was necessary.

The political architects of France were well aware of this, and hence they chose to destroy the old castle 'as a nuisance'.⁸⁹ Indeed, Benjamin Flower insisted, the French people would never be able to rejuvenate a system which had long been deranged: any effort of this kind would prove but a 'feeble endeavour to prop up an old, crazy, ruinous mansion, which daily threatened destruction to its inhabitants'. The National Assembly was wise in choosing to mould the whole system afresh, making use of

⁸⁷ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 33-4.

⁸⁸ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 18-9, 34.

⁸⁹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 39-40.

those old materials only which might be found fit for the new order.⁹⁰ As a whole, Benjamin Bousfield claimed, the people of France had never enjoyed any rational semblance of freedom. There was no proper constitution in their country after which a free system could be patterned. It was therefore proper for them to new-model 'a complete and confident constitution': 'They have not patched up their ruinous house, but have taken it down wholly, and laying anew the foundation, in the *rights of men*, have erected on it a superstructure that will be the admiration of the world.'⁹¹

At this point, Burke's opponents had taken care to point out the difference between the Revolution in France and the 1688 Revolution in Britain whose moderate turn had been induced by Burke in order to argue against the radical nature of the former. According to William Belsham, the French Revolution, though consonant in principle with the 1688 Revolution, could not have followed its course of moderation:

The Revolution of France. . . is equally capable of vindication with that of England, for both rest upon the same general foundation – the rights of the people; both have in view the same object – the happiness of the people. In this important respect they differ, that with them this object was attainable only by a total subversion, with us by a resolute defence of the antient constitution.⁹²

There were many reasons to explain such a difference. It was, for one thing, widely held that the situations of Britain and France on the eve of their respective revolutions were essentially different. The constitution of Britain in 1688 was a good system abused, while what France possessed prior to 1789 proved to be a government fundamentally bad. Samuel Parr had drawn this comparison:

In England the mischiefs which more immediately called for a remedy endangered a good government. In France they almost constituted a government completely bad. In England despotism was an excrescence, which deformed only the surface of the state. In France it was a canker, which preyed upon the vitals.

Both in bulk and in strength, the distempers that caused the Revolution in France were substantially much more serious than those evils that provoked the British to revolt in

⁹⁰ Flower, *The French Constitution* p. 104.

⁹¹ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* pp. 26–8.

⁹² Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays*, ii, 306.

1688. The French people purported to attack an inveterate disease which had spread throughout society and had produced more baneful effects: 'the root of it struck down to Tartarus, and its top towered almost into the skies.' From this point of view, Parr claimed, France needed a much more radical treatment than Britain had previously required.⁹³ Henry Mackenzie espoused a similar stand. The scale of change must always be greater in proportion to the extent of depravity that befell a country. While Britain in 1688 demanded but moderate change in order to restore a constitution whose abuses could be rectified without much violence, radical measures had to be taken in the case of France where distempers had become so deep-rooted that they could not so easily be done away. Thus, he wrote: 'the English constitution had only suffered some dilapidations which it was not difficult to repair: the French was rotten at the foundation, and it required a great deal of pulling down to remedy the mischief.'⁹⁴ The state of France before the Revolution, in sum, could admit of no comparison with that of Britain in 1688. The British in the Glorious Revolution had merely intended to remove a temporary impediment from the machine of government, one which could be taken away without having to break the whole into pieces; as for France, since her object was to reform an essentially oppressive system, some '*very material* change' therefore became indispensable.⁹⁵

It was maintained, upon the whole, that against an arbitrary regime like the French monarchy attempts at revolutions would be always plausible and, indeed, justifiable.⁹⁶ To cure the malady of France, Thomas Christie argued, any effort at '*partial* reform' would be of no great avail since that could at best provide a '*temporary* remedy' to an essentially incorrigible evil. Had the ancient establishments been allowed to remain in France, he believed, the same practices of oppression and control would always be repeated. The minds of the nation, then, would forever remained fettered and freedom could never be cultivated. 'It would have been to reform by ingrafting new principles on an old stock, but it would have ended in no reform at all.'⁹⁷ Radical writers were generally sceptical about the effect of gradual, or moderate, reform. The old regime of France, one wrote, was so bad that it was incapable of amendment:

⁹³ Parr, 'Miscellaneous Remarks', *Works*, iii, 231-2.

⁹⁴ [Henry Mackenzie], *The Letters of Brutus*, p. 39.

⁹⁵ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, pp. 32-3.

⁹⁶ Vicesimus Knox, *The Essence of the Calm Observer*, pp. 44-5.

⁹⁷ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 85, 91.

An entire revolution, therefore, was, in that country, indispensably necessary, before any degree of liberty could be effectually established; and an attempt to produce a partial or gradual reformation, would have had no other consequence than to rouse the indignation and resentment of the ruling powers, and to rivet so much the faster the fetters of absolute government.⁹⁸

It was all the more possible, James Mackintosh apprehended, that, if drastic change had not been made in time, the ancient institutions '*would have destroyed LIBERTY, before Liberty had corrected their SPIRIT*'. Moderate reforms could serve no more than to amuse the aspirations of the nation and might thereby lull the popular enthusiasm for change. Meanwhile, 'Power vegetates with more vigor after these gentle prunings'. Mild improvement could give new momentum to an old system, making it more able to resist essential reformation. In this manner, a golden opportunity for fundamental change might thus be missed forever:

If radical reform is not, at such a moment, procured, all partial changes are evaded and defeated in the tranquility which succeeds. The gradual reform that arises from the presiding principle exhibited in the specious theory of Mr. Burke, is belied by the experience of all ages.

It would be vain to expect that, through gradual reform, the spirit of freedom could silently enter into the old system and help by degrees to correct its defects 'without convulsion'.⁹⁹ With moderate reform, another writer claimed, some new spirit might indeed be infused by drops into the old system, but one would have to wait, he stressed, 'after the accumulation of an hundred years, when the grand-children of the present race were sinking into their graves, [before] a constitution less liable to exception might have appeared'.¹⁰⁰

IV

Allowing that radical measures were requisite for dealing with the problem of France, drastic change, however, had, at the same time, led to the emission of popular excesses which, in Burke's eyes, had tarnished the cause of freedom. To defend the Revolution, Burke's critics were hence obliged to rationalise its attendant enormities

⁹⁸ A. B. *Letters on the Character and Writings of Mr. Burke*, pp. 20-1.

⁹⁹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* pp. 105-7.

¹⁰⁰ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections* pp. 22-3.

and violences. The radical observers, basically, did not attempt to deny the fact that excesses had been committed, and that blood had been shed, in the course of the Revolution. One critic, for example, was ready to admit that the French Revolution had been 'somewhat disgraced by the licentiousness of the rabbles'.¹⁰¹ There could be no doubt, a second writer noted, that riots and excesses had taken place at Versailles on 6 October 1789.¹⁰² It was a scene, Benjamin Bousfield added, that must incur many sentiments of compassion and abhorrence from men of common sense and common feeling.¹⁰³ At a later stage, when the Revolution ran into extremes, even a passionate supporter such as John Thelwall was also appalled at the ferocious barbarity, and the 'almost unparalleled cruelty', of the revolutionaries.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, one tract commented, some of the crimes consequent on the Revolution were so black and heinous that the principle of humanity was outraged and the cause of freedom dimmed.¹⁰⁵

Though popular excesses could not be concealed, most opponents of Burke were prepared to exculpate them as the unavoidable evils that must accompany such a great change. '[W]e should remember,' Thomas Christie claimed, 'that we live in a world where it is in vain to expect pure good without any mixture of evil.'¹⁰⁶ In fact, another writer asserted, few radical changes had ever taken place which had not produced some offences.¹⁰⁷ Great revolutions, Sir Brooke Boothby also agreed, would always bring with them violence and excesses: 'We know too that change itself cannot be wrought without disturbance and disorder; the decomposition and combination of elements will be attended with commotion and effervescence.'¹⁰⁸ It would be impractical to expect, William Cuninghame stressed, that a great revolution could be completed without causing some atrocities at the same time.¹⁰⁹ To be sure, it was added, all revolutions could not proceed with that 'gentle ebb and flow' which Britain

¹⁰¹ *A Short Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, (London, 1791), p. 7.

¹⁰² *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 117.

¹⁰³ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ Thelwall, *Sober Reflections*, p. 63.

¹⁰⁵ *Thoughts on a Peace with France*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁶ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 127.

¹⁰⁷ *Thoughts on a Peace with France*, p. 40.

¹⁰⁸ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁹ Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings*, p. 39.

had previously experienced.¹¹⁰ The reason for this seemed clear enough. In a great revolution, especially that of a popular nature, James Mackintosh pointed out, violence could hardly be avoided:

when a general movement of the popular mind levels a despotism with the ground, it is far less éasy to restrain excess. There is more resentment to satiate, and less authority to controul. The passion which produced an effect so tremendous, is too violent to subside in a moment into serenity and submission. The spirit of revolt breaks out with fatal violence after its object is destroyed, and turns against the order of freedom those arms by which it had subdued the strength of tyranny.

It could not be imagined that a people, long sore with oppressions, would be 'punctiliously generous in their triumph, nicely discriminative in their vengeance, or cautiously mild in their mode of retaliation'.¹¹¹ At length, Gilbert Wakefield would dismiss as 'inconsequent' the claim that a well-regulated system could establish itself without producing some tumult, violence or bloodshed at the time of revolution when an entire community was so fiercely split by discordant sentiments, opposing interests and blind prepossessions.¹¹²

From the nature of things, popular excesses were ever apt to break out during a great national emancipation. When a man was suddenly set loose from a long bondage, Thomas Christie explained, his conduct might be expected to become somewhat 'enthusiastic, or even riotous'. Similarly, a people could commit some follies 'in the first moments of exultation, on the recovery of their liberty'.¹¹³ Capel Lofft asserted that, while a country fell into the ferment of revolution, even a usually well-tempered people could give way to excesses 'on being at once awakened from the iron slumber in which they had been held by Despotism'.¹¹⁴ It was like the giddiness of an inmate, Gilbert Wakefield wrote, who was suddenly exposed to the 'meridian blazes of the sun' after having been so long locked in

the gloomy recesses of a dungeon; where, for a succession of

¹¹⁰ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 26.

¹¹¹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 162-4.

¹¹² Wakefield, *A Reply to the Letter of Edmund Burke, Esq. to a Noble Lord*, p. 41.

¹¹³ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 133.

¹¹⁴ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 92.

years, no light, save the casual glimmerings of a star, or the pale glances of the moon, shall render visible the palpable darkness, that environs him.¹¹⁵

It was exactly the case with France. The French people were long buried in the darkness of servitude; at the first dawn of freedom, thus Mackintosh noted, they became unable to tell the proper 'boundaries of their duties and their rights':

It was no wonder that they should little understand that freedom which so long had been remote from their views. The name conveyed to their ear a right to reject all restraint, to gratify every resentment, and to attack all property.

And this accounted for some of the commotions and calamities in the Revolution.¹¹⁶ Many radical observers, hence, pleaded for a sympathetic view of the conduct of the French people. It was urged that special allowance should be made for the temporary excesses of an oppressed and exasperated people, who were, 'in a moment of delirium, agitated at once by the frenzy of joy for the actual overthrow of despotism'.¹¹⁷ In those circumstances, Joseph Towers wrote, circumspection was hardly desirable: 'It was not to be expected that a people, just emerging from a despotic government to an high degree of liberty, should in every respect act with perfect discretion, wisdom and moderation.'¹¹⁸

While popular excesses in the Revolution were admitted, there was, however, a general opinion among the radical writers that the picture given in Burke's *Reflections* had been grossly overcoloured. Burke's account of the violences and misfortunes befalling the French nation, Thomas Christie claimed, was an exaggeration in the highest degree.¹¹⁹ There was perhaps no other event in history, James Mackintosh pointed out, which had been more widely, malignantly, and systematically exaggerated than the French commotions. He conceived Burke's picture of the Revolution to be a mere 'illusion' perceived through a '*moral optics* which makes near objects so

¹¹⁵ Wakefield, *A Reply to the Letter of Edmund Burke, Esq. to a Noble Lord*, p. 41.

¹¹⁶ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 179.

¹¹⁷ See: Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays* ii, 237; *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 117.

¹¹⁸ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* pp. 83-4.

¹¹⁹ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France* pp. 120-1.

disproportionately large'. Had it been placed under a proper light, people would have been rather struck at 'its unexampled mildness, and the small number of individuals crushed in the fall of so vast a pile'.¹²⁰ Indeed, Thomas Paine asserted, 'when the French Revolution is compared with the revolutions of other countries, the astonishment will be, that it is marked with so few sacrifices'.¹²¹ Many writers held on to the view that few revolutions of such consequence could be accomplished with so little violence.¹²² As Benjamin Bousfield put it:

Notwithstanding Mr. Burke's pathetic tale descriptive of the excesses and enormities committed on the mobs of France, . . . we may challenge his historical research to produce any one instance in either antient or modern annals, where a revolution, of any nearly equal magnitude, was effected with less enormity or less bloodshed. The unhappy objects of popular rages and popular sacrifice were few, comparatively speaking.¹²³

Historically, Mackintosh remarked, Holland, England and America had, in their respective struggles for freedom, all experienced more bitter wars and prolonged terrors: 'the different portions of liberty which they enjoy, have been purchased by the endurance of far greater calamities than have been suffered by France'.¹²⁴ In Thomas Christie's estimation, the total number of people killed since the Revolution were far less than those whom kings had sacrificed in 'a *single* battle of an unjust war'.¹²⁵ In fact, John Butler noted,

the secret intrigues of a cabinet council of the best regulated state or common wealth in Europe, have done some more mischief, and shed more human blood, by one rash decision, than all the blundering stratagems of the National Assembly of France were capable of doing.¹²⁶

Compared with other occurrences, Bousfield claimed, the excesses of the French mob

¹²⁰ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 170, 175-6.

¹²¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 72.

¹²² Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, p. 84; Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 120; *A Short Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 7-8.

¹²³ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, p. 19.

¹²⁴ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 167-70.

¹²⁵ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 128.

¹²⁶ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject*, p. 13.

would prove only too trivial.¹²⁷ 'In this French Revolution, considering the numbers concerned, and the opposing interests,' another writer echoed, 'it is almost miraculous, that it should attend with so few which do violence to humanity.'¹²⁸

Two more things deserved further notice. It was claimed, first, that the behaviour of the mobs in the French Revolution was not particularly violent. In British history, Sir Brooke Boothby claimed, the siege of Londonderry (1699) had produced more horrors than all that could be attributed to the French people in the present turmoil. In fact, the history of France itself witnessed more examples of an even more horrid nature: 'The execution of M. Foulon cannot be compared for atrocity with that of the Marechal D'Ancre, or the massacre of the King's guards with the nights of St. Bartholomew.'¹²⁹ Secondly, attention was also drawn to the fact that, for all its commotions and tumults, the Revolution had not turned violence into a constant policy. During the Revolution, Henry Mackenzie observed, the popular outrages had not occurred so frequently as might have been expected on such an occasion.¹³⁰ The scene on 6 October was no doubt unpleasant, and the massacres on 10 August and 2 September were indeed horrid. It was, however, a great wonder, the *Political Correspondence* claimed, that the conduct of the French people,

since the first Revolution, has not consisted of an incessant series of slaughters, in consequence of the treacheries they have had to encounter, and the sanguine spirit they might be expected to have imbibed, from a long familiarity with the dungeons, tortures, and racks, of their ancient Government.¹³¹

Furthermore, Benjamin Bousfield stressed, those people who fell in the turmoil were mostly those who had been the 'willing instruments' of the horrible despotism and whose lives could, therefore, be justly forfeited.¹³² Thus, Thomas Christie claimed:

Though I regret their mistaken violence, I see it only took place where they conceived themselves threatened with the *greatest* danger;

¹²⁷ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 18.

¹²⁸ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 26-7.

¹²⁹ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* pp. 23-4.

¹³⁰ [Henry Mackenzie], *The Letters of Brutus*, pp. 40-1.

¹³¹ *Political Correspondence* p. 103.

¹³² Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 20.

and while I deplore their needless cruelty, I cannot at the same time hinder myself from perceiving, that they imagined themselves acting as the Ministers of Justice, appointed to take vengeance on their oppressors.¹³³

At length, Bousfield added, the zeal that actuated the French people, no matter how excessive and mistaken, was honourable after all: 'Their object was not to plunder or to despoil, or to enrich themselves. Their fury was directed against the plunderers of the state, and the supposed oppressors of the people.'¹³⁴

If, however, the people of France had indeed turned out to be violent and atrocious, it was the ancien regime itself that was to blame. The Revolution had not nursed their propensity for savagery. It had its remote origin, John Thelwall claimed, in the inhuman environment of the old despotism; the Revolution having but given it an opportunity to display itself in open deeds. 'Revolutions are touchstones for the real dispositions; but they do not, like the whip of a harlequin's sword, change the dove into a tyger, or the tyger into a dove.'¹³⁵ How, then, did the people become atrocious under the ancien regime? The barbarity of the French mobs, according to Thomas Christie, had much to do with the utter ignorance in which the nation had been deliberately kept.¹³⁶ Francis Stone would blame the French disposition to 'cruel outrages' on the general demoralisation of the French people, caused by the failure of its old government to provide better instruction for the people in the obligations of religion, in the duties of morality, in the virtues of industry, and in the knowledge of the rights of man.¹³⁷ The tyrannic legal practices with which the ancien regime contrived to punish its subjects, furthermore, also produced adverse effects. On the one hand, these ruthless acts had operated to dehumanise the common people. The often sanguinary scenes of horror and barbarity seen in the old government, Thomas Christie remarked, tended to inure the people to atrocities:

¹³³ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France* p. 122.

¹³⁴ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 20. It needs to be noted, on the whole, that the French Revolution was probably, as its British supporters had claimed, less violent at its early stage. By 1793-4, when the Reign of Terror prevailed, however, the case seemed very different. The British radicals, indeed, would find it not so easy to play down the later violence of the French Revolution.

¹³⁵ Thelwall, *Sober Reflections*, pp. 65, 85, 87-8, 94-5.

¹³⁶ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France* p. 126.

¹³⁷ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 133-4.

The *Bastille* had accustomed them to condemn and punish without trial or accusation; the frequent repetition of *public capital punishments* . . . had familiarized them with putting men to death; the *gibbets* of the State pointed to the *lanterne*, and the *racks, stakes* and *wheels* of established authority, had fatally habituated them to shut their ears against the cries of the dying, and to abuse the bodies of the dead.¹³⁸

Practices of this nature, Catharine Macaulay stressed, would naturally strike great terror into men's minds and operate to barbarise the people.¹³⁹ 'The effect of those cruel spectacles exhibited to the populace,' Thomas Paine echoed, 'is to destroy tenderness, or excite revenge.' It was to torture their feelings, harden their hearts, and, as a result, render them ruthless.¹⁴⁰ In the meantime, the old regime, by such brutal practices, had also set up examples of atrocities apt to instruct the people how to revenge themselves. In truth, Christie insisted, the savage acts returned upon the fallen *grande*s were all learned from their former governments. The people in France had been ruthlessly treated; when once power fell into their hands, they would, it might be expected, retaliate upon their oppressors in the same manner as had previously befallen them.¹⁴¹ Thus, Paine concluded: 'It is over the lowest class of mankind that government by terror is intended to operate, and it is on them that it operates to the worst effect. They have sense enough to feel they are the objects aimed at; and they inflict in their turn the examples of terror they have been instructed to practise.'¹⁴²

Most of the violences complained of, nevertheless, might not have happened, it was further argued, had it not been for those malicious provocations from the enemies of the Revolution. The outrages of the French people, one author asserted, were directly provoked by the very difficult situation confronting them. From both within and without, the Revolution had faced tremendous opposition that served to sow 'suspicions, jealousy, and party rancour and malignity'.¹⁴³ When the Revolution was under threat, Charles Pigott stressed, the people were driven almost to madness for fear that their new freedom might be lost and the nation again replunged into

¹³⁸ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France* pp. 126-7.

¹³⁹ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflection of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 79-80.

¹⁴¹ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 127.

¹⁴² Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 80.

¹⁴³ R. P. *Three Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* (London, 1796), p. 44.

their ancient horrors. Under such an infinitely complicated situation, any kind of enormity could take place.¹⁴⁴ Before the court party revealed their 'infernal intentions', one author noted, the people had shown no sign of tumult. Unfortunately, while the National Assembly was pursuing reforms,

a proclamation was issued for their dissolution; - a military force was employed to drive them from their house, - the existing Ministry, which possessed a considerable portion of popular confidence, were compelled to resign their places to successors odious on account of arbitrary principles, and well known enmity to *the States* - an army was collecting, under the command of the sanguinary *Broglie* - the most diabolical measures, were adopted for causing an artificial scarcity of provisions.

These moves combined to disclose 'a horrid determination to subdue the spirit of reform'.¹⁴⁵ Joseph Towers, likewise, recounted:

The firing on the people in the gardens of the Thuilleries on the 12th of July, 1789, justly increased the suspicions of the inhabitants of Paris respecting the designs of the court; and when the National Assembly was conceived to be in danger, when foreign troops were brought to act against the citizens, when artillery was pointed against the capital, when the ministry was changed, and marechal Broglie was made minister of war, the people had abundant reason to believe, that all which had been done in favour of their liberties was about to be overturned.

This series of events was set to incite the people to violence and disorder.¹⁴⁶ There seemed no doubt, James Mackintosh added, that the French then had great apprehensions of sinister plots, whether 'real' or 'chimerical', against their freedom. 'These causes operating on that credulous jealousy, which is the malady of the Public mind in times of civil confusion, which sees hostility and conspiracy on every side, seem sufficient to have actuated the Parisian populace.'¹⁴⁷ In fact, Thomas Christie was convinced, a great part of the ensuing hardships could have been avoided if the Revolution had not faced so much stubborn resistance.¹⁴⁸ Those measures of strong

¹⁴⁴ Pigott, *Jockey Club*, Part III, pp. 204-5.

¹⁴⁵ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁶ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, pp. 84-5.

¹⁴⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 186-8.

¹⁴⁸ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 115.

coercion,' Henry Mackenzie echoed, 'were necessarily opposed by exertions of equal force; and in such conflicts, in the shock of heated and contending parties, not only delicacy and decorum, but even justice and humanity are sometimes forgotten.'¹⁴⁹

To Burke's critics, at last, the popular excesses attendant upon the French Revolution, though regrettable, were at least excusable. It was the more so if one considered that the Revolution was expected, in the long run, to produce incalculable good to the nation as a whole. Those popular excesses which were often deplored as having tarnished the cause of the Revolution, James Mackintosh urged, must be treated with an expansive mind. People should learn to approach the defects of the Revolution, not with a 'womanish and complexional sensibility' which shrank 'at a present evil, without extending its views to future good', but with a 'manly and expanded humanity' which fixed its steady eye 'on the object of general happiness'. This was not of course to suggest that a crime could always be committed because there was prospect of a certain good; however, Mackintosh asserted, no one could pretend that, in the case of the French Revolution, '*we are to decline the pursuit of a good which our duty prescribed to us, because we foresaw that some partial and incidental evil would arise from it.* On balancing the limited evil of transient anarchy with the inestimable good of established liberty, the French Revolution proved commendable.¹⁵⁰ Henry Mackenzie took a similar stand. Speaking of popular excesses, he claimed:

If it sometimes shook the pillars of justice, if it sometimes loosened the bonds of humanity, the transient evil must be endured for the sake of the future permanent good. If France shall ultimately obtained freedom at no greater expence than the blood which has already been spilt, though individuals may have to mourn their private losses, the public cannot repent of the purchase.¹⁵¹

In the opinion of Sir Brooke Boothby, when much was to be gained much would have to be hazarded: 'The destruction of an inveterate tyranny, and the probable establishment of a free constitution must be always regarded as cheaply purchased at the expence of a few years of anarchy and disorder.'¹⁵² He urged the true lover of

¹⁴⁹ [Mackenzie], *The Letters of Brutus*, pp. 39-40.

¹⁵⁰ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 164-7.

¹⁵¹ [Mackenzie], *The Letters of Brutus*, p. 41.

¹⁵² Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 20-1.

liberty not to make too much of the blemishes of the Revolution, for, after all, the excess of freedom remained a 'glorious fault'.¹⁵³ William Belsham also stressed that the confusion and bloodshed caused by malicious provocations should not derogate in the least from the merits of the Revolution itself.¹⁵⁴ And to Robert Hall, no matter how lamentable these crimes and disorders might have been, 'the French Revolution has always appeared to me, and does still appear, the most splendid event recorded in the annals of history'.¹⁵⁵

v

The British sympathisers with the French Revolution went on to defend the National Assembly whose composition had been so vehemently vilified, and whose authority so vigorously challenged, in Burke's *Reflections*. In spite of Burke's assault, his critics were generally prepared to accept the Assembly as the true representation of the French people. The French legislators, it was claimed, were chosen largely from 'the favourable opinions, and unbiassed suffrage, of their constituents'.¹⁵⁶ The election, another asserted, had been conducted with fairness and justice.¹⁵⁷ It was, Benjamin Bousfield agreed, pure, virtuous and uninfluenced. He maintained that the French people had been serious in their 'first exercise of the glorious privilege of election':

There was not time for corruption, intrigue, and under influence, to debase the principles, to pervert the judgment, and to suppress the spirit of the people – All was done on the impulse of the moment, and that impulse must have been virtuous.¹⁵⁸

The whole nation, meanwhile, was conceived to have been completely, and comprehensively, represented. Men from different ranks and various professions had all been returned.¹⁵⁹ It was at least, Joseph Priestley insisted, a more genuine

¹⁵³ Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and on Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, p. 97.

¹⁵⁴ Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Essays* ii, 340.

¹⁵⁵ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 107–8.

¹⁵⁶ *Short Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 12.

¹⁵⁷ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, p. 21.

¹⁵⁸ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, pp. 24–5.

¹⁵⁹ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, pp. 119–20.

representation than the Parliament of Britain.¹⁶⁰

Burke had cavilled at the the National Assembly, reviling the obscure origins of its members. Most of his critics, on the contrary, contended that such an allegation was both mistaken and slanderous. The French people in the election, it was true, had not particularly favoured those from higher orders. This seemed, however, but too natural. 'In France,' Benjamin Bousfield claimed, 'the nobility were all, and the people nothing.' Public virtues in that country could scarcely be discovered among its higher ranks, who, he asserted, were merely interested in forging the chains for the people.¹⁶¹ Moreover, the States General had been convened to undertake reform, aiming to eradicate the abuses of the privileged orders. It would be unreasonable, then, to expect that the French people would give such a task to a class whose privileges had become the object of reform. They had, instead, chosen to entrust it to men of less rank, whose views were more agreeable to their own.¹⁶² Notwithstanding this, one would be much mistaken if he supposed that the delegates to the National Assembly were mostly from the lowest, and the most despicable, social classes. If the people of France had thought it unwise to select their representatives from the higher orders, there was equally no reason why they should risk giving the serious task of reform to people of contemptible condition. Indeed, one writer contended:

Reason cannot easily be persuaded that in the election of representatives, upon an occasion of the highest solemnity, success should have attended the most contemptible of every condition; and, least of all, that the clergy should be so blind to their own interest, as to fix upon the meanest, the poorest, the most worthless members of the church to be the representatives of that ever jealous order, in the grand council of the nation.¹⁶³

Evidence seemed to suggest that the middle class had, in reality, formed the main body of the National Assembly. According to Joseph Towers, the people of France, in the election, had shown a preference for 'professional men'.¹⁶⁴ They included, James Mackintosh recounted, mainly lawyers, physicians, merchants, men of letters,

¹⁶⁰ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 13.

¹⁶¹ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 25.

¹⁶² *An Answer to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 44-5.

¹⁶³ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections* p. 20.

¹⁶⁴ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 121.

tradesmen and farmers. Such choices, in a sense, were unavoidable: 'These professions then can only furnish Representatives for the *Tiers Etat*' The people had no other proper candidates: these groups constituted the 'middle rank' of the community, within which, Mackintosh indicated, 'all the sense and virtue of society reside'.¹⁶⁵ Thus, Benjamin Bousfield wrote: 'It is true, there are some great exceptions, but in general, the public spirit of the country resides among the middle class of men.'¹⁶⁶

Burke's opponents had undertaken, in particular, to defend the merits of the two delegations dominant in the National Assembly, the lawyers and the lesser clergy, whom Burke had contemptuously styled as 'country attorneys' and 'country curates'. On the one hand, James Mackintosh was confident about the political potential of the legal profession:

The majority of the Third Estate was indeed composed of lawyers. - Their talents of public speaking, and their professional habits of examining questions analogous to those of politics, rendered them the most probable objects of popular choice, especially in a *despotic* country, where political speculation was no amusement for the leisure of opulence.

He continued to confute Burke's allegation that the lawyers delegated had come chiefly from the unlearned and mechanical part of the profession. The list of the Assembly, he noted, suggested that the majority of them belonged to the 'provincial advocates', a group whose importance in French society, in his opinion, could not be estimated by the 'English' idea of 'country attorneys'.¹⁶⁷ The deputies of the clergy, meanwhile, were also not lacking in talented men. Joseph Towers believed that even among the lower clergy there could be found many people who were well qualified for the role as legislator.¹⁶⁸ Burke's claim, that most of the representatives of the clergy were ignorant, seemed ill-founded. They were composed mainly of parochial clergy, who, Mackintosh again indicated, should not be ranked with the poor 'country curates' of England.¹⁶⁹ To emphasise the political capacity of the two leading groups of

¹⁶⁵ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 128-9.

¹⁶⁶ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 25.

¹⁶⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 130-1.

¹⁶⁸ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 122.

¹⁶⁹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 136.

legislators, one author had thus asserted: in France

the provincial advocates. . . were to the distinguished magistrates. . . what the compass is to a ship in a voyage around the world; that the mere country curates. . . have, either in divinity, law or politics, more of true knowledge than the generality of the high clergy. . . and are all endowed with the hearts of Gentlemen and men of honour.¹⁷⁰

Compared with the parliamentarians in Britain, Joseph Towers satirised, there was no reason to suppose that the country divines and the practitioners of law and physicians could not

make full as good legislators, as many of those fox-hunters and sportsmen, who have often appeared in the former parliaments of Great Britain; and who have been much more attentive to the preservation of the game, than to the preservation of the liberties, or to the promotion of the interests of their country.¹⁷¹

For Joseph Priestley, after all, no matter from what class these delegates were elected, there seemed no doubt that they must have been persons 'in whom their constituents thought they could best confide'.¹⁷²

The moral fitness of the French legislators was also widely acclaimed. Benjamin Bousfield, for one, declared that the the National Assembly had consisted largely of people whose enlightened wisdom, public virtue and private integrity would enable them to fulfil the sacred trust of the state.¹⁷³ The French legislators, Catharine Macaulay remarked, had combined a '*bold and enterprising spirit*' with the '*disinterestedness of principle*'.¹⁷⁴ George Rous, moreover, praised their 'honest intention' to promote the public welfare:

These men could not intend to convert a *public* trust to *private* benefit, who began their operations by enabling the nation to *crush all their oppressors*. That their labours have, in fact, advanced the public

¹⁷⁰ *An Address to the National Assembly of France*, pp. 51-2.

¹⁷¹ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, pp. 120-1.

¹⁷² Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 14.

¹⁷³ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 25.

¹⁷⁴ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* pp. 90-1.

happiness, twenty-five millions of witnesses. . . attest, who enthusiastically devoted to the new constitution, contend only who shall be most active in its defence.¹⁷⁵

For Mark Wilks, the Assembly had revealed the soundest judgment and the most extensive legislative capacity. It became an institution where 'mercy and truth meet together, where righteousness and peace embrace each other'.¹⁷⁶ Its members had shown, Joseph Towers added,

a greater degree of intellectual illumination, a more ardent zeal for the principles of just and equal, and. . . more noble and sublime views, than any other body of men invested with power in that country, from the foundation of the French monarchy to the present hour.¹⁷⁷

At last, John Butler noted that, though the new legislators of France might not be perfect, they had taken care to act on the 'strictest principles of liberality'.¹⁷⁸

The legitimacy of the National Assembly itself, too, needed to be vindicated. The States General, if following its ancient rule, had to be convened in three separate orders – the nobility, the clergy and the third estate – each with a similar number of delegates. From the procedural view, Burke had accused the French legislators of having grossly violated the regulation of the States General by not only doubling the delegates of the third estate but even conflating the three distinct orders into one assembly.¹⁷⁹ In response to this charge, Burke's opponents, though unable to dispute such facts of violation, were ready to defend them as deviations necessitated by the critical situation of the time. It was well known that the aim of the States General was to reform abuses which had much to do with the privileges of the nobility and clergy. To achieve this object, William Belsham asserted, the people should be allowed to secure a proper share of political influence. This naturally meant that the delegates of the third estate in the States General had to be made equal in number to that of the other two orders united.¹⁸⁰ Unless the number of delegates of 'the oppressed' were

¹⁷⁵ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 9.

¹⁷⁶ Wilks, *The Origin and Stability of the French Revolution*, pp. 12–3.

¹⁷⁷ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, p. 117.

¹⁷⁸ Butler, *Brief Reflections on the Liberty of the British Subject*, p. 26.

¹⁷⁹ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 315.

¹⁸⁰ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 201.

increased to the same level as that of 'the oppressors', the much expected reform would be defeated.¹⁸¹ This measure, again, would be good for nothing, Thomas Christie added, if the three orders continued to meet in separate houses and vote by orders. Little reform could be expected from a States General 'meeting and voting on the old system':

From an attentive consideration of the former state of France, of the prevalence of ancient prejudices, and ancient habits, . . . and still more from the dispositions and conduct actually manifested by the various *orders* of men, at the summoning of the *Etats Generaux*, it is to me perfectly clear, that if the States had adhered to their ancient form, and continued to vote by distinct orders, the Reformation so much hoped and wished for, would have ended in a mere farce – nothing great or effectual would have been done.¹⁸²

The reason for this was clear enough. If the States General continued to meet in its ancient form, Sir Brooke Boothby noted, an alliance of the two higher orders would be able to reduce the delegation of the people into a mere nullity.¹⁸³ The nobility and clergy, James Mackintosh claimed, always had great stakes in perpetuating those abuses that were to be reformed. Their possession of two equal and independent voices within the States General would render the efforts of the third estate impotent and nugatory.¹⁸⁴ Francis Stone emphasised that the two first orders, more attentive to their own exclusive interests, would be sure to outvote the third estate by two to one. In this manner, the delegates of the people would be turned into no more than cyphers; and 'the public safety, welfare, and liberty would have been neglected, and sacrificed to the ambition and avarice of magnates and ecclesiastics'.¹⁸⁵ By and large, it was claimed, the States General in its old form proved 'considerably inconvenient for giving efficacy to the public will'.¹⁸⁶ It was apt, William Belsham asserted, to restrain the just influence and authority of the people. If, therefore, it were followed, there would be no hope 'of any effectual reformation of the political evils and oppressions by which the kingdom was reduced to a state the most deplorable, and

¹⁸¹ *Short Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 13.

¹⁸² Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 72-3, 100.

¹⁸³ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 19.

¹⁸⁴ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 42-3.

¹⁸⁵ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 83.

¹⁸⁶ *An Answer to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 46.

to which it had so long indignantly submitted'.¹⁸⁷ To Thomas Paine, after all, the National Assembly could be excused for its departure from the ancient course, which, he insisted, proved an essentially 'bad one'.¹⁸⁸

Burke had made further attacks on the National Assembly. First, he declared, the Assembly in making a revolution had obviously deviated from the original instructions of the people who seemed to desire no more than reform. He was persuaded that all the proposals set out in these instructions had run counter to what formed the 'fundamental parts of their Revolution'.¹⁸⁹ Secondly, the procedure through which the National Assembly took over the supreme authority was also regarded as radically defective: 'They do not,' he wrote, 'hold the authority they exercised under any constitutional law of the state.' The National Assembly, in his opinion, had merely availed itself of the national crisis to seize power in the state.¹⁹⁰

It was indeed true, respecting the first charge, that the National Assembly had failed to follow the literal instructions of its constituents. Samuel Parr was ready to admit that the delegates of the people had exceeded the limits of their original commission. This excess, however, was necessary, because, he argued, if the original instructions were to be strictly observed, these delegates would never be able efficiently to discharge 'all of the momentous duties for which they were appointed'.¹⁹¹ To Thomas Christie, on the other hand, this alleged abuse of trust was rather in appearance than in reality:

Every man of sense must see at first view, that their constituents could not foresee, any more than themselves, what it would be requisite to grant, or what the new and arduous scene they were going into might render necessary for them to do. If the Assembly departed from the *letter*, they preserved the *spirit* of their instructions. They were to act *for the best*, and they did so. Their constituents pointed out all that occurred to them at the times as good, and left them, as to the rest, to be instructed by circumstances.

He insisted that what the National Assembly had since undertaken had in no sense

¹⁸⁷ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 200-1.

¹⁸⁸ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 126.

¹⁸⁹ Burke, 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 94.

¹⁹⁰ Burke, 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 435.

¹⁹¹ Parr, 'Miscellaneous Remarks', *Works*, iii, 230.

violated the common goal of the people, who, it could be justly asserted, must have intended their representatives 'to do what they found necessary, to rectify abuses, and give France a free, regular, and fixed constitution'.¹⁹² In truth, Capel Lofft further remarked, the original letter that summoned the States General had expressed an explicit intention to entrust the delegates with a 'general power' to propose, advise and consent to everything that might concern the needs of the nation.¹⁹³ As Catharine Macaulay put it:

Whatever might have been held out as the ostensible object of the people in their demand for the meeting of their representatives, it certainly was intended by them to use their power, when thus vested with a legitimate form, and endowed with a capacity of legislation, not only to the *reformation* of abuses, but to the *regeneration* of their constitution.

She was in no doubt that the National Assembly had been invested with 'the trust of legislation, in the *highest* sense of the word'.¹⁹⁴ They had taken on themselves a mission which, as events developed, the original instructions were not sufficient to direct.

The National Assembly's assumption of supreme power, at length, could not be properly deemed as usurpation. If its authority, as Burke claimed, had not been held through formal constitutional procedure, it was mainly due to the necessity of the day. The States General, James Mackintosh pointed out, had been originally convened under existing laws as an ordinary legislature summoned to propose reforms, only to be transformed by many unexpected events into a national assembly assuming the supreme power to mould a new government. Ever since the Parisian revolt and the defection of the army, the old government had been totally paralysed, with its authority reduced to mere formality. From the nature of things, hence, the power of the state devolved on the National Assembly: 'Every other species of authority was annihilated by popular acts, but that of the States General. On them, therefore, devolved the duty of exercising their *unlimited* trust, according to their best views of general interest.' In Mackintosh's opinion, the lack of legal form in this conveyance of

¹⁹² Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 92-5.

¹⁹³ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 7-8.

¹⁹⁴ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 57.

power would not at all nullify the authority of the National Assembly. Great revolutions were always moments that proved too immense for technical legal formality; and all the sanction that could be expected on such occasions was the 'voice of the people': 'The authority of the Assembly was then first conferred on it by Public confidence,' Mackintosh went on, 'and its acts have been since ratified by public approbation.'¹⁹⁵ Thomas Christie also tried to defend the authority of the Assembly on the same plea. At the start, the French legislators had met, not as the National Assembly to mould a new constitution, but merely as the States General to propose reforms. As the national crisis deepened, however, the course of events became radicalised:

What was to be done in such a crisis? The executive power had yielded. . . Things had returned to the state of nature – all the springs of government were broken. There was but one way to prevent universal anarchy: that was for the States General to declare themselves a *National Assembly* – to assume the supreme power, not for the sake of governing, or rather tyrannizing over the people. . . but for the sake of forming to the people a just and equal Constitution, by which. . . their nation should hereafter be governed.

The National Assembly, hence, was completely justified in its assumption, and the use it had made, of state authority. It had, after all, received both the tacit consent and open approbation of the nation as a whole.¹⁹⁶ From the view of contract theory, in fine, Thomas Paine was to represent the Assembly as embodying the 'personal social compact' of the French people. It stood for the nation 'in its *original* character' and was therefore possessed of the supreme power to form a constitution.¹⁹⁷

VI

We shall conclude our discussion on the British radicals' defence of the French Revolution with a survey of their opinions about the new order set up in France. Before the new system was established, the National Assembly had undertaken, first of all, to dismantle the old establishments. A most conspicuous landmark to be swept away, without doubt, was the aristocratic order. The French nobility, George Rous claimed, had composed an army of 'political Janisaries' that supported the

¹⁹⁵ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 59–63.

¹⁹⁶ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 110–1

¹⁹⁷ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 94.

monarchy.¹⁹⁸ In France, James Mackintosh observed, the noblesse were 'a *tribe* of 200, 000' who formed themselves into a separate caste insulated from the rest of society. From sentiments, interests and habits, this order of men were naturally devoted to, and became utterly dependent on, the monarch. With privileged status, moreover, they had monopolised almost all the rewards and offices of the state, whereas the common people were reduced to 'political *helotism*'. Like other feudal institutions, the nobility of France were tainted with a spirit of despotism which rendered them utterly unfit for a free system.¹⁹⁹ According to Sir Brooke Boothby, the French noblesse always supported the hateful principle of arbitrary government and had become the declared and determined enemies of liberty.²⁰⁰ Though servile to the throne, they were ever imperious to the people: 'there was in the French Nobility,' one author claimed, 'something too much of pride, something too much of distance in conduct towards other man, and too exalted ideas of their own pre-eminence.'²⁰¹ In William Belsham's eyes, the noblesse were no better than a gang of privileged oppressors and tyrants.²⁰² They had always, Henry Mackenzie went on, held their people in a vassalage intolerably oppressive.²⁰³ In them, another added, the nation was to find many 'petty tyrants': 'their *hauteur*, their extortions and severity had rendered them odious to the people, and their dispositions dangerous to freedom.'²⁰⁴ Thus, the *Political Correspondence* declared:

the Nobles in general had not only rendered their order detestable by arrogance and injustice, but had proved by their claim of exclusive privileges, at the meeting of the States, and by their ostentation of contempt towards the *Tiers Etat*, that no liberal form of government *could* be carried on while titles were suffered to exist.²⁰⁵

Most radical writers, hence, argued in support of their immediate and total

¹⁹⁸ Rous, *Thoughts on Government* p. 9.

¹⁹⁹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 70, 73-4, 255-6.

²⁰⁰ Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and on Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, pp. 151-2.

²⁰¹ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections* p. 51.

²⁰² Belsham, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs'. *Essays* ii, 295.

²⁰³ [Mackenzie], *The Letters of Brutus*, p. 44.

²⁰⁴ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 13.

²⁰⁵ *Political Correspondence*, pp. 77-8.

suppression. The aristocracy of France was hostile to freedom and unfavourable to reform. They proved utterly incapable of being accommodated into the new order which the Revolution aimed to establish: 'But in France,' it was asserted,

the interest and prejudices of this order were so rooted in favour of that partial consequence which it enjoyed at the expence of the state, that there was no means of gaining such restrictions as liberty and policy required, without levelling the rank to the ordinary condition of life, and obliterating every mark of distinction.²⁰⁶

In fine, Sir Brooke Boothby emphasised, the abolition of this obnoxious order came to be 'an essential point, a *sine qua non* to a free constitution under any form'.²⁰⁷

The National Assembly, next, had moved on to restructure the Gallican Church, which would, it was claimed, need a radical reform in order for it to be integrated into the new order of the Revolution. 'I have no doubt,' George Rous declared, 'that the fabric of the Church establishment of France was adverse to public freedom, and that to new model it was a duty incumbent on the National Assembly.'²⁰⁸ The most striking aspect in this ecclesiastical reform was the nationalisation of church property, a measure actuated by the financial crisis of the state. In opposition to Burke's argument, the radical writers generally asserted that the nation had the right to retrench for public purposes the revenue of the church, which, in their opinion, should be deemed, not as ordinary private property which was inalienable, but as a public pension granted for ecclesiastical services and thus resumable upon national exigencies.²⁰⁹ The situation of France on the eve of the Revolution, further, seemed also to render such a policy unavoidable. France was then a state where the government was on the brink of financial bankruptcy while the church had amassed a great deal of property. The excess of wealth in the church had not only produced corruption among the clergy themselves, but had become destructive to industry, harmful to the state and utterly incompatible with freedom. 'Every consideration of

²⁰⁶ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, pp. 51-2.

²⁰⁷ Boothby, *Observations on the Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, and on Mr. Paine's Rights of Man*, pp. 150-1.

²⁰⁸ Rous, *Thoughts on Government*, pp. 60-1.

²⁰⁹ James Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 82-88; William Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 241-2; [Henry Mackenzie], *The Letters of Brutus*, pp. 44-5; Joseph Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, pp. 106-8; George Rous, *Thoughts on Government*, p. 60; *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 135; *Short Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 27-8.

religion, justice and national advantage', therefore, 'pointed at the superfluous property of the Church, as the national relief to the disordered finances of the State'.²¹⁰ As for the reforms within the Gallican church itself, the initial measures introduced were mainly institutional. It was proposed, among other reforms, to rationalise the provision for the clergy, to prohibit pluralities and enforce the rule of residence, to make clerical offices elective, to dissolve monastic institutions, and to reject the supremacy of Rome. 'No change, however,' William Belsham stressed, 'was made or even attempted in the doctrinal articles of the church.'²¹¹ The merits of the reformed church were widely acclaimed. In many respects, Benjamin Flower claimed, it seemed to excel over the old establishment. First, the new church restored to the people the right to elect their own pastors so that their spiritual concerns could be trusted to men with genuine religious convictions; second, the plan to provide for the clergy with state revenues would relieve the people from burdensome tithes; third, the more equal incomes for the clergy would secure to all of them a decent living without being excessive; fourth, the ban of pluralities and non-residence would make ministers more attentive to their religious duties; and fifth, toleration had also been enlarged to promote the freedom of religion.²¹² This last effort to establish the universal right of conscience, in particular, was to win general admiration from British radicals.²¹³ The great act of toleration, Benjamin Bousfield praised,

will operate more to reclaim the morals of the people, to promote christianity, and to procure respect for all religious establishments, than all the denunciations of vengeance, which, for many centuries before, had been bellowed from the pulpit of intolerant bigotry. – This will give respect and stability to their government – introduce wealth, extend the commerce of their country.²¹⁴

James Mackintosh, hence, felt no sorrow at the downfall of the old Gallican Church,

²¹⁰ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, pp. 37–46.

²¹¹ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 213. See also: *Political Correspondence*, pp. 78–9; M. C. Browne, *A Leaf out of Burke's Book*, pp. 53–4.

²¹² Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 300–35, 404–28.

²¹³ For examples: Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 107; Joseph Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, p. 113; Earl Stanhope, *A Letter from Earl Stanhope, to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 30; Sir Brooke Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 55; *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 30.

²¹⁴ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, p. 35.

which he believed had already degenerated into a corporation adverse to freedom.²¹⁵ In contrast, Benjamin Flower claimed, the reformed church appeared more recommendable: 'The church of France is now so far reformed, that it rivals all the other churches of Europe: not in splendour and riches, but what is infinitely better, in its conformity to the church in the earlier ages of Christianity.'²¹⁶

The ancient boundaries of the French provincial divisions, at last, were also smashed, and the whole was to be reorganised, from a loosely connected feudal monarchy, into a compactly unified modern state. Despite its appearance as a simple monarchy, James Mackintosh claimed, the old kingdom of France had never been truly integrated:

France was, under the ancient Government, a union of Provinces acquired at various times, and on different conditions, differing in constitution, laws, language, manners, privileges, jurisdiction, and revenue. It had the exterior of a simple Monarchy, but it was in reality an aggregate of independent States. The Monarchy was in one place King of Navarre, in another Duke of Brittany, in a third Count of Provence, in a fourth Dauphine of Vienne. Under these various denominations, he possessed, at least nominally, different degrees of power, and he certainly exercised it under different forms. – The mass composed of these heterogeneous and discordant elements, was held together by the compressing force of despotism. When that compression was withdrawn, the provinces must have resumed their ancient independence, perhaps in a form more absolute than as members of a federative Republic.

The feudal structure of the French monarchy, thus, became a great impediment preventing France from developing a single national identity, since every thing then 'tended to inspire *provincial*, and to extinguish *national* patriotism'.²¹⁷ Catharine Macaulay pointed out that the various provinces, after their annexations to the French throne, had still retained their own laws and customs which were apt to rekindle those local prejudices and provincial jealousies previously prevalent in the kingdom.²¹⁸ The old provinces could all claim their diverse local and immemorial exemptions and privileges, which, William Belsham insisted, could benefit themselves little only to

²¹⁵ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 98.

²¹⁶ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 256.

²¹⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 235–7.

²¹⁸ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 76.

jeopardise the interest of the whole community. These feudal remains, indeed, had formed an effectual bar to the complete coalescence and consolidation of France into one regular and well compacted whole: 'It was one of the first and greatest object therefore,' he continued,

of the National Assembly to abolish for ever these pernicious exemptions, privileges, and feudal rights, the remains of a barbarous and Gothic policy, and to establish a system of perfect equalization and uniformity; a system of whole energy should pervade alike all the classes of the community, and all the dependencies of the empire.²¹⁹

In sum, Thomas Christie emphasised, the extent and limits of the French provinces had all been settled by chance and caprice without regard to convenience and utility. They could serve no valuable purpose but to keep up the 'old feudal ideas'. The National Assembly, then, was right to abolish these old provincial privileges, jurisdictions and peculiarities, and to draw up a new and more equal division congenial to the spirit of the Revolution.²²⁰

Upon the ruin of the ancien regime was to be established a new order. The basic principle that framed the new constitution of France, one author stressed, was the doctrine of the rights of man.²²¹ The French people, Thomas Paine announced, were attempting to set up a system embodying the principles of the rights of man and the authority of the people, such as were publicly instituted in the *Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens*.²²² The legislators of France, James Mackintosh claimed, were actuated by the grand theory that the object of a legitimate government consisted in the 'assertion and protection of the NATURAL RIGHTS OF MAN'. It was this ideological framework that countenanced the new body politic.²²³

In speaking of form, however, the initial change in the political system of France, at first glance, might not appear so drastic. During the early stage of the Revolution, at least, the French had not contemplated establishing a republican order. The National Assembly, Thomas Christie noted, had not at once abolished the monarchical part of

²¹⁹ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 210.

²²⁰ Christie, *Letters the Revolution of France*, p. 152.

²²¹ *An Address to the National Assembly of France*, p. 52.

²²² Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 131-7.

²²³ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 204.

their government: They preserved the ancient form of Government, but corrected its abuses; they kept their King, but deprived him of the power of doing evil.²²⁴ Another writer was baffled at how to name such a political system. He tended to deem it as a 'mixed' government, which was made up of a limited monarchy and a what he called 'trimocracy'. The latter, different from simple democracy, proposed to confer political rights on those only who paid tax or had an income: 'the democracy respects *person*, the trimocracy *person* and *property*.'²²⁵ To William Belsham, indeed, the French constitution was not absolutely and perfectly novel. It was, none the less, noticed that the general plan of the new government was to be based on the principle of the separation of powers. From this angle, he suggested, the entire system could be compared to the British Constitution: 'The grand *contour*, or outline, is evidently copied from the constitution of England, to which, in the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial powers, that most important of all axioms of polity, it bears an intimate resemblance.'²²⁶ On the whole, James Mackintosh stressed, the French Revolution had ushered in a constitution which would lodge the legislative right in the representatives of the people, the executive authority in an hereditary first magistrate, and the judicial power in the personally elected judges 'unconnected either with the Legislature or with the executive Magistrate'.²²⁷

The executive power of the state would be placed in the king, who was to assume a role quite different from the old one. The king of France was formerly the sovereign authority in the nation. The new constitution, Thomas Paine observed, had distinguished the king from the sovereign: 'It considers the station of King as official and places Sovereignty in the nation.'²²⁸ Such an arrangement clearly reflected the ideological stance of the Revolution: the principle of popular sovereignty. 'It is a most essential part of the French Constitution,' Thomas Christie declared,

that all power emanates from the People; and that ultimately and in the last resort, sovereignty resides in the Nation. The King himself is the creature of the Constitution; he is the delegate of the majority of

²²⁴ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France* p. 207.

²²⁵ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 9.

²²⁶ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 234; *idem*, 'Examination of An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *ibid*, ii, 294-5.

²²⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 223.

²²⁸ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 111.

the Nation.²²⁹

Within this framework, Benjamin Flower claimed, the king of France became merely 'the representative of the people, entrusted with the supreme executive power, for their benefit'. He would, in fact, turn out to be more like the king of Britain: 'The royalty is delegated, hereditarily, to the race on the throne. The person of the king is sacred and inviolable. He reigns by the law, and it is in the name of the law he requires obedience.'²³⁰ A monarch of this nature, of course, could not enjoy as much power as it had before. To prevent the future revival of monarchical despotism, Francis Stone asserted, the new constitution had set to curtail the king's authority in many respects.²³¹ All those prerogatives were abrogated, *The Political Crisis* noted, the possession of which would be dangerous to the liberty and interest of the subject.²³² These included notably the authority of legislation, the right of taxation, and the power of war and peace. It might be complained that the crown seemed to have been left with too little power. Joseph Priestley, nevertheless, warned that 'kingly power'

is a plant which, having once taken root, is very apt to grow too luxuriant; and *this* though lopped, may sprout again. As the French kings had gradually acquired, and grossly abused, their power, it is not to be wondered at, if, in the first instance, the Assembly should have reduced it too low.²³³

After all, Catharine Macaulay remarked, the limitations set on the crown had been mostly necessitated by the then state of the nation, and would be still '*inseparable* to the security of the democracy'.²³⁴

Some writers argued, on the other hand, that the authority of the French king, even after such an abridgement, still remained too powerful. Against Burke's declamation, Thomas Christie asserted that the throne of France in fact had not lost so much power. The monarch would retain the respect of the people, and the dignity

²²⁹ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France* p. 228.

²³⁰ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 237-8.

²³¹ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 13-4.

²³² *The Political Crisis* p. 88.

²³³ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 11.

²³⁴ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 83.

of his condition; and he would lose nothing of his just and lawful prerogatives. 'He is still the Chief of the State, the Supreme Head of the Empire – the Head of the executive, and, conjointly with the Legislative Body, the Delegate of the legislative power.'²³⁵ In Mackintosh's opinion, the power a king of France would reserve was certainly as much as pure theory could allow to an executive magistrate.²³⁶ Thus, William Belsham recounted:

Though the constitutional authority of the Kings of France is reduced somewhat below the level of the authority of the Kings of England, it is still greatly superior to that with which the Kings of Sweden were invested previous to the Revolution in that country; and to that which the Kings of Poland at this day possess. The King of France is the sole depository of the executive power. He is the supreme head of the general administration of the kingdom. He sanctions or rejects the acts of the legislative body. He is the supreme chief of the army and the navy. The external safety of the state, and the conservation of its rights and privileges are confided to him. He disposes at his pleasure of the great offices of state. He appoints ambassadors to foreign courts. He nominates the military and naval commanders, the tribunitial and tresorial commissioners. And to maintain the dignity and splendor of the crown, he has a civil list revenue of 1, 250, 000. l. *per annum*

These could still constitute a 'mighty aggregate of power, wealth, and dignity'; and a monarch with an authority of this extent, indeed, would remain able to turn into a 'very worst species of despotism'.²³⁷ The throne of France, in short, was by no means reduced to a mere royal nonentity: 'In forming a new constitution,' thus one author wrote to a member of the National Assembly,

you did not destroy his prerogative, but only extracted the sting – you gave him every power calculated for the benefit, though none that he could employ to the injury of the state; like frugal directors of the public treasure, you abridged his enormous allowances, but left enough to support the true and amiable splendour of royalty.

There was no doubt that the king had lost not a little in the Revolution, 'but purely in proportion he [still] possessed *too much*'.²³⁸

²³⁵ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, pp. 235–7.

²³⁶ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 273–8.

²³⁷ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 233, 295.

²³⁸ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 7.

The National Assembly had also ventured to remould their old judicial system. The present judiciary of France had come into existence long before the feudal era and had become almost out of tune with the liberal spirit of the new age. Catharine Macaulay, attacking the French legal system, pointed out that

a system of jurisprudence formed by *ignorant barbarians*, from codes of law adapted to support the *despotic tyranny* of the *Roman Emperors*, could not be in unison with the sentiments of an enlightened people, or capable of supporting the principles of a *free* government.

It was an institution which was formed under the influence of the rankest prejudices and which, therefore, could not be fit for administering laws that were 'dictated by the *humane* spirit of an enlightened age'.²³⁹ Moreover, James Mackintosh observed, these judicial establishments had for years accumulated numerous abuses. The offices of justice became openly purchaseable and the judges generally regarded the 'right of dispensing justice as a marketable commodity'. The ancient judicature of France, that is, had failed to maintain equitable laws, and it could hardly be compatible with a free government.²⁴⁰ To sum up, one tract stressed, the obscurity of the ancient laws, and the venality of legal offices, had rendered the administration of justice in France ever precarious. It called for the abrogation of the old system and the formation of a new one.²⁴¹

One important step in the legal reform was the abolition of the 'parlements'. The French parlements – the high courts of justice of the country – had formed themselves into a corporation of 'Judiciary Aristocracy' whose spirit and claims, James Mackintosh wrote, were not consonant with liberty: 'They had imbibed a spirit congenial to the authority under which they had acted, and suitable to the arbitrary genius of the laws which they had dispensed.'²⁴² In fact, it was observed, the offices of the parlements had virtually become the favourite stepladder for those social upstarts aspiring to enter the noble order. These people, despite their lack of legal qualifications, were allowed, through purchase, into those judicial situations which

²³⁹ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 64.

²⁴⁰ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 103-4.

²⁴¹ *An Address to the National Assembly of France*, p. 59.

²⁴² Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 102-3.

were to 'decide on the property, the honour, and the lives of their fellow-citizens'.²⁴³ Furthermore, the parlements, as independent judicatures, had indeed in the past served as effective bulwarks against the inroads of arbitrary will. With the establishment of a democratic order, however, their functions in this aspect had become redundant. If the parlements could previously form some checks upon the monarchical power, Catharine Macaulay claimed, there was no reason for them, after the Revolution, to continue their control over the supreme authority of the people.²⁴⁴ As Mackintosh declared:

The usurped authority of the Parliaments formed, it is true, some bulwarks against the caprice of the Court. But when the abuse is destroyed, why preserve the *remedial evil*? . . . To such establishments, let us pay the tribute of gratitude for past benefit; but when their utility no longer exists, let them be cannonized by death, that their admirers may be indulged in all the plenitude of posthumous veneration.²⁴⁵

Since the National Assembly had already taken over the function of supervision, another author agreed, the parlements became dispensable: 'The offices of Parliaments were extinct, and therefore it was necessary they should be dissolved'.²⁴⁶

The object of the legal reform was to set up an independent judicial system able to dispense justice with equity. In this respect, William Belsham noted, the National Assembly had decreed in principle that the judicial power should be forever separated from the legislative and executive authorities. It proceeded to determine that the jury should be instituted in criminal courts, that justice should be gratuitously administered to the people, and that the office of judge should be no longer purchaseable or hereditary.²⁴⁷ Samuel Parr recommended the French decision to simplify the 'intricate, uncouth, and ponderous jurisprudence', to abolish the *lettre de cachet* and to mitigate the forms of punishment.²⁴⁸ On the other hand, there were also critical opinions. James Mackintosh, for instance, had great doubt about the venture of the Assembly to

²⁴³ *Short Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 29-30.

²⁴⁴ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 64-5.

²⁴⁵ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 104.

²⁴⁶ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, pp. 58-9.

²⁴⁷ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 212.

²⁴⁸ Parr, 'Miscellaneous Remarks', *Works*, iii, 223.

render the code of law sufficiently simple and readily intelligible, intending thereby to abolish professional lawyers. 'Of all the attempts of the Assembly, the complicated relations of civilized society seem to render this most problematical.'²⁴⁹ Capel Lofft, in addition, opposed the move to institute the popular, and periodical, election of judges. The experience and independence requisite for the office of justice would certainly militate against such a novel experiment.²⁵⁰

The legislative authority, no doubt, was to become the centre of politics under the new order. The French constitution vested this power in a body of representatives originating, Thomas Paine claimed, 'in and from the people by election, as an inherent right'.²⁵¹ The complicated system of representation which constituted this legislature, however, had turned out to be controversial. The National Assembly, first of all, planned to base the representation of the nation upon a combination of the three principles of population, territory, and contribution. Such a bizarre contrivance had met quite mixed responses. James Mackintosh, on the one hand, frankly opposed elements like territory and contribution to be represented. Territorial or financial representation, he claimed, was the monstrous relic of ancient prejudice: 'Land or money cannot be represented. Man only *can* be represented, and population alone ought to regulate the number of Representatives which any district delegates.'²⁵² Based on the principle of natural rights, Francis Stone also argued that only population could form the proper basis of the representation of a nation.²⁵³ Some critics, on the other hand, came to its defence. Benjamin Flower had voiced against James Mackintosh's view, arguing that, though land or money might not be represented, their possessors could be. People who owned greater property, or paid more taxes, ought to have their corresponding share of influence in politics. A representation combining the basis of population together with those of territory and contribution, he asserted, was consonant with the purest principle of justice and equity.²⁵⁴ It could form a system that, another claimed, would have the greatest regard to equality.²⁵⁵ Thomas

²⁴⁹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 271.

²⁵⁰ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* pp. 68-9.

²⁵¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 111.

²⁵² Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 228.

²⁵³ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 180.

²⁵⁴ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp.171-2.

²⁵⁵ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections*, p. 56.

Christie was convinced that inequality would never take place in such a contrivance: 'It is fortified even against the changes of events, and the destructive hand of time.' Indeed, he went on, this plan revealed the 'originality and correctness' of the National Assembly in 'their ideas of political economy'.²⁵⁶ To William Belsham, in fine, the combination of these principles in one election would be the most effectual method that human wisdom could work out to secure the aim of representation: 'the liberty and happiness of the community'.²⁵⁷

The gradation of elections won a more favourable reception. Francis Stone, it was true, had accused the National Assembly of having confused the principle of simplicity by bringing in a strange and perplexed hierarchy of representations. He agreed with Burke that the insertion of two intermediate elections would so distance the primary elector from his legislator that the connection between the one as constituent and the other as representative would be broken off and that all the professed responsibility in the latter would become pointless.²⁵⁸ James Mackintosh, on the contrary, was to welcome the hierarchy of elections^{as} 'a master-piece of legislative wisdom'. He had, first of all, tried to play down the question of responsibility at issue. No organised system, hitherto, had been able to prevent the possible 'variance between the *popular* and the *representative will*':

Responsibility, strictly and rigorously speaking, it can rarely admit, for the secrets of political fraud are so impenetrable, and the line which separates corrupt decision from erroneous judgment so indiscernibly minute, that the cases where the Deputies could be made properly responsible are too few to be named as exceptions. Their *dismission* is all the punishment that can be inflicted, and all the best Constitution can attain is a *high probability* of unison between the constituent and his deputy.

The French system of representation seemed able to answer this purpose. In fact, he continued, the hierarchy of representation had been obtruded on France by necessity. It was introduced as a means to prevent tumults, which were apt to happen in popular governments:

Had they rejected it, they had only the alternative of tumultuous

²⁵⁶ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France* pp. 196-7.

²⁵⁷ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays* ii, 379.

²⁵⁸ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 179.

electoral Assemblies, or a tumultuous Legislature. If the primary electoral Assemblies were to be so divided as to avoid tumult, their deputies would be so numerous as to make the National Assembly a mob. If the number of electoral Assemblies were reduced according to the number of deputies that ought to constitute the Legislature, each of them would be numerous enough, on the other hand, to be also a mob.

From a political view, Mackintosh stressed, the gradation of elections must be deemed as a grand improvement on the representative government.²⁵⁹ It was calculated, William Belsham echoed, to infuse animation and energy into every corner of the political system and, meanwhile, to preclude the kind of tumult and excess that were notorious in English elections.²⁶⁰ It could, another writer added, give the people 'the satisfaction of a suffrage while the dignity and fitness of delegates is secured'.²⁶¹

The qualification of property for the right of suffrage, on the other hand, was to call forth many criticisms. Francis Stone, for one, contended against property being set up as a qualification for election, which, he asserted, belonged to personal right in which property should not interfere at all:

The right of suffrage in the choice of legislators being merely a personal right, totally independent of the plus or minus of property, and consequently the poorest man's right equal with the richest, *every man* arrived at the age of twenty-one years, at least, should have been invested with the full enjoyment and exercise of it.

Adhering to the tenet of natural equality, Stone argued that by imposing tax restrictions the National Assembly had 'swerved from their wise and just principle of the equalization of all men'.²⁶² James Mackintosh, by conviction, opposed any kind of disqualification: 'I regard all *disfranchisement* as equally unjust in its principle, destructive in its example, and impotent for its pretended purpose.' It would prove inefficient and preposterous, he agreed with Burke, that the French constitution disfranchised all citizens who could not pay direct contributions: 'Nothing can be more evident than its inefficacy for any purpose but the display of inconsistency and the

²⁵⁹ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 240-1, 244-5, 247-8.

²⁶⁰ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 226.

²⁶¹ *Temperate Comments upon Intemperate Reflections* p. 56.

²⁶² Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 179-82. Stone proposed to disfranchise the ministers of the crown, who could in his opinion exert pernicious influence in elections; otherwise, he was prepared to extend this right even to 'aliens'.

violation of justice.²⁶³ Indeed, Capel Lofft asserted, the qualifications the French constitution set for the elective right would be too small to secure the independence of electors, but strong enough to infringe the principle which justly regarded the choice of a representative as 'a Right attached to the person of the Citizen, not to his property'. There was further danger to be apprehended. Such qualifications, however slight, if once admitted into the constitution, he warned, would 'furnish a Basis for more and more restraints'.²⁶⁴ Of course, not all radical writers were inclined to oppose the restriction of elective right. Catharine Macaulay, surprisingly, suggested that those who lived on the alms of society could not be entitled to enjoy political rights. She supported the decision of the National Assembly to limit the right of suffrage 'to every man who is not a pauper': 'This plan, in theory at least, promises to unite the highest degree of *freedom* with the highest degree of *order*.' It would be plausible in its appearance and 'exactly agreeing with the rights of the citizens in the *strictest sense* of the word'.²⁶⁵ Benjamin Flower admitted that the qualifications on the right of election were not in line with the principles of the Revolution. None the less, he indicated, the present state of France might not yet be ripe for universal suffrage: 'I confess,' he claimed,

that rendering any pecuniary qualification absolutely necessary, is seemingly contradictory to the declaration of rights; but the warmest friend of that declaration must confess, that the utmost care is requisite, in restoring to mankind rights which for a considerable length of time, they have not enjoyed, and which require to be understood in proportion as they are brought into exercise.

It would not be prudent all of a sudden to make the right of election universal while the majority of the nation was yet in ignorance. He was confident, however, that the people of France, once having become enlightened enough, would be able to assert this right: 'Should the passive citizens of France, at any future period, demand the exercise of those rights possessed by their fellow citizens, I trust their demand will

²⁶³ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* pp. 224, 270. He would not even see it proper to disfranchise the king's ministers: 'The presence of Ministers in the Assembly would have been of great utility in a view of business, and perhaps, by giving publicity to their opinions, favourable on the whole to Public Liberty. To exclude them from the Legislature, is to devote them to the purposes of the Crown, by giving them no *interest* in the Constitution.' *Ibid.*, pp. 270-1.

²⁶⁴ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* pp. 65-6.

²⁶⁵ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* pp. 77-9.

not long be resisted.²⁶⁶ For James Mackintosh, this abuse of disfranchisement was certain to be merely short-lived. He predicted that the spirit of reason and liberty, which had so far scored such mighty victories, would soon overcome 'this puny foe' and that the right of suffrage would, in due course, become universal.²⁶⁷

To the critics of Burke, generally speaking, the new order introduced into France was a remarkable achievement of the Revolution. Thomas Paine, for instance, applauded the French constitution for achieving a rational order of things: 'The principles harmonize with the forms, and both with their origin.' Its form grew out of the principles of the Revolution and would work, in return, for their perpetuation.²⁶⁸ The political system set up in France, George Rous claimed, was a noble edifice erected for the accommodation of public liberty.²⁶⁹ It was founded upon the equitable principle of fraternal union, aiming to wipe out all those tyrannous distinctions that had kept the nation in slavery.²⁷⁰ For Benjamin Flower, the French constitution promised to establish a system

that levels at once the corrupt prejudices with which the world has long been overcast; which annihilates despotism; which raises the depressed part of mankind; which breaks the fetters of slavery, both civil and ecclesiastical; which renounces those horrid principles of action that have made nearly one half of the world at war with the other; which has purified the church from those corrupt innovations that infested it for more than a thousand years past.²⁷¹

William Belsham, above all, was to compare this new order, in glory, with ancient Athens: 'The government of France,' he declared, 'like that of Athens, as described by Pericles, may now with a noble pride, boast "that it is popular, because the end of it is the happiness of the people or nation, and not that of a few individuals".' It would prove favourable to the liberty and happiness, he added, not only of the French nation, but also of the world at large.²⁷²

²⁶⁶ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 174-5.

²⁶⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 227.

²⁶⁸ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 114.

²⁶⁹ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 10.

²⁷⁰ *Political Correspondence*, p. 92.

²⁷¹ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 5.

²⁷² Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays*, ii, 247; *idem*, 'Examination of an Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *ibid.*, ii, 280.

These acclamations notwithstanding, the system established in the wake of the Revolution, in the eyes of its supporters, was by no means complete or perfect. One writer claimed that people might be highly pleased with the Revolution as a whole without endorsing every aspect of the new order. He would fain allow that some of its measures were likely to be inconvenient while the effects of others doubtful.²⁷³ William Cuninghame took care not to claim perfection for the French constitution. It was, he admitted, undoubtedly defective and many things in it should still be mended.²⁷⁴ Indeed, Benjamin Bousfield asserted:

Much has been done, and much certainly remains to be done. - It could not be the work of a day to reform the monstrous abuses of ages - where every object of good government was perverted, where every department of state was corrupt.²⁷⁵

The French constitution, another added, was the work of men and must, hence, ever be susceptible to errors. Defective as it might be, however, what was important was that avenues were not closed for further reform and melioration as experience might suggest, until the whole could be brought to the zenith of improvement and perfection.²⁷⁶ Most supporters of the Revolution seemed disposed to endorse such an optimistic view. There were, no doubt, flaws in the new system of France, but, Charles-Jean-Francoise Depont assured Burke, only time, experience and reflection were able to provide proper correctives.²⁷⁷ 'If any defects should be discovered in the new constitution of France,' Joseph Towers claimed confidently,

there is so much information, knowledge, and good sense, diffused throughout that nation, that. . . these defects will be rectified, and such a constitution finally established, as will in an eminent degree promote the freedom and happiness of the people.²⁷⁸

The French people, Henry Mackenzie echoed, would be able to overcome their difficulties and succeed, at last, in 'establishing, though not a perfect or an

²⁷³ A. B., *Letters on the Character and Writings of Mr. Burke*, p. 19.

²⁷⁴ Cuninghame, *The Rights of Kings* p. 40.

²⁷⁵ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 25.

²⁷⁶ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 19-20.

²⁷⁷ M. Depont, *An Answer to the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 4.

²⁷⁸ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, pp. 122-3.

unexceptionable government, one at least more consonant to the *natural rights* . . . and more friendly to the happiness of man'.²⁷⁹ For the moment, another writer admonished, people ought to greet a change that was on the whole a great blessing, and trust 'to time, and to further opportunity, for improving what was imperfectly finished'.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁹ [Mackenzie], *The Letters of Brutus*, pp. 46-7.

²⁸⁰ *An Answer to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 36.

CHAPTER 8
BRITAIN AND THE NEED FOR REFORM

'Of all nations in Europe,' Thomas Paine announced, 'there is none so much interested in the French Revolution as England.'¹ The British reformers, in particular, had been much agitated. Indeed, the French Revolution was to give new inspiration, and to bring new momentum, to the reform movement in Britain, which had lain dormant ever since the mid-1780s. The spectacle of France achieving liberty was a prospect that was bound to rekindle the hopes of the British radicals, who were already longing for change. 'I rejoiced in the hope,' David Williams declared, '... that England, stimulated by general emulation, might be induced to revise its government, correct its errors, and remove its inconveniences.'² It was from this perspective, in fact, that their enthusiasm for the revolution in a neighbouring country should be properly understood.³

I

The astonishing revolution effected in France, William Belsham observed, had excited in the minds of many people in Britain a spirit of political examination and enquiry.⁴ It inspired them to reflect on the present state of Britain. 'The French revolution,' Benjamin Flower claimed, 'compels us to consider our situation, and forces us to confess, that notwithstanding the collected wisdom of ages, which is so much boasted, there is still something materially wanting for our security.'⁵ Richard Price was among the first to catch the implication of the occurrences in France for Britain. In the Revolution Sermon of 4 November 1789, he hailed the French Revolution as ushering in a new era favourable 'to all exertion in the cause of public liberty'. Price naturally focussed his discourse on the pressing issues facing Britain. Reviewing the heritage of the Glorious Revolution, he claimed that the British people, though achieving a great deal in 1688, had unfortunately not then done quite enough to

¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 288.

² [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, pp. 119-20.

³ For the influence of the French Revolution on the reform movement in Britain, see: P. A. Brown, *The French Revolution in English History*, pp. 51-74; John Cannon, *Parliamentary Reform, 1640-1832* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 116-143; A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty*, pp. 19-31; and H. T. Dickinson, *British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789-1815*.

⁴ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays* ii, 356.

⁵ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 149.

provide for the 'secure and complete possession of the blessings of liberty', and that their posterity, as a result, were during the following century to see their constitution gradually sinking into abuses. It might be true that at present Britain had not yet arrived at the last stage of national corruption and misery, but, he reminded his audience, there remained much room for 'apprehension and alarm':

It is too evident that the state of this country is such as renders it an object of concern and anxiety. It wants the grand security of public liberty. Increasing luxury has multiplied abuses in it. A monstrous weight of debt is crippling it. Vice and venality are bringing down upon it God's displeasure. That spirit to which it owes its distinctions is declining; and some late events seem to prove that it is becoming every day more reconcilable to encroachments on the securities of its liberties. It wants, therefore, your patriotic services.⁶

Price was by no means alone in sounding the tocsin about the approaching crisis of Britain. Robert Hall, for instance, also warned that British liberty was at a critical moment:

The present crisis, is in my apprehension, the fullest of terror and danger, we have ever experienced. In the extension of excise laws, in the erection of barracks, in the determined adherence to abuses, displayed by parliament, in the desertion of pretended patriots, the spread of arbitrary principles, the tame subdued spirit of the nation, we behold the seeds of political ruin quickening into life. The *securities* of liberty. . . have given way.

Indeed, he believed, those who contemplated the present state of Britain would be 'tempted to predict the speedy downfall of liberty'.⁷

The radical observers contended that Britain under the old order was never as admirable as people had often thought it to be. One anonymous writer challenged Burke's claim that the British nation had prospered under its 'old fashioned constitution'. During the hundred years past, he pointed out, Britain had witnessed revolutions and rebellions. It had run to frequent armaments and had thus built up stupendous debts. Most serious of all, its people were to suffer repressive laws and excessive impositions.⁸ Benjamin Flower was ready to admit that since the 1688

⁶ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, pp. 29, 34, 39-41.

⁷ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 94, 104.

⁸ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 162-5.

Revolution the people of Britain had indeed secured a degree of felicity unknown to their ancestors. There could be no reason, however, to pretend that the nation had already reached a state of bliss:

What has been the happiest of our situation? Have we not, for this century past, been almost continually engaged in bloody and expensive wars? Have we not an enormous national debt, and a load of taxes, which press heavy upon the majority of the people?

He regretted that in the course of time Britain seemed to have gradually 'lost sight of the best principles of government'.⁹ William Belsham was actually not so sure whether the bulk of the community had enjoyed much more ease, comfort and happiness after 1688 than before. Observers were apt to marvel at the outward prosperity of Britain without attending to the real state of her people. In truth, he contended, the political order founded upon the Revolution Settlement had benefited only rich stockholders, great traders and those who depended on the government:

All these different classes of men talk much and loudly of the flourishing state of the kingdom. But those who are conversant with the middle and lower ranks of the community, who have visited the cottages, or rather the *hovels* of those stiled, in the language of aristocratic insolence, 'A Swinish Multitude', are sensible of the fallacy of this flattering, but fatal delusion.

The Revolution Settlement failed, in short, to bring many real advantages to the lower orders of society.¹⁰ In Britain, John Oswald echoed, the rich few flourished, and rioted in their enjoyments; but the great mass of the people were actually harassed and oppressed.¹¹ John Butler exclaimed: 'There are none richer, there are none poorer, than the people of England.' The present system of Britain tended to award privileges to a small minority who paid little regard to the general interest of the nation and who sought to 'swell their property at the expence of the poor, or keep the nose of the humble cottager to the grinding-stone'.¹²

The British people, there seemed little doubt, had suffered oppression and

⁹ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 149-50.

¹⁰ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays*, ii, 364-5.

¹¹ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 30.

¹² Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* p. 116.

injustice. Christopher Wyvill pointed out that, despite her apparent prosperity, there still existed many great and undeniable grievances in Britain: 'they are felt as evils; they are resented as injuries.'¹³ Excessive taxation was the grievance perhaps the most complained of. Robert Hall claimed that Britain had now accumulated a national debt, and had consequently multiplied her taxes, to a degree 'unexampled in any other age or country'.¹⁴ Since the 1688 Revolution, Mark Wilks declared, the British Government had, within the span of 103 years, contracted a public debt up to 'the moderate amount of TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY MILLIONS STIRLING'.¹⁵ The Hanoverian succession, Thomas Paine emphasised, had engulfed Britain in destructive continental politics, which were to occasion so enormous an increase in the national expenditure that the people were forced to bear a heavy load of taxes.¹⁶ To defray her huge expenditure, another author noted, taxation in Britain had soared exceedingly high, and duties were unreasonably levied 'on not only what people eat and drink, but on their windows, . . . on their rides, and on their walks'.¹⁷ A British subject was often compelled, Major John Scott observed,

under a severe penalty, to give to a collector an account of the number of his carriages, his horses, his men and maid servants, and to hold up an infant as a plea for the remission of a tax; to sign a muster-roll of his wagons, his carts, and his windows.

The burden was enormous, partial and oppressive.¹⁸ Indeed, George Rous asserted, impositions had become so widespread that every individual could feel its effect on most of his expences.¹⁹ Thus, another writer complained: 'The importunate tax-gatherer is never out of our houses, collecting money for the light of heaven, and diving into our pockets for the last solitary shilling, while water and air remain the almost only articles untaxed in the kingdom.'²⁰ It was so notorious that, John Butler

¹³ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England* p. 84.

¹⁴ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 88.

¹⁵ Wilks, *The Origin and Stability of the French Revolution*, p. 57.

¹⁶ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 253-5.

¹⁷ *Letters on the Present State of England and America* p. 35.

¹⁸ John Scott, *A Letter from Major Scott to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (London, 1791), p. 15.

¹⁹ Rous, *Thoughts on Government* p. 21.

²⁰ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke* p. 164.

claimed, foreigners were pleased to call Britain '*the Island of Taxation*'.²¹

Two kinds of taxes were especially singled out for attack: the excise and the window tax. The imposition of the excise was widely hated as the most oppressive of all taxes. The excise, George Rous claimed, was an odious and detestable system which rendered every one it touched 'a slave to the ruling Power'.²² *The Political Crisis* believed it to be an assessment most apt to promote abuses:

the collectors of the revenue are licensed in committing the most daring insults, under the pretence of doing their duty; while imposters, and others, frowning at the wanton severity of the laws, think themselves justified in carrying on an illicit trade, and in defrauding the public.²³

Under the mask of royal authority, John Butler complained, an exciseman was empowered to burst people's doors, ransack their houses and commit whatever depredations he pleased. He was authorised to stop any free subject on the king's highway, examining his goods and seizing anything thought amenable to the excise; 'and on the smallest resistance, a pistol is clapped to his head, his brains blown out'.²⁴ This could never be, Joseph Towers contended, a constitutional mode of taxation. It ran counter to the true spirit of the British constitution and would prove utterly inimical to British liberty:

the permanency of this mode of taxation, which has a tendency to render the crown less dependent on the parliament; the power that it gives to officers of the crown to enter men's houses at their pleasure, and without any warrant from a civil magistrate; the great increase which it occasions of revenue officers appointed by the crown; the deprivation of the subject, in excise causes, of the right of trial by jury; these. . . render the excise highly dangerous, and very inconsistent with the genius of a free nation.²⁵

The principle of liberty, John Butler insisted, could never exist in the measure of excise: There is no liberty, there is no happiness, where the excise laws are in full

²¹ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* pp. 82-3.

²² Rous, *Thoughts on Government* p. 41.

²³ *The Political Crisis*, p. 20.

²⁴ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* p. 64.

²⁵ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* pp. 11-2.

force.²⁶ At the same time, the 'window tax' was seen as yet another outrageous example of absurd and arbitrary impositions. *The Political Crisis* argued that to lay a duty on windows was tantamount to compelling the people to pay for 'light' which was a free gift of providence.²⁷ Britain was perhaps the only country on earth, John Butler exclaimed, where subjects were forced, against nature, to purchase light:

we are deprived the benefits of this great comforter of nature, and not permitted to enjoy the radiant light of the Sun, the free gift of heaven, without contributing to a tax that would hardly gain credit in any country in Europe.

'Every additional hole in the wall of our houses,' he added, 'is a fresh source of revenue to the king.'²⁸ To Joseph Towers, in sum, this imposition was essentially a bad tax. It would work to exclude light and air from the habitations of people, thus undermining 'the healthfulness and the beauty of the edifices of a country'.²⁹

The administration of justice in Britain became another main target of attack. It had been current, Joel Barlow noted, for people, 'especially among Englishmen, to speak in praise of the English jurisprudence, and to consider it as a model of perfection'. But, he contended, this appeared to be a grossly mistaken impression.³⁰ Robert Hall was also convinced that the British legal system was very defective. It proved too corrupt to serve as the proper rule of civil life: 'For want of gradual improvements, to enable it to keep pace with the progress of society, the most useful operations of law are clouded by fictions.'³¹ The penal laws, first of all, were condemned as being much too severe and too inhuman. Joseph Towers complained that there were too many capital punishments carried out in Britain, and that the penalties imposed were not always properly proportioned to the nature of the offence and to the degree of guilt.³² 'Our penal laws punish with death the thief who steals a few pounds,' exclaimed Mary Wollstonecraft. The laws seemed to regard the life of a deer more sacred than that of

²⁶ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* pp. 64, 68.

²⁷ *The Political Crisis*, p. 21.

²⁸ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* pp. 83-4, 86.

²⁹ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 15.

³⁰ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, p. 133.

³¹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 102-3.

³² Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 53.

a man.³³ The legal costs, meanwhile, were so high as to render justice barely accessible to the common people. Robert Hall observed that a lawsuit in Britain often incurred an expence 'as formidable as the penalty'. It could not, indeed, be fairly claimed that justice could be the same for the poor as for the rich, whose opulence must certainly place them in a more privileged position.³⁴ The murky multiplicity of legal procedure, Joel Barlow asserted, was the main factor which rendered legal charges so high that few people dared to make the attempt: 'The courts are effectually shut against the great body of the people, and justice as much out of their reach as if no laws existed.'³⁵ The corpus of the British laws, furthermore, were themselves rather complicated, and even often contradictory, beyond the comprehension of common folk. 'In England,' John Butler pointed out, 'we have laws to contradict laws, laws to explain laws. The combustibles of our acts of Parliaments are a heterogeneous compound of contradiction.' Its entire system was crowded with ridiculous absurdities and seeming contradictions which could even confound the judgements of the most learned judges and puzzle the skills of professional lawyers.³⁶ 'As to the general system of the laws of the land,' Joel Barlow wrote,

. . . no man in the kingdom knows them, and no man pretends to know them. They are a fathomless abyss, that exceeds all human faculties to sound. They are studied, not to be understood, but to be disputed; not to give information, but to breed confusion.³⁷

The laws in Britain, Robert Hall continued, had been piled into volumes, encumbered with numerous precedents, and perplexed with dark intricacies: '[T]hey are often rather a snare than a guide, and are a fruitful source of the injustice they are intended to prevent.'³⁸ In effect, John Butler added, the rapid increase of laws in Britain seemed rather to signal 'the degeneracy of our liberty'.³⁹

There remained many other grievances. The charters and corporations that existed

³³ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 26.

³⁴ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 103.

³⁵ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, p. 134.

³⁶ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject*, pp. 47, 137.

³⁷ Barlow, *Advice to the Privileged Orders*, Part I, p. 126.

³⁸ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 102-3.

³⁹ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject*, p. 137.

throughout the British Isles were resented as, to couch it in Thomas Paine's terms, the 'badges of ancient oppression' and the 'instruments of injustice'. Paine set out his attack on the corporations by confuting the old opinion that charters conferred rights: 'It is a perversion of terms to say, that a charter gives rights. It operates by a contrary effect, that of taking rights away. Rights are inherent in all the inhabitants; but charters, by annulling those rights in the majority, leave the right by exclusion in the hands of a few.' Great evils had resulted from the institution of charters and corporations. In England, Paine observed, every chartered town formed an aristocratic monopoly in itself. Such establishments were able, first of all, to engross enormous political influence through their exclusive electoral interests, since in many corporations only council members were qualified to vote in elections. In fact, he added, the House of Commons in Britain was, 'in a great measure, made up of elections from these corporations'. The social and economic effects, meanwhile, were no less unfavourable. The corporations hindered the movement of population and thereby arrested the circulation of property. They were bound to block free trade, thus preventing the nation from becoming prosperous. Charters and corporations, above all, were utterly detrimental to the liberty of the people. In the chartered towns, Paine complained, all the strangers would be driven out as if they were foreign enemies:

A native of England, under the operation of these charters and corporations, cannot be said to be an Englishman in the full sense of the word. He is not free of the nation. . . His rights are circumscribed to the town, and, in some cases, to the parish of his birth; and all other parts, though in his native land, are to him as a foreign country.

He was deprived of his natural rights and could not, therefore, be properly called a freeman.⁴⁰ The corporation, John Butler further pointed out, was originally instituted to guard public property and hereditary liberty. It had, however, long degenerated into a 'rampallian tribe of interested engrossers and unjust detainers', tending rather to trespass on the property and liberty which it was supposed to protect. In Britain, he observed, charters were everywhere:

What is Great Britain in the greatness of her consequence but a charter'd isle, and every city, town, borough, and cinque port, have their charters also. These charters, though first granted as privileges and marks of royal favours, are now reduced into systems of concealed policy, and rendered so obnoxious to the liberty of the subject as to

⁴⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man* pp. 96-7, 242-6.

become a perfect nuisance to civil society.

The corporations were always governed in the most arbitrary manner. They formed many little oligarchies where one part of the people was able to tyrannise over the other. A chartered town was often a corrupt body composed of the 'the whole gang of ragamuffin gentry'. In command of the city, these chartered tyrants, under the colour of authority, came to 'usurp the privileges of their fellow citizens, and commit the most daring acts of violence upon the freedom of those born to equal liberty as themselves'. To Butler, in the end, the corporations appeared to be but many 'enlarged prisons' where freedom had to be purchased and where the people suffered oppression.⁴¹

The Game Laws constituted a major grievance to farmers in particular. In England, Thomas Paine claimed, game was made the property of the higher orders.⁴² The Game Laws, *The Political Crisis* observed, prohibited the peasants from catching birds that hovered round their roofs, or killing beasts that ranged their fields: 'The beasts of the fields, and the fowls of the air, were made for the service of man, and man has a natural right to take them: but the law reserves them for the sport and luxury of the Great.'⁴³ There was a more destructive aspect to this regulation. Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out that a poor farmer in Britain could do nothing to prevent his noble lord from planting a decoy field near his meagre farm. 'Games devour the fruit of his labour; but fine and imprisonment await him if he dare to kill any – or lift up his hand to interrupt the pleasure of his lord.' For some very slight violations, many people had been plunged into great misery.⁴⁴ John Butler claimed that the Game Laws were oppressions of the most abominable nature. They sacrificed public interest to the private conveniences of a few individuals. Under such laws, no rustic labourer was allowed either to enjoy the simple sport of the field or to reap the 'bounties of Providence'. He could not even protect his crops from the devastation caused by the pleasure of the noble 'sportman':

There comes the esquire, mounted on his steed, overleaps the hedges, breaks down fences in pursuit of game; his spaniel and his

⁴¹ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* pp. 30, 91, 101, 104-5.

⁴² Paine, *Rights of Man* pp. 96-7.

⁴³ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 20-1.

⁴⁴ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* p. 31.

pointer put to flight the herdsmen's flock, regardless what depredations he commits while in pursuit of charming sport; and who shall dare to interrupt the licenced pastime of this qualified sportsman while in pursuit of hare, of pheasant, and of partridge, woodcock, snipe, or other birds, for which a man more needy than himself, must pay a heavy fine, or suffer long imprisonment.

Butler came to deem the Game Laws as the most mortal stab at British liberty. 'What foreigner can envy the liberty of a British subject,' he wondered, 'when he is informed that for shooting, or killing a bird. . . a man shall be cast into prison like a common felon [?]'⁴⁵

Complaints were also raised against the notorious press-gang. To impress soldiers, seamen and marines, Joseph Towers remarked, was a custom flagrantly violating the spirit of the British constitution as well as the principles of justice and humanity. It had proved cruel to those who were impressed on the one hand, and expensive to the state on the other.⁴⁶ Such a measure was bound to bring misery and distress upon the lower orders of the society. Thomas Cooper observed:

The Labour of the poor Man, constitutes the whole of his Wealth, and his domestic Connections almost the whole of his happiness. But on a sudden, under the dubious authority of a Press Warrant, he is cut off from his peaceful habitation and domestic Society, and forcibly dragged on board the floating Prison of a Tender: he is impelled to labour in the dreadful Service of murdering his fellow Creatures at the command of his Superiors, and paid such scanty Wages. . . as the niggardly System of Government Finance thinks fit to allow. His family meanwhile, who look up to him for Comfort and Substance, ignorant of his Misfortune, are anxiously expecting his wonted return; perhaps their homely repast for the night depended on his earnings for the day; but his usual hour of return to his family is gone by. . . The next or succeeding day brings the mournful tidings of his destiny; and leaves the widowed wife. . . to eke out a comfortless existence.⁴⁷

Pressed men would incur further social evils. Mary Wollstonecraft claimed that those veterans who might be fortunate enough to return could find that it was not easy for them, after long service, to readjust, both mentally and occupationally, to normal civilian life: 'The vulgar have not the power of emptying their mind of the only ideas

⁴⁵ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* pp. 69-73.

⁴⁶ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* pp. 23-4.

⁴⁷ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* pp. 72-3.

they imbibed whilst their hands were employed; they cannot quickly turn from one kind of life to another. Pressing them entirely unhinges their minds; they require new habits, and cannot return to their old occupations with their former readiness.' Pressing had often resulted in their sinking into idleness, drunkenness, and a train of other vices.⁴⁸ To John Butler, indeed, the orders of impressing were but dreadful death warrants for their innocent victims. The entire system seemed as cruel as the 'French Bastille, or Spanish Inquisition'. It was pernicious to the liberty of the people and 'disgraceful to a Christian country'.⁴⁹

To the Dissenters, at least, the Test and Corporation Acts caused an additional grievance. These laws, one Dissenting country attorney declared, were founded in injustice and oppression.⁵⁰ Richard Price, in his sermon to the Revolution Society, strongly protested against the imposition of such laws, which, he claimed, had unjustly deprived of the right to civil and military offices all those who refused to conform to the established church. He decried this proscription as one of the most notorious instances of Britain's 'public iniquities': 'For I cannot call by a gentler name, laws which convert an ordinance appointed by our Saviour to commemorate his death, into an instrument of oppressive policy.'⁵¹ The Test and Corporation Acts, Benjamin Flower contended, had long imposed hardship on the Dissenters, who were by such laws disqualified from even the meanest offices of trust or profit.⁵² Samuel Heywood, likewise, regretted the injustice of a practice that laid a part of the people under restraints for merely embracing opinions different from the established church; opinions moreover which had not in the least prevented them from being good subjects or faithful civil servants.⁵³ In spite of his Anglican background, Christopher Wyvill was much in sympathy with the suffering of the Dissenters. In England, he claimed,

the Dissenters are ignominiously marked as men unfit to be trusted with any honourable or advantageous office, or a share even in

⁴⁸ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, pp. 27-30.

⁴⁹ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject*, pp. 79-80.

⁵⁰ *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, Esq, from a Dissenting Country Attorney* (Birmingham, 1791), p. 76.

⁵¹ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, pp. 30-1.

⁵² Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 454.

⁵³ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, p. 128.

the Government of a Corporate Town: they are forbidden. . . to serve his Country in any civil or military post for which his attainments fit him.

For over one hundred years, Dissenters had been compelled to acquiesce in silence under the disgrace and disabilities of the Test Laws.⁵⁴ At present, Robert Hall angrily claimed, the Dissenters in Britain were always 'Exposed to pains and penalties, excluded from all offices of trust, proscribed by the spirit of the present reign, [and] menaced and insulted wherever they appeared'.⁵⁵

Richard Price contended that the proscription imposed by the Test Laws was an oppression that the Dissenters by no means deserved.⁵⁶ First of all, another author argued, the Dissenters had made equal contributions to the state, in which, therefore, they had as much stake as other subjects. It would be, then, completely just for them to claim equal rights.⁵⁷ Joseph Priestley made a similar point:

Paying our full share to the public taxes, and having always distinguished ourselves by our industry, in manufactures and commerce. . . we thought it not unreasonable to request a right of admission. . . to such advantages as arise from that flourishing state of the country to which. . . we have eminently contributed.

People ought never to be barred from such advantages upon pure religious account.⁵⁸ The Dissenters, moreover, were always loyal subjects. They had never, it was asserted, held principles unfriendly to the civil constitution of Britain: 'No Dissenter is so mad, or unwise, as to think of resisting the civil power; they would risk their lives in support of it.'⁵⁹ Samuel Heywood, referring to the evidence of history, insisted that the Dissenters had been the staunchest defenders of British liberty: 'I will venture,' he wrote,

to recall the attention. . . to a few historical facts. In the reign of

⁵⁴ WYVILL, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 9-10.

⁵⁵ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 84.

⁵⁶ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, p. 30.

⁵⁷ *A Letter to the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, Esq. from a Dissenting Country Attorney*, p. 107.

⁵⁸ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 131.

⁵⁹ *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, Esq. from a Dissenting Country Attorney*, pp. 91, 144.

Charles II. at the very time when the Test Act was passed, the Dissenters were ranked among the zealous asserters of the Protestant religion and the liberties of their country; they were then esteemed sincere friends to the public peace in Church and State. . . . From the time of passing the Test Act till the abdication of the last unfortunate prince of the House of Stuart, the Dissenters were not less distinguished for their steady opposition to the tyrannical measures of the Court, than since that time for their zealous attachment to the constitution, as settled at the Revolution. . . . From that great era, when the rights of mankind were vindicated against a tyrant, and the people of England dared to assert their freedom, to the present moment, not a single instance can be pointed out, in which their loyalty to the monarch on the throne, or their affection to the government, can be justly called in question.⁶⁰

Indeed, Christopher Wyvill claimed, even their repeated humiliations in their efforts to repeal the Test Laws had not, it seemed, rendered them disaffected to the government or disobedient to the laws.⁶¹ It was, then, imprudent to proscribe such a community of people. In sum, one author put it: '[T]he Corporation and Test Acts, if defensible when made, . . . become impolitic and unjust, in discriminating between equally good subjects, and in stigmatizing Protestant Dissenters as unworthy of trust under a government they have uniformly supported, and whose burthens they have equally borne.'⁶² They infringed the just right, and damned the proper interest, of the Dissenters.⁶³

To the radicals, in the final analysis, the British nation was far from being free. John Butler was indeed of the opinion that liberty in Britain had been 'upon the decline'.⁶⁴ Butler seemed to be but 'an obscure citizen' who had himself deeply suffered the oppressions of an execrable local oligarchy.⁶⁵ His observations, therefore, could perhaps afford a grass-roots view of the reality of liberty in Britain. People were always inclined to extol England as '*an island of Liberty*', but, Butler claimed, his experiences seemed to prove it to be far otherwise. In Britain, liberty was no more than a 'phantom':

⁶⁰ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 166-7.

⁶¹ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 9-10.

⁶² *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, Esq. from a Dissenting Country Attorney*, p. 92.

⁶³ *The Political Crisis*, p. 18.

⁶⁴ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject* p. 36.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 143.

we are supposed to have many privileges, but we only see them as it were through a glass darkly, they were not perceptible to our naked eyes, or any of our outward senses. We have laws and customs among us, which are a disgrace to a free nation; the symptoms of liberty are but faintly breathed, through the modern customs and manners of our constitution.

To common subjects, that is, liberty could have no real existence: 'We have the empty name of liberty, but not the actual enjoyment of it.' Furthermore, the term, 'liberty', was often twisted to serve as the 'common substitute for oppression, slavery, taxation. &c':

Every manoeuvre of government comes forward under the protection of liberty. When the king declares war against any foreign power, to enrich one class of subjects and impoverish the other, it is to extend our liberty. When the minister imposes partial and oppressive taxes, to feed the wanton extravagances of the state, it is to support our liberty. . .

The perversion was such that 'every repugnancy to the word' seemed to be taken for its 'true meaning'. Worse still, he noted, the deluded people of Britain were themselves also so misled as always unwittingly to boast 'of liberty under the banners of slavery, and freedom under the pangs of oppression'.⁶⁶ If, indeed, there was liberty or freedom in the British Isles, Butler claimed, it must exist merely in the upper classes. To the great mass, little was left:

to attempt to prove that any liberty exists within the walls of the humble cottager, or the dismal mansions of the labouring mechanic, is like an astronomer proving an invisible eclipse of the sun, which cannot be contradicted by those who have no eyes; and truly the liberty of a poor subject is equal to an invisible eclipse, which cannot be discovered by the naked eye.

Above all, even those meagre rights which a poor subject was allowed to enjoy under the constitution would remain vulnerable to the 'arbitrary hand of self-created tyranny and oppression'.⁶⁷ Mary Wollstonecraft, at last, tried to deny the reality of British liberty. In England, she declared, property was always more secure than liberty: 'the liberty of an honest mechanic - his all - is often sacrificed to secure the property of

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7, 36-9, 77-8, 113.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 122, 128.

the rich'. Thus, she exclaimed: 'Security of property! Behold, in a few words, the definition of English liberty.'⁶⁸

II

It seems, then, obvious that Britain had never been such a free country as was often claimed. There was little question in the mind of the radicals that the nation was at present replete with oppression and injustice. To the reformers, moreover, all the grievances complained of were by no means distempers of an occasional, or individual, nature. The existence and perpetuation of such abuses, according to them, appeared to signal that there were fundamental defects in the political system of Britain. Thus, Thomas Paine observed: 'The defect lies in the system. The foundation and the superstructure of the government is bad.'⁶⁹ Their attentions however were drawn, in the main, to the British constitution.

The reformers in Britain were generally of the opinion that, despite its claim to longevity, the British constitution had long since fallen into decay. The political system of Britain was excellent, John Butler claimed, when it was first established. Through a series of changes, however, the edifice had gradually suffered dilapidation. It was flagrantly 'violated by modern corruptions, and dwindling each day into the grossest scenes of absurdity'.⁷⁰ Francis Stone lamented the departure of the British constitution 'from its original beautiful simplicity'. While he adored the primordial purity of the constitution, he found it hard to recommend 'those instances of its present abused and very corrupt state'.⁷¹ The writer of *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, too, declared:

Though I have paid a just tribute to the English constitution, it would be absurd to maintain an unqualified assertion of its excellence; there are many excrescences that cling to the oak of British liberty, and are nourished by its sap. You must be conscious that they consume what would give additional vigour to the fruitful branches.⁷²

⁶⁸ Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, pp. 24-5.

⁶⁹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 284.

⁷⁰ Butler, *Brief Reflections upon the Liberty of the British Subject*, pp. 41, 117, 131.

⁷¹ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 2-3.

⁷² *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 15.

To William Belsham, the British constitution was excellent at the time of its establishment in 1688, but since then corruptions and defects had arisen which were bound to excite the indignation of many people. He called attention to the growing influence of the crown, the radical defect in the representation of the nation, the maintenance of a formidable standing army in peacetime, and the existence of 'a second army of placemen and pensioners'.⁷³ Robert Hall claimed that a stream of abuses had silently tainted Britain with decay. It operated to render the theory of the British constitution in its most important particulars 'a satire on the practice':

The theory provides the responsibility of ministers as a check to the execution of ill designs; but in reality we behold the basest of the tribe retreat from the ruin of their country, loaded with honours and with spoils. Theory tells us the parliament is free and independent; experience will correct the mistake by shewing its subservience to the crown. We learn from the first, that the legislature is chosen by the unbiased voice of all who can be supposed to have a will of their own; we learn from the last, the pretended electors are but a handful of the people, who are never less at their own disposal than in the business of election. The theory holds out equal benefits to all, and equal liberty, without any other discrimination, than that of a good and bad subject; its practice brands with proscription and disgrace a numerous class of inhabitants on account of their religion. In theory the several orders of the state are a check on each other; but corruption has oiled the wheels of that machinery with united pressure on the happiness of the people.

At present, he insisted, Britain had merely preserved the form, but had already lost the spirit, of her vaunted constitution.⁷⁴ It turned out in practice to be, *Political Correspondence* added, no more than 'a mere mockery of its theory, and an insult on the people'.⁷⁵ The British constitution was once the admiration of the world, while other nations were possessed of nothing like it. However, Benjamin Bousfield noted, the situation had recently changed. There were signs that the French people were about to form a system able to surpass that of Britain, which was 'formed in the dark ages, partially patched up as occasion offered; irregular in its original construction, arrested and degenerated by time'.⁷⁶

The derangement of the British constitution, most reformers believed, had chiefly

⁷³ Belsham, 'Reflections on the French Revolution', *Essays* ii, 273-4.

⁷⁴ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 94, 98-9.

⁷⁵ *Political Correspondence*, p. 125.

⁷⁶ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 28.

resulted from the gradual dysfunction of its much acclaimed mechanism of checks and balances. It was an almost unchallenged view that the political system of Britain was based on the principle of a balanced constitution. Philip Withers, for instance, thus wrote:

In our constitution we have COMMONERS to watch over the interests of the *People*, we have PEERS to maintain an equilibrium between the EXECUTIVE POWER and the *Commons*, and the KING is armed with a negative Power to protect the Prerogatives of the Throne, with a power to curb licentiousness in the Commons, and with the privilege of increasing the peerage to punish the obstinacy of the Lords, when they obstruct the general good.

'This is,' he emphasised, 'the Constitution of our ancestors'.⁷⁷ To most radical observers, however, this version of the British constitution appeared to be, in fact, but the vision of theorists. James Mackintosh contended that such a government of control and balance had never truly existed in Britain:

To speak of our practical Government would be an outrage on common sense. There no trace of those discordant powers which are supposed in our theoretical Constitution remains. The most beautiful simplicity prevails. The same influence determines the executive and legislative power. The same cabinet makes war in the name of the King, and sanctions it in the name of the Parliament.

There could be no mutual control, or well-poised balance, in a system where the same class of men were suffered to wield excessive and uncontrolled influence.⁷⁸ Samuel Parr claimed that people were apt to exaggerate the independence of the component parts of the British constitution. In practice, he contended, there was an 'intimate connection between them': 'Instead, therefore, of considering them merely, or even chiefly, as mutual checks, I have of late been accustomed to view them as wheels facilitating the motion of each other in a vast and complicated machine.'⁷⁹ Indeed, George Rous observed, the political system of Britain tended to unite in the same persons '*the responsible character of Ministers, and the effective power of controul*'. There could be, then, no such things as mutual checks.⁸⁰ John Oswald thus

⁷⁷ [Withers], *Philo-Theodosius*, pp. 17-8.

⁷⁸ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae* pp. 265-6, 278-9, 340.

⁷⁹ Parr, 'Miscellaneous Remarks', *Works*, iii, pp. 264-5.

⁸⁰ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 76.

mocked at the working of Parliament:

His Majesty's Prime Minister comes down to the House of Commons, with measures previously concerted in the King's Cabinet: he proposes his Bills; and the House exclaims, What a prodigy of wisdom! He makes his motion; and his motion is carried on by a great majority, as virtuous as *unbought*. A similar farce is carried on in the House of Lords; and the will of the Cabinet is proclaimed as the will of the people, who, perhaps, all the while are lifting up their voice against the measure.⁸¹

For sure, David Williams contended, the three powers in Britain had seldom, or perhaps never, been balanced by counter-action.⁸² James Mackintosh came to the conclusion that Britain had in effect maintained a government, 'not of check, but of conspiracy'.⁸³ In substance and fact, John Oswald echoed, 'IT IS THE CONJURATED TREASON OF THREE PARTS AGAINST THE WILL OF THE WHOLE'.⁸⁴

The balanced constitution of Britain had been toppled from different quarters. First of all, it was feared, the influence of the crown had increased to such an extent as to destabilise the constitutional balance at the expense of the people.⁸⁵ Thomas Cooper pointed out that the British crown, though apparently a limited one, was in effect possessed of far more influence than necessity could justify.⁸⁶ 'The influence of the crown at present,' William Belsham also claimed, 'extends indeed far beyond what is necessary to preserve the balance of the Constitution'.⁸⁷ To Sir Brooke Boothby, the corrupt influence of the throne was a 'radical disease' that would become fatal to the British constitution:

In this country those who consider the immense and growing influence of the Crown in addition to powers which had been already

⁸¹ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 32.

⁸² [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 66.

⁸³ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, p. 340.

⁸⁴ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 60.

⁸⁵ The attack on the 'influence of the crown' is a recurrent theme on the agenda of political debates in 18th-century Britain, see: H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property*, chaps. 3, 5, 6, *passim*; Ian R. Christie, *Myth and Reality in Late-Eighteenth-Century British Politics and Other Papers* (London, 1970), chap. 14; Archibald S. Foord, 'The Waning of "the Influence of the Crown"', *English Historical Review*, lxii (1947), 484-507.

⁸⁶ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, p. 66.

⁸⁷ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays*, ii, 386.

deemed sufficient for its support, will not I think be at a loss to prognosticate the malady which will one day give the mortal blow to our boasted constitution.⁸⁸

The king was able to command excessive influence chiefly because he was left considerable room for manoeuvre in managing the enormous revenue raised mainly to fund the national debt. The immense public debt in Britain, Joseph Priestley observed, had in various ways contributed to the increased power of the crown.⁸⁹ 'The accumulation of debt and taxes,' Robert Hall echoed, 'has so augmented the influence of the crown, as to destroy the equipoise and balance of the constitution.'⁹⁰ The influence of the throne was secured through a comprehensive network of corruption. The huge expenditure of the government, Thomas Paine noted, served to keep this channel of corruption open.⁹¹ Benjamin Bousfield, hence, condemned the vast heap of national debt as the 'deposit of the foul torrent of venality and corruption, which has almost deluged the land, and levelled the great barriers of freedom'.⁹² Indeed, Robert Hall concluded:

The multiplied channels through which seventeen millions of money must flow into the treasury, the legion of officers it creates, the patronage its expenditure on the several branches of the administration supplies, have rendered the influence of the crown nearly absolute and decisive.

There seemed no other power in the nation that was able effectively to counter such a 'silent irresistible force of royal patronage'.⁹³

It was well known that the crown had usually operated to manipulate Parliament by means of corruption. The legislature of Britain had not shut its door to the king's servants and dependents. Because of their admission, Francis Stone observed, the minister of the day was able, by distributing royal patronage, quietly to assert his control over Parliament, many of whose members had actually become no more than

⁸⁸ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 81.

⁸⁹ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 126.

⁹⁰ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 88.

⁹¹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 256.

⁹² Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 38.

⁹³ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 88, 90.

mercenaries 'at his sole command'. Indeed, he stressed, with the good things of the crown – pensions, places, lucrative offices, and sinecures – at their disposal, the king's ministers could always secure a majority 'for the vile purpose of legislating for their own private emolument and aggrandisement, instead of the national welfare'.⁹⁴ In the eyes of Thomas Paine, members of Parliament were mostly but the 'mere machines of the court, placemen and dependants'.⁹⁵ If one should draw attention to the British legislature, Benjamin Flowers noted,

The first object which strikes a spectator is, that famous place in the House of Commons, called the TREASURY BENCH. Here. . . seated, the first lord of the treasury and chancellor of his majesty's exchequer, with a band of placemen, his chief supporters, on each side. . . That minister is reckoned the compleatest Statesman, who by any means whatever can best manage the house, and have the largest majority of its members at his disposal. If we look a little farther into the House of Commons, we shall see an host of placemen and pensioners; of dependants on the crown, and on the ministers. All these men. . . are allowed not only seats, but votes on every occasion.

Members of Parliament of this sort were so numerous, so connected and so united that the crown could always, with ease, enforced its will on the House. Parliament was therefore turned into a 'grand theatre of corruption, where the principal actors were devoted to the will of the ministers, and ready. . . to sacrifice the dearest interests of the people; to serve the purposes of the court'.⁹⁶

The preponderance of the peers posed another serious threat to the balanced constitution of Britain. The House of Lords, Thomas Paine pointed out, was a great political force that lay beyond the control of the people: 'It is an hereditary aristocracy, assuming and asserting indefeasible, irrevocable rights and authority, wholly independent of the nation.' He ridiculed the peerage as a caste of persons whose professions consisted mainly in 'letting landed property'.⁹⁷ The peers, John Oswald asserted, formed a privileged tribe who were totally distinct from the mass of the people. 'They are the mere creatures of the Crown, and a part of that regal pageantry, to support which the people are so shamefully taxed and so cruelly

⁹⁴ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 13, 49–51.

⁹⁵ Paine, *Rights of Man* p. 287.

⁹⁶ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 193–5, 212.

⁹⁷ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 152, 246.

curtailed of the comforts of . . . life.⁹⁸ George Rous contended that the House of Lords could not be the natural guardian of the interests of the people. It was an order whose interests and prejudices must ever incline them to the crown.⁹⁹ In truth, Paine pointed out, the peers in Britain had formed a substantial part of that comprehensive system of corruption emanating from the throne:

There are but few of its members who are not in some mode or other participators, or disposers of the public money. One turns a candle-holder, or a lord in waiting; another a lord of the bed-chamber, a groom of the stole, or any insignificant nominal office, to which a salary is annexed, paid out of the public taxes, and which avoids the direct appearance of corruption.¹⁰⁰

It would be chimerical, therefore, to expect such an order to play its supposed role of constitutional balance against the sinister influence of the crown.

The domination of the peers in Parliament was the main object of complaint. The House of Lords constituted a separate branch of the legislature and it possessed an independent voice in legislation. Not content with this constitutional power, however, the peers had, through their personal connections, gone much further in order to dominate the House of Commons. 'This Colossus,' Robert Hall claimed, 'bestrides both houses of parliament; legislates in one and exerts a domineering influence over the other.'¹⁰¹ The present defective system of representation, one writer explained, had enabled the peers to secure great political interests. They exposed the electorate to undue influence and corruption, thus giving them the means of 'uniting a great part of the representative body to themselves'.¹⁰² Because of their electoral interests in boroughs, Francis Stone pointed out, the peers could command a decisive influence in the House of Commons.¹⁰³ Thomas Paine claimed that the 'borough traffic' had allowed the peers to send many of their relations and connections to Parliament. Together with their own independent voice, this had given them a preponderance in legislating

⁹⁸ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 9.

⁹⁹ Rous, *Thoughts on Government*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁰ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 250.

¹⁰¹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p.37.

¹⁰² *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 6, 49.

¹⁰³ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 124.

on almost every matter of common concern.¹⁰⁴ Such a domination, Thomas Cooper lamented, had virtually reduced the House of Commons to being 'more a representation of the Lords than the Commons of Great Britain':

At present there is reason to believe, that about 70 or 80 Persons are enabled to send an efficient Majority of Members to Parliament, so that the House of Commons is in fact, the Representative of this virtuous band of aristocratic electors. . . "The Commons of England in Parliament assembled", is a phrase false and absurd; it should be the deputies of the Aristocracy in Parliament assembled!

The peers therefore were able to shake off one salutary check, which was originally intended for them 'by the Spirit of the Constitution'.¹⁰⁵ In effect, Francis Stone asserted, the House of Lords could form but a 'fanciful equilibrium' between the rights of the people and the prerogatives of the crown. They were more inclined to sacrifice the welfare of the community to their own partial interest and all-grasping ambition.¹⁰⁶ 'If our liberty depends on the balance and controul of the respective orders in the state,' Robert Hall added, 'it must be extremely absurd, to blend them together, by placing the father in one department of the legislature, and his family in the other.'¹⁰⁷

The influence of the Crown and the ascendancy of the Lords were, no doubt, both noxious. It was, none the less, principally the defect in the popular branch of the constitution that, to most of the reformers, was most to blame for the decline of liberty in Britain. John Thelwall, explaining the distempers of the British constitution, had pointed out:

It is not from the aristocracy, properly so called, that we have most to dread. It is not even from the prerogatives of the executive power. It is from the oligarchy of the rotten borough-mongers. It is from the corruption of that which ought to be the representative branch of the legislature. This is that which is undermining. . . the constitution and liberties of Britain.¹⁰⁸

It was generally held that a fair representation of the people in the legislature was the

¹⁰⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 248.

¹⁰⁵ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, pp. 15-6, 69.

¹⁰⁶ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 101, 124.

¹⁰⁷ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 37-8.

¹⁰⁸ Thelwall, *Sober Reflections*, p. 102.

surest protection of their liberty. 'You should remember,' Richard Price exhorted his audience, 'that a representation in the Legislature of a kingdom is the *basis* of constitutional liberty in it, and of all legitimate government.'¹⁰⁹ In the case of Britain where a mixed government was maintained, George Rous contended, the House of Commons, therefore, became the only quarter in the constitution where the direct influence of the people ought to prevail and in which public liberty was to be defended.¹¹⁰ The British people could assert their freedom through no better medium than their own representation in the House of Commons, whose very independence, Robert Hall insisted, formed 'the column on which the whole fabric of our liberty rests'.¹¹¹ The reality, however, seemed far otherwise. 'Equality of representation is to any people the most valuable token of liberty,' one author claimed, 'and in this essential ingredient is the boasted parliament of England miserably deficient.' Britain had maintained a system of representation which proved too corrupt to become the cornerstone of British liberty.¹¹² The representation of the British people, Benjamin Flower asserted, was so unequal as totally to distort the original nature of Parliament. It had been turned into little more than 'an engine of corruption', often employed to accomplish measures 'directly opposite to the interests of the people, and calculated to promote the purposes of ambition or despotism'.¹¹³ Indeed, David Williams argued, despite the better condition of Britain, no one there could truly be free while his life and property were at the discretion of a legislature in whose election he had no real choice and over whose conduct he could have no control.¹¹⁴ As noted in the *Political Correspondence*. 'No Englishman who wishes well to his Fellow-citizens and his Country, can resist the mingled emotions of regret and scorn, when he reflects on the state of National Representation in Parliament.'¹¹⁵ This had, to Richard Price, become in truth the 'fundamental grievance' of the British people.¹¹⁶

The charge against Parliament, as indicated above, focussed upon the defects in the

¹⁰⁹ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, p. 33.

¹¹⁰ Rous, *Thoughts on Government* p. 38.

¹¹¹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 27.

¹¹² *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 15.

¹¹³ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 181.

¹¹⁴ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, p. 75.

¹¹⁵ *Political Correspondence*, p. 124.

¹¹⁶ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, p. 34.

system of representation. This issue can be examined from various angles. There existed, first of all, a glaring inequality of representation between different constituencies. It was a notorious fact, one writer complained, that the representation of the British nation was 'partial and oppressive'. Whereas a number of old boroughs, which had long declined, could still return members to Parliament, many other new towns, which had recently flourished, were not directly represented.¹¹⁷ Thomas Paine and Benjamin Flower had both made efforts to expose this appalling state of unequal representation. The largest county in England, Yorkshire, which contained nearly a million souls, sent two members; and so did Rutland, the smallest, whose population scarcely exceeded one hundredth part of that of the former. The rotten and decayed boroughs, such as Gatton and Old Sarum, where but several houses stood, remained entitled each to send the same number of representatives as the city of Westminster, which had around fifteen thousand voters. Most remarkable of all, a city such as Manchester, one of the most prosperous towns and with a population of sixty thousand, was not even directly represented at all.¹¹⁸ Thus, Robert Hall remarked:

The confused and inadequate state of our representation, at present, is too obvious to escape the attention of the most careless observer. While through the fluctuation of human affairs, many towns of ancient note have fallen into decay, and the increase of commerce has raised obscure hamlets to splendour and distinction, the state of representation standing still amidst these vast changes, points back to an order of things which no longer subsists. The opulent towns of Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds, send no members to parliament; the decayed boroughs of Cornwall appoint a multitude of representatives.¹¹⁹

There was an obvious reason to explain such a preposterous phenomenon as a few rotten boroughs in Cornwall returning more members to Parliament than these great towns. *The Political Crisis* acknowledged that the inadequacy here indicated had resulted not so much from the 'evil conduct of individuals' as from the 'unavoidable change in human affairs'. Demographic changes in Britain over the past centuries had not been followed by timely readjustments in the nation's representation. Hence there arose the inequality so much complained of.¹²⁰ The population in many places in the

¹¹⁷ *Letters on the Present State of England and America* p. 32.

¹¹⁸ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 96; Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 178-9.

¹¹⁹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 28-9.

¹²⁰ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 52-3.

British Isles, another author observed, had considerably increased within the last hundred years, but the system of representation remained little changed:

The representation in this kingdom. . . continued in a changeable state till the reign of James I. but has undergone no material alteration since that period; for want of this, the evil has proceeded so far, that it may be made a question, whether the numbers of boroughs, which are deemed private property, did not return more than a third of the members of the last parliament.

Parliament had done nothing for those places which had grown in size and wealth in the course of time and which therefore deserved representation in the legislature: 'It supports a nominal representation only, for those places which, by the effects of time or other causes, may go to decay, which not only militates against, but actually destroys, as far as it extends, the spirit and principle of the British constitution.'¹²¹

The qualifications of electors, meanwhile, were both unequal and irregular. In Britain, Robert Hall pointed out, the restrictions set upon the right to vote were extremely inconsistent. In the boroughs it was conferred on the corporations in some places, but it went to house-holders in others; and, quite often, the right was attached to a particular sort of property, whose owner hence possessed the vote. In counties, the forty shilling freeholders had the right of election while wealthier copyholders were not enfranchised.¹²² Benjamin Flower called attention to the unequal requirements with respect to property. There were places where no pecuniary qualification was required and there were also others where the requirement became so oppressive as to 'confine the right of election to a very small number'. He continued to explore:

We have cities. . . containing twenty or thirty thousand inhabitants, where the members are elected by a corporation of twenty or thirty persons. . . The county of Cornwall is full of corporate towns, in which a few persons engross to themselves the right of election. A freehold estate of forty shilling a year, is the qualification necessary for a county voter; and whatever property a person may possess, if destitute of this particular species, his right of voting is withheld. In the city of London, the great body of the freemen are entirely cut off, and the right of election is confined to those who are members of companies or corporations.¹²³

¹²¹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 3-6, 31, 49.

¹²² Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 29-30.

¹²³ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 180-1.

The entire system, Thomas Paine thus claimed, appeared as capricious as possible: 'Everything is out of nature. . . in this strange chaos, and all sorts of follies are blended with all sorts of crimes.'¹²⁴

Under such an irregular system, those who were qualified to vote were limited in number. Thomas Paine observed that the House of Commons which ought to represent the people was in truth elected but by a small part of the nation: 'I presume, that though all the people of England pay taxes, not an hundredth part of them are electors.'¹²⁵ John Oswald also claimed that the Commons were always chosen by an electorate 'not exceeding, at a very extravagant calculation, a hundredth part of the people of Great-Britain'.¹²⁶ In Britain, George Rous estimated, about 41,000 voters were able to return 369 representatives out of an assembly of 558 members.¹²⁷ To other radicals, indeed, not even this figure seemed sufficient to indicate the limited nature of the British system of representation. A closer scrutiny revealed that in truth the majority of the House of Commons had been returned by a far smaller body of electors. John Oswald calculated that in Britain, where eight millions of people lived, a total of '6087 persons' were entitled to elect a majority of members to the House of Commons: that is, 'eight millions of inhabitants are every seven years brought to market and sold, like cattle at a fair, by 6087 individuals'.¹²⁸ A parliament thus constituted could hardly be expected to speak the true voice of the people. Indeed, Benjamin Flower contended, such a legislature might in certain circumstances act against the will of 'many millions'.¹²⁹

The restrictions laid further on the candidates served still more to turn the House of Commons into a virtually aristocratic oligarchy. At present, Francis Stone observed, Parliament had disqualified all those who did not possess a certain quantum of landed

¹²⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man* p. 95.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 287.

¹²⁶ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain* p. 13.

¹²⁷ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 68.

¹²⁸ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain* p. 25. There are different estimations of this number, ranging variously from six to eight thousand. William Belsham, for instance, believed that 'less than 6,000 men' were able to choose 'more than one half of the representatives of nine millions of people', see: 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays*, ii, 368. Robert Hall noted that 'less than eight thousand' people had elected the majority of the House of Commons, see: *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* p. 29.

¹²⁹ Flower, *The French Constitution* p. 178.

property from being elected as its members.¹³⁰ John Oswald contended that Britain's 'phantom of election' was rendered even more illusory by the limitation prescribed on the choice of the already small electorate: 'I mean, the regulation of Parliament, which narrows the choice of the electors to a certain circle of the Aristocracy, consisting of men possessed of at least three hundred pounds *per annum*' This restriction, he satirised, had reduced the House of Commons to an establishment where the rich and their dependants chose men from a class still richer than themselves to represent the nation.¹³¹ Thus, Thomas Cooper believed, the Commons seemed at present not so much the representatives of the people as of 'Lords and rich Land-holders; of Ministers and Borough Mongers'.¹³² It could not, with justice, be called a 'popular' representation, Francis Stone argued, while six-sevenths of the men of age, among six or seven million people, were excluded from the right of election.¹³³

The activities of elections, to make matters worse, were also replete with corruption and absurdities which served to vitiate even further the credit of Parliament. William Belsham declared that the irregularities attending the few popular elections were deleterious to the welfare of the nation.¹³⁴ During elections, one writer wrote, every measure was taken to corrupt and overawe the voters. He went on to report:

In one borough, the determination of a wealthy inhabitant, who hopes for indemnity in the gratitude of great friends, and whose power and patronage enable him to exert an irresistible influence over the minds of his less opulent neighbours, regulates the popular choice, and some worthless, or perhaps detested, character, is thus rendered the successful candidate. In other places, elections are carried on by an unwarrantable act of tyranny, still less varnished over by the appearance of mildness: the voters are coolly told by the steward of their powerful landlord, whom they are to nominate. . . In others, the borough is acknowledged to be personal property; its representation is even sold by the lordly despot to the highest bidders; and the poor slaves of electors, rather than be turned out of doors and starve, are forced to resign their rights forever. And in others, where they are free from those disgraceful shackles of evil bondage, every act is exerted to

¹³⁰ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 49.

¹³¹ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, pp. 14-5, 18-9, 24.

¹³² Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* p. 15.

¹³³ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 53.

¹³⁴ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays*, ii, 368.

corrupt their integrity.¹³⁵

Venality was generally condemned as one of the most notorious abuses in elections. There were quite a number of people, Benjamin Flower claimed, who acquired their seats through purchase.¹³⁶ The seats attached to the rotten boroughs, it was pointed out, had often been simply thrown into the market for sale 'as any other species of property'.¹³⁷ Thomas Cooper launched an attack on the traffickings of borough-mongers, who, he exclaimed,

'buy and sell Seats in Parliament as openly and notoriously, as Stalls for Cattle at a Fair' – who buy and sell the People, their nominal Electors, as if they were Slaves appurtenant to the Soil – who treat them as the worst species of Slaves, buying and selling their voices and inclinations; dealing in the Consciences of their Tenantry, as a fair object of traffic.¹³⁸

There could be no doubt, it was asserted, that those who purchased their seats in Parliament must have been tempted by some promise of reward or by the distribution of favours. It would be difficult to expect public virtue or merit from these venal people.¹³⁹ The electorate, in the meantime, were also of no better sort. The *Political Correspondence* claimed:

The voters think that they have gained their object, if they have added a few guineas to their purse for the present moment, and seem to have no idea how wretchedly they ought to expect to be governed, when their governors owe their power to such base acts.¹⁴⁰

In this situation, George Rous was convinced, those who had public money at their disposal were in a position, with utmost facility, to manipulate elections.¹⁴¹ Mary Wollstonecraft noted that sordid interest and licentious thoughtlessness had indeed

¹³⁵ *Political Correspondence*, pp. 126–7.

¹³⁶ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 179.

¹³⁷ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 31.

¹³⁸ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, p. 15.

¹³⁹ ^{The} *Political Crisis*, p. 53; *Letters on the Present State of England and America*, pp. 32–3.

¹⁴⁰ *Political Correspondence*, p. 127.

¹⁴¹ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 68.

become the spring of action at most elections.¹⁴² Thus, Catharine Macaulay lamented, the important interests of the nation were often sacrificed to the ambition of private individuals.¹⁴³

To most radicals, in sum, even the popular branch of Parliament had failed truly to represent the people of Britain. The *Political Correspondence* had categorically denied that the House of Commons in its present abused state could be the real representative of the people.¹⁴⁴ 'The House of Commons,' Thomas Cooper echoed, 'it is well known are not the Representatives of the People; it is not *there* that the voice of the People is heard.'¹⁴⁵ In fact, Benjamin Flower added, evidence suggested that the modern House of Commons always operated in direct opposition to the will of the people.¹⁴⁶ It became neither the 'organ of their voice', nor the 'guardian of their rights'. To call it a popular representation, James Mackintosh claimed, would be a most 'insolent and preposterous abuse of language'.¹⁴⁷ That would be, Francis Stone echoed, to make 'a mere mockery of the people, and unpardonable substitution of the "shadow" for the substance'.¹⁴⁸ David Williams, above all, was to deride the British legislature as but 'a FRAUDULENT DECEPTION'.¹⁴⁹ It had, George Rous concluded, neither expressed the will of the people, nor consulted the common interests of the nation.¹⁵⁰

III

'We have,' Robert Hall declared, '. . . at length arrived at that crisis when nothing but speedy and effectual reform can save us from ruin.'¹⁵¹ The recent lesson of France was to convince the British reformers that some kind of improvement had to be made,

¹⁴² Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 85.

¹⁴³ [Catharine Macaulay], *Observations on the Reflections of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 51.

¹⁴⁴ *Political Correspondence*, p. 126.

¹⁴⁵ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt*, p. 69.

¹⁴⁶ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 215.

¹⁴⁷ Mackintosh, *Vindiciae Gallicae*, pp. 336-7.

¹⁴⁸ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, p. 112.

¹⁴⁹ [Williams], *Lessons to a Young Prince*, pp. 25-6.

¹⁵⁰ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 69.

¹⁵¹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 88.

or else Britain would fall into a state of crisis. 'WE ARE NOT VERY WELL OFF,' Benjamin Flower warned, 'AND WE DO WANT A MOST MATERIAL CHANGE.' The situation of Britain at present was such that without a significant and essential alteration the liberties of the people could not be secured.¹⁵² John Oswald laid stress on the pressing necessity of a timely reformation.¹⁵³ 'Some reform,' Thomas Paine asserted, 'must, from the necessity of the case, soon begin.'¹⁵⁴ Both Oswald and Paine had indeed predicted the coming of a universal revolution in the old order of Europe, from which Britain would not be able to absent herself.¹⁵⁵ 'Our poor little institutions like our watches,' Sir Brooke Boothby contended, 'require to be periodically wound up and frequently repaired.' Their original concoction contained latent principles of destruction which tended to vitiate the entire body politic.¹⁵⁶ The noble fabric of the British constitution had long been the admiration of the world, but now, one writer claimed, it had fallen into decay for want of repair. It needed to have its peccant parts excised and 'replaced with those excellent materials of which it was originally composed'.¹⁵⁷ They must be bigoted, Joseph Towers insisted, who should suppose that the constitution was now so perfect as to leave no room for redress.¹⁵⁸

There were different opinions with regard to reform. Those who embraced more radical views were naturally apt to agitate for more sweeping changes. Thomas Paine, for instance, supported a fundamental reformation in the political system of Britain. He had no confidence in the old regime improving itself and he wanted to see Britain undergo a popularly activated 'general reform'.¹⁵⁹ John Oswald, likewise, preferred a radical approach. The evils of Britain, according to him, were so serious as to be beyond the reach of such time-serving expedients as parliamentary reform, which, while able to amuse the people for a time, would never be effective enough to

¹⁵² Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 494, 500.

¹⁵³ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, p. 47.

¹⁵⁴ Paine, *Rights of Man*, p. 284.

¹⁵⁵ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, pp. 45; Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 165, 239, 288.

¹⁵⁶ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 80.

¹⁵⁷ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament*, p. 60.

¹⁵⁹ Paine, *Rights of Man*, pp. 287-8. Cf. R. R. Fennessy, *Burke, Paine, and the Rights of Man: A Difference of Political Opinion*, pp. 164-6, 173-4, 178-80.

'remedy the defects, nor eradicate the deep-rooted vices of the Government'.¹⁶⁰ For most reformers, however, moderate reform would be a better alternative. Joseph Towers renounced any attempt to pursue abrupt change in the British constitution: 'I would not wish to have any alteration made in the general system of our laws, or in our constitution, but on the most mature deliberation.'¹⁶¹ The author of *The Political Crisis* plainly stood against revolution:

I am far from wishing a revolution, and would spill my blood to prevent it. I only wish to see some reform; and perhaps a reformation in the expenditure of money and the established church, and in the modes of election, so as to produce a more equal representation of the people, would render the present government as lasting as the pillars of time.¹⁶²

In fact, another writer asserted, the British constitution was not so hopeless yet as to require so violent a remedy. He was persuaded that a proper improvement of Parliament would be the sole reform 'necessary to give perfect energy to the English constitution'.¹⁶³

The British reformers were indeed mostly of the opinion that what Britain needed the most, at present, was an effectual parliamentary reform. Robert Hall contended that a reform of Parliament could provide an effective remedy for the malady of the nation.¹⁶⁴ Improvement of this nature, Sir Brooke Boothby emphasised, would be the safest, the easiest, and 'the most perfectly constitutional' method to set right the British constitution.¹⁶⁵ Even Thomas Cooper, very much a Painite, had also made it clear that, at this stage at least, the reformers in Britain meant no more than to pursue parliamentary reform:

To restore this imperfect State of parliamentary representation to its constitutional Vigour - to create what has never yet been seen in this Country, a full, fair, and adequate representation of the People in the *lower House* of Parliament. . . - to ensure upon all occasions that the voice of the People and the voice of the House of Commons shall

¹⁶⁰ Oswald, *Review of the Constitution of Great-Britain*, pp. 44-5.

¹⁶¹ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 60.

¹⁶² *The Political Crisis* p. 52.

¹⁶³ *A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 38.

¹⁶⁴ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 99.

¹⁶⁵ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 124.

be the same, and that the representatives of the people shall be under the due Controul of those who sent them, by means of annual or triennial elections - is the sole end and aim of the friends of British Liberty.

In the present state of Britain, he emphasised, '*no Man can be justified in going farther than a complete and effectual reform in the Representation of the People, and the duration of Parliaments.*'¹⁶⁶

Opinions were, again, divided over how to secure a proper reform in Parliament. There were those who advocated moderation. Sir Brooke Boothby proclaimed himself to be 'totally averse to all deep reform or new-modelling of the representation'. He renounced any attempt to set up a new system of representation upon pure democratic principles, that is, to set up 'a popular assembly'. His reform would extend no farther than redressing the inadequate state of the national representation. 'This is no more than to repair the common inevitable injuries of time.' It would also be a means more consonant to the spirit of the British constitution.¹⁶⁷ At a later stage, another writer who campaigned for peace with France, similarly dismissed as impractical the schemes of annual parliaments or universal suffrage. The British parliament, no doubt, stood in need of some change, but, he asserted, the people of Britain should undertake

not such a visionary reform as the heated imagination of some inconsiderate men has suggested. . . but such a prudent and temperate amelioration; such an easy and gradual alteration in the system, as the collective wisdom of Parliament, pointed to that most important object, will be able to mature and digest.¹⁶⁸

Some radical reformers, on the other hand, were not satisfied with a mere temperate approach. Thomas Christie, for instance, argued that a 'complete and radical reform' ought to be carried out in the representation of the nation. It was this kind of change that could be expected to create a free, honest and independent legislature.¹⁶⁹ Thomas Cooper likewise contended in support of the more effectual reform of Parliament. It

¹⁶⁶ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* pp. 14-6, 69-70.

¹⁶⁷ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 125-6.

¹⁶⁸ *Thoughts on a Peace with France*, p. 45.

¹⁶⁹ Christie, *Letters on the Revolution of France*, p. 39.

would be a paltry measure merely to disqualify rotten boroughs and to increase the members representing counties. He was not even content with the proposal of enfranchising all taxable householders. That could serve no more than, he asserted, to create a corporation of property, leaving the cottagers, the mechanics and the day labourers – the largest, the most important and the most oppressed part of the community – still without a voice.¹⁷⁰ Francis Stone was perhaps the most outspoken in agitating for ‘a substantial, and rigorously complete’ reformation of Parliament. The British people, he argued, were entitled, by nature and by constitution, to have a House of Commons ‘annually elected, on the comprehensive, liberal, benevolent principles of universal suffrage’. To secure a legislature on this principle would be the surest and safest way to defend the freedom of the nation:

The cause of liberty in Britain, to which the example of France is auspicious, is the very necessary reform of the House of Commons, on the broad basis of annual election, and of equal and universal representation and eligibility, with the exception of the dependants on the Crown.

It would also be the sole reform that was likely to last for long.¹⁷¹

The purpose of parliamentary reform was, of course, to secure to the people a fair and just representation. This task could be dealt with from three aspects: a rectification of the partial state of the representation, a redress of the absurd qualifications for the franchise, and a revision of the duration of Parliament. There were various proposals on each of these themes. To ensure that Britain was more equally represented, two plans were suggested. On the one hand, reformers such as Sir Brooke Boothby and William Belsham proposed a rather limited reform. They intended to redistribute parliamentary seats by disqualifying rotten boroughs and extending representation to the newly flourishing towns.¹⁷² On this principle, the *Political Correspondence* worked out a more detailed plan. First of all, the rotten boroughs, being the source of abuses, would be disfranchised; secondly, the number of the knights for the shires would remain unchanged; and thirdly, all market towns would be allowed to send representatives. The general aim of this author was that

¹⁷⁰ Cooper, *A Reply to Mr. Burke's Invective against Mr. Cooper and Mr. Watt* p. 70.

¹⁷¹ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 17, 54, 67–8, 96–7, 112, 124.

¹⁷² Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 125; Belsham, ‘Remarks on Parliamentary Reform’, *Essays*, ii, 38.

every town in the kingdom should be freely represented.¹⁷³ On the other side, the writer of *The Political Crisis* offered a bolder scheme. He cherished the principle of 'equal representation' and he was prepared to base the national representation on the sole principle of population. The drift of his reform was, first, to take a national census of all qualified inhabitants and, then, to fix each member to the same numbers of legal voters. Meanwhile, the whole kingdom would be divided into different districts in which the voters would be confined to elect their representatives. This scheme, he was convinced, could render Britain 'more equally represented'.¹⁷⁴

The next step of reform was to revise the qualifications of the electors on a more general and rational basis. In this respect, Francis Stone favoured a radical redress. He defended universal suffrage as the natural right of man, and as a principle embedded in the ancient Saxon constitution. He intended to confer this right on all men who had arrived at the year of maturity. 'This universal right,' he stressed, '. . . is a right not dependent on *property*, much less on any species of it, but merely a *personal* right, to which the poorest man has an equal claim with the richest.'¹⁷⁵ But most reformers were apparently not prepared to go this far. The author of the *Political Crisis*, who otherwise supported a radical redistribution of parliamentary seats, surprisingly rejected the idea of universal suffrage. Those who had no interest in the community were not entitled to enjoy the right of election. He hoped merely to reduce the property qualification so as to broaden the basis of representation. It was his plan to grant the right of election to all those who possessed an estate equal to the value of one hundred pounds, or had an annual income from property of four pounds, and all with one year's residence in the places where their votes would be cast.¹⁷⁶ Several writers suggested that the right of suffrage should go to all male householders. William Belsham would extend the franchise to all those who occupied such tenements as might be 'supposed to place them upon a level with freeholders of forty shillings *per annum*'.¹⁷⁷ The *Political Correspondence* wanted to abolish the distinction between freehold and copyhold with respect to election. It would be dangerous to adopt universal suffrage, but it would be 'both practicable and rational to grant that

¹⁷³ *Political Correspondence* p. 142.

¹⁷⁴ *The Political Crisis* p. 55.

¹⁷⁵ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections* pp. 27, 48-9, 108-9.

¹⁷⁶ ^{The} *Political Crisis*, pp. 54, 56.

¹⁷⁷ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays* ii, 382.

privilege to all householders, residing in places entitled to the right of election, and paying taxes of fifty shillings'.¹⁷⁸ In Robert Hall's opinion, a general enfranchisement of householders in the kingdom would so extend the basis of representation as to make it fair enough to express the sentiments of the people.¹⁷⁹

More frequent elections were also considered essential to an independent Parliament. The supporters of parliamentary reform were generally critical of the present septennial parliaments. Francis Stone denounced the act which extended Parliament to a duration of seven years, as a 'most gross and daring' infringement on the right of the British electorate who used to have more frequent elections.¹⁸⁰ The introduction of the Septennial Act had been productive of numerous abuses. The longer term of Parliament, Robert Hall pointed out, had set its members at too great a distance from the people. It rendered a representative virtually independent of the control of his constituents:

It is intolerable, that in so large space of a man's life as seven years, he should never be able to correct the error he may have committed in the choice of a representative, but be compelled to see him every year dipping deeper into corruption; a helpless spectator of the contempt of his interests, and the ruin of his country.¹⁸¹

Benjamin Flower decried the Septennial Act as a barefaced innovation which opened the flood-gates of corruption and which 'totally altered the nature of the British constitution'.¹⁸² What, then, should be the proper duration of Parliament? The *Political Correspondence* urged a return to the old practice of a three-year term.¹⁸³ William Belsham would welcome either triennial, or annual elections.¹⁸⁴ Resorting (or so they thought) to the old Saxon tradition, Robert Hall and Francis Stone were both in favour of annual parliaments and were prepared to defend even more frequent ones.¹⁸⁵ To

¹⁷⁸ *Political Correspondence* p. 145.

¹⁷⁹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 31.

¹⁸⁰ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 50, 109.

¹⁸¹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 32-3.

¹⁸² Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 184.

¹⁸³ *Political Correspondence*, p. 146.

¹⁸⁴ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays* ii, 382.

¹⁸⁵ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, pp. 31-2, 35; Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 27, 50, 109.

these reformers, at any rate, frequent elections would help to create a more responsible legislature. When once Parliament became more frequently elected, Joseph Towers emphasised, both ministers and representatives would be obliged to pay more attention to the sentiments of the people.¹⁸⁶ It would be able especially to force the members of Parliament, *The Political Crisis* stressed, to be more concerned with the voters: 'They are not long enough possessed of power to abuse it, and are led to consider the rectitude of their conduct as the only means by which they can acquire the confidence of their country in future.'¹⁸⁷

Further measures were proposed in order to secure an honest and independent Parliament. One important suggestion was the separation of the executive authority from the legislative body. George Rous was convinced of the necessity to exclude legislators from all participation in the administration. He claimed that most abuses in British politics had proceeded from the '*unnatural mixture of executive government in an assembly formed to control*'.¹⁸⁸ Benjamin Flower praised the wise decision of the French legislators to debar the ministers and dependants of the crown from being elected to the National Assembly with a view to preventing corruption. In Britain, he contended, the presence of such people in Parliament had destroyed its independence.¹⁸⁹ It made the king's men able to engross too great a share of the legislative function, Francis Stone claimed, thus placing the welfare of the nation at their sole control and disposal. 'The people can never be free and happy, till they are excluded from this legislative assembly.'¹⁹⁰ The secret Ballot was also recommended by some as a measure to forestall corruptions at election. William Belsham deemed the ballot as the most eligible mode of election.¹⁹¹ 'Election by ballot,' according to Benjamin Flower, 'is one of the best methods. . . to preserve the purity of election.' It would root out the sources of corruption and bribery.¹⁹² Several reformers, furthermore, proposed that the Members of Parliament should be paid a salary. The *Political Correspondence* suggested that severe punishments should be inflicted on

¹⁸⁶ Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 22.

¹⁸⁷ *The Political Crisis* p. 56.

¹⁸⁸ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 64-8.

¹⁸⁹ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 190-201.

¹⁹⁰ Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 12, 26.

¹⁹¹ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays* iii, 382.

¹⁹² Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 182-3.

those who gave, or received, bribes in elections, but he was prepared, at the same time, to allot every Member of Parliament five hundred pounds *per annum* as a reward for his public service.¹⁹³ Such a measure, *The Political Crisis* was convinced, would help to cultivate the integrity of the representatives: 'This would lessen the temptation of embezzlement, and heighten the odiousness of the crime.' Parliament would then be expected to become more responsible in the performance of its duties.¹⁹⁴

To most reformers, after all, parliamentary reform was an operation indispensable to the preservation of British liberty. A reform of the legislature, Benjamin Flower asserted, was the sole great national measure that could prevent the ruin of Britain.¹⁹⁵ It was essential for the nation to maintain an adequate representation, one author echoed, if the evils complained about the British constitution were to be remedied.¹⁹⁶ Benjamin Bousfield insisted on the priority of redressing the perversion of the representation, which, he stressed, had long been the source of grievance in Britain.¹⁹⁷ To regenerate the constitution, William Belsham argued, there could be no better approach than to attack its abuses at their source. It would be more serviceable 'effectually to eradicate the cause, than to provide a remedy for any of the specific mischiefs resulting from it'. If once Parliament had been reformed, he believed, all other beneficial improvements would, in due course, be completed 'by the wisdom and authority of the legislature, in a regular and constitutional method'.¹⁹⁸ Many reformers shared this optimistic view. George Rous remarked that there were indeed oppressions to be redressed: 'Yet,' he argued,

we think that the first and most important object is to obtain an organ, by which the public mind may speak in legislation. We flatter ourselves that, this obtained, every other abuse will be gradually and temperately done away by the increasing knowledge of the age.¹⁹⁹

Indeed, Robert Hall asserted, a reform of Parliament would not only secure the liberty

¹⁹³ *Political Correspondence* p. 146.

¹⁹⁴ *The Political Crisis*, pp. 53-4.

¹⁹⁵ Flower, *The French Constitution* p. 221.

¹⁹⁶ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 86-7.

¹⁹⁷ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 38.

¹⁹⁸ Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays* ii, 352, 359.

¹⁹⁹ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 80.

which the people already possessed, but would also pave the way for the rectification of other abuses which permeated the nation.²⁰⁰ Upon the whole, Sir Brooke Boothby summed up:

A wise and temperate reform in the representation, such as derives from the nature and cause of this defect, must surely be considered as a mighty *desideratum* indeed. It would remove a perpetual source of scandal, and add greatly to the confidence of the people in the legislature.²⁰¹

A reformation of this nature, Joseph Towers added, would prove crucial in the end to the security and establishment of freedom in Britain.²⁰²

IV

It is relevant, here, to draw attention to the opinions expressed about religious and ecclesiastical reforms. The extent of the efforts devoted to this subject highlights the deep involvement of the Dissenters in the British debate on the French Revolution. In Britain, political changes and religious reforms were believed to be inseparable. Joseph Priestley contended that a reform of the British government must necessarily lead to an 'enquiry into *ecclesiastical* matters, which are now so closely connected with things of a civil nature'.²⁰³ The abuses connected with the established church, in a sense, could be traced, in origin, to the failure of the Glorious Revolution to effect a proper religious reform. Richard Price pointed out that Britain's imperfect state of religious liberty was a default left by the otherwise admirable Revolution of 1688.²⁰⁴ 'The revolution,' Samuel Heywood complained, 'introduced a happy change in the civil constitution, and liberty became the portion of Englishmen; but the church remained the same, and slavish are *still* her doctrines.' It was high time now to call for a just reform:

it may deserve the serious consideration of the well-wishers to the Church, whether the eager zeal of the sons of bigotry may not accelerate its fall. The Church was established more than two hundred

²⁰⁰ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press* p. 88.

²⁰¹ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* pp. 123-4.

²⁰² Towers, *Thoughts on the Commencement of a New Parliament* p. 22.

²⁰³ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* p. 127.

²⁰⁴ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, p. 30.

years ago, in the infancy of learning in Europe. The intellect of man has been improving ever since, and yet *the Church* . . . has made *no improvement at all*. To suppose that there is nothing in its doctrines or discipline that can be objected to, or improved, is an absurdity.²⁰⁵

The church establishment in England, Sir Brooke Boothby commented, was perhaps an evil 'sanctified by time'. It might not be prudent to demand its total removal, yet there was certainly plenty of room for redress.²⁰⁶ Indeed, Christopher Wyvill asserted, an ecclesiastical reformation on the principles of moderation would conduce to purify, without destroying, the Church. It could also add a strong fortification to the British constitution.²⁰⁷

The alliance of church and state, as we have previously discussed, was widely asserted to be the main cause of the abuses which afflicted the Church.²⁰⁸ In the campaign for religious and ecclesiastical reforms, hence, many reformers came, first of all, to press for its dissolution. Benjamin Bousfield was one who had severely attacked the English policy of connecting church and state. It was ever his opinion that religion ought to be kept completely separate from politics.²⁰⁹ Sir Brooke Boothby praised the achievement of the French Revolution in this respect: 'The political part of the church government has. . . been wholly dissolved by the late reformation in France, and this was certainly the most pressing object of a political revolution.' He was much aggrieved at the continuance of such a union in England.²¹⁰ The connection in this kingdom of church and state, Joseph Priestley stressed, ought to be dissolved, or else both would fall together. It was his most ardent wish to see this fatal alliance ended, but he was, he asserted, inclined to support a more 'peaceable separation, attended with no calamity'. He invoked the example of the New World to prove the happy result of such a separation: 'Happy is such a country as America, where no such *alliance* as that of *church* and *state* was ever formed, where no such unnatural mixture of ecclesiastical and civil polity was ever made.'²¹¹

²⁰⁵ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 116, 132-3.

²⁰⁶ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 50.

²⁰⁷ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 47-8.

²⁰⁸ See, *supra*, chap. 6, section ii.

²⁰⁹ Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet*, p. 33.

²¹⁰ *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 55-6.

²¹¹ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 130.

The dissolution of the union of church and state would naturally affect the position of the established church. The Church of England had long been under attack. Because of its accumulation of errors and abuses, William Belsham declared, the established church had already become an object of contempt to serious and intelligent minds.²¹² Civil establishments, according to one writer, were the main source, and the fertile soil, of evils such as indolence, luxury and pomp that vitiated the Church.²¹³ Some critics were therefore prepared to have the Church disestablished. Joseph Priestley was perhaps the most avowed enemy to the established church. The church establishment, he claimed, could be deemed as a '*parasitical plant* which, unless it was cut off in time, would drain to death the noble tree of Christianity. It was a vermin to be exterminated without mercy.'²¹⁴ The stubborn opposition of the clergy to the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts convinced another critic that the established church could never be compatible with equal liberty and justice. He would not regret it if such an establishment should fall: 'it is impossible for me to wish the continuance of that hierarchy, or not to feel pleasure, in the expectation of its extinction.'²¹⁵ Other reformers were more cautious. One anonymous writer claimed himself to be no foe to the established church, though he agreed that its defects had to be remedied.²¹⁶ The establishment of a parochial clergy, Christopher Wyvill contended, remained important 'in the present very imperfect state of knowledge and virtue in the World'. While sympathetic to the Dissenters, he was not convinced that the time was now ripe for England to abolish her established church in exchange for a 'simple and original mode of Instruction': 'That we are far distant from that state of general knowledge and virtue, in which it would be expedient to adopt this scheme, is readily allowed.'²¹⁷ George Rous, who was, like Wyvill, an Anglican, admitted his reluctance to approve 'all the arrangements of our national Church'. Nevertheless, he indicated, the established church could still be of use if, of course, it was maintained in line with justice.²¹⁸ The opinion of Samuel Heywood is particularly interesting.

²¹² Belsham, 'Remarks on Parliamentary Reform', *Essays* ii, 363.

²¹³ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 46.

²¹⁴ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 83-4.

²¹⁵ *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, Esq. from a Dissenting Country Attorney*, p. 76.

²¹⁶ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 51-2.

²¹⁷ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 31-3.

²¹⁸ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 29-30.

Heywood, a Dissenter, launched a severe attack on the high church politics, but he also disclaimed any intention of overthrowing the established church: 'The Dissenters in general,' he claimed, 'so far from bearing ill-will to the establishment *as such*, admit its *utility*, as a mere human institution, on the whole well calculated for the instruction of the people in the principles of morality and religion.' An established church must not, however, trespass upon religious liberty: 'Here indeed the Church of England stands in need of great reformation.'²¹⁹

Whether disestablished or not, the Church of England herself was in need of reform. First of all, her doctrines and liturgy had to be purified. It could not be pretended, one writer claimed, that the creed of the Church should always remain unalterable. If there were defects in her present doctrine, discipline and worship, sound policy would demand their removal.²²⁰ To many reformers, the Church of England was certainly not perfect in this respect. Ever since the 1688 Revolution, Samuel Heywood observed, little alteration had been made in the articles, canons, or homilies of the Church: 'they are now in force; and subscribed, as before that glorious era, and the rubric remains unreformed.' The Church continued to preach, against the spirit of the times, the 'spiritual poison' which had operated with deadly effect before the Revolution.²²¹ The absurdities existing in the doctrines of the Church were now too obvious to be tolerated: 'There is hardly a man,' Benjamin Flower claimed, 'who would not, at once, acknowledge, there were several things in the articles, and in the common-prayers, very objectionable.' The enforcement of such doctrines had served more to cause dissent than to preserve uniformity. It was notorious, he noted, that those who subscribed to them were mostly compelled, for practical reasons, to do so without genuine conviction.²²² There seemed little doubt, Robert Hall alleged, that the creed of the Church failed to correspond with the sentiments of its members: 'The world. . . will be little edified by the example of a church, which in compelling its members to subscribe opinions that few of them believe, is a discipline of fraud.'²²³ The liturgy of the Church, Sir Brooke Boothby complained, was tautological and pharisaical. It stood totally contrary to the direct precept of Christ and its

²¹⁹ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 8-9, 146-8.

²²⁰ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 50-2.

²²¹ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 93, 103.

²²² Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 336-80.

²²³ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 100.

preservation would 'cast a ridicule upon the most sacred things'. For the sake of religion, he stressed, the Church needed to adopt a more rational form of prayer, 'rid of the remains of popery'.²²⁴ Christopher Wyvill hoped to save the main body, but meantime to eradicate the disputed part, of the Anglican liturgy:

It is the sentiment of every liberal Churchman. . . that the use of a Liturgy ought to be continued, and that our present Liturgy, in the main part of it ought to remain unaltered; but it is their dear conviction also that the language of dispute should never be heard in our addresses to the Almighty, and therefore our Forms of Public Worship ought to be rendered as nearly as they can be, conformable to the practice and phrasology of Scripture; some repetitions. . . might be struck out of the Liturgy; some improvements might be introduced in its arrangement.

It was, after all, not his intention to replace the existing articles of the Church with an entirely new system.²²⁵

It was proposed, secondly, to reform the current practice concerning the nomination of clergy. At present, it was noted, all the officers of the Church were the mere creatures of civil power.²²⁶ The arbitrary imposition of officiating ministers, *The Political Crisis* claimed, was one great evil attendant on the established church. It was usual that those in positions of civil authority preferred to choose men to administer the sacred truth of Christianity who would 'officiate the cheapest' rather than those with superior religious qualifications. The consequence was deleterious: 'This readily accounts for the little attention paid to divine worship. The church is deserted by the most conspicuous characters, and the Sabbath wantonly profaned.'²²⁷ Indeed, Benjamin Flower believed, the present desolate state of religion could be attributed to the people having no concern in the election of their priest:

Our bishops and pastors are NOT chosen by the people. We are careless about religion, and trust our spiritual concerns to statesmen; and so long as that is the case, it is impossible true Christianity should flourish. Our bishops are chosen by the king, at the recommendation of his ministers. . . Our deans, canons. . . are chosen by the crown. Those persons who have most interest with administration, are sure to arrive

²²⁴ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 135.

²²⁵ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 41-3.

²²⁶ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 47-8.

²²⁷ *The Political Crisis*, p. 68.

at the highest preferments.²²⁸

It had reduced the established church to an institution more interested in worldly pursuit than in religious concerns: 'You make it,' Joseph Priestley noted, 'a mere engine of state, a source of *wealth* to some of the clergy, and of *power* to those who have the nomination of them.' In both cases, he asserted, little attention was paid to the proper interests of religion.²²⁹ The introduction of an elective clergy was considered to be a better method of helping the Church out of its depressed state. Benjamin Flower was convinced that the clergy would never become better qualified for their stations until the people started to appoint them. 'The people,' he declared, 'have a right to choose their own ministers, from the highest to the lowest.' It had been entrusted to politicians long enough and it was now time for its resumption.²³⁰ Another author wanted to allow the people to choose their own minister, and to requite him as he deserved.²³¹ Every one, *The Political Crisis* insisted, was entitled to attend the preaching he pleased and every parish, it added, had a collective right to appoint its own minister. It continued to propose:

Let every town, parish, or district, containing seventy families, be obliged to provide itself with a teacher of religion and morality, and so on in proportion to the number, and the contract of settlement be made between the contracting parties.

Ministers would, hence, acquire a competency, while the people would show more respect to the church.²³² Popular election of ministers, after all, was in tune with the practice of the original church; and the example of the Dissenters could also prove its good effects.²³³

The third object of reform was the provision of the Church. It aimed both to revise the income structure of the clergy and to alter the method of provision for the Church

²²⁸ Flower, *The French Constitution*, p. 304.

²²⁹ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 104-5.

²³⁰ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 306-11.

²³¹ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, p. 47.

²³² *The Political Crisis*, pp. 68, 70.

²³³ Francis Stone, *An Examination of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Reflections*, pp. 165-6; Joseph Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 100-1; *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, Esq. from a Dissenting Country Attorney*, pp. 99-100, 103.

as a whole. The incomes of the clergy in England were grossly inequitable and often oppressive. While some dignitaries lived in splendour, *The Political Crisis* observed, the mass of lower clerics were impoverished.²³⁴ A minority of bishops, another critic felt revolted, made 'no contemptible figure in horses, in equipages, in their parks, and their palaces, in their tables and other luxuries', without the slightest thought of sharing some of their spoils with the poor curates, whose incessant labours were 'more beneficial in one month, than the toils of many bishops in many years'.²³⁵ The contrast in fortunes between clerics was manifest: 'In the place where I live,' Sir Brooke Boothby testified,

the respectable clergyman with a numerous family does the duty of a most extensive parish for sixty pounds a year, while from the same parish the Dean of Lincoln receives a thousand per annum for doing nothing at all.

Poverty caused hardship to parochial clergy in particular, who were mostly able to secure but miserable and inadequate provision.²³⁶ Benjamin Flower made efforts to expose such irregularities and injustices:

Some of the livings are worth from twelve to fifteen hundred a year, others only fifty or sixty pounds, and even this property is grasped by those in higher stations; our bishops and deans often hold livings with their other preferments. Those of the clergy who have interest sufficient to procure two livings, hold them both together; the consequence of this injustice is, that the clerical duty is performed in various parishes, by curates, who with their wives and families are existing, or rather perishing, while many of the higher orders of ecclesiastics are living in indolence and luxury.

All these abominations, he insisted, ought soon to be annihilated.²³⁷ Christopher Wyvill, at last, pleaded that measures had to be taken to augment the provisions of small benefices which, he stressed, should be increased to such an extent as to provide a decent living for resident clergymen. Without a proper readjustment, the Church could never secure the 'general satisfaction of the Parochial clergy'.²³⁸

²³⁴ *The Political Crisis* pp. 66-7.

²³⁵ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Mr. Burke*, pp. 65-6.

²³⁶ Boothby, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* pp. 50-1.

²³⁷ Flower, *The French Constitution* pp. 323-7.

²³⁸ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England* p. 45.

The reformers, meanwhile, continued to press for the abolition of tithes. The imposition of tithes, Benjamin Flower claimed, was an unhappy mode of providing for the Church. It laid a heavy burden on most parts of the kingdom; and the strictness of its collection, he noted, was odious to the people:

The keenness of the clerical scent in many parishes is truly surprising; nothing can escape it; not only the produce of arable and pasture land, but of the garden and the orchard is ravaged; pigeon-houses and hen-coops are searched; pig sties are groped into; and as if the squabbles often occasioned by such intrusions were not warm enough, these christian pastors force themselves into hot houses, and seize upon all plants and fruits, British and Exotic.

The collection of tithes often compelled people to languish in jail because they were not able to satisfy the claims of their parish priest.²³⁹ Indeed, another critic claimed, tithes had caused inconveniences and evils to the community. They formed a perpetual source of litigation between the proprietors of land and the clergy, and an everlasting bone of contention between ministers and their parishioners. They impeded agricultural improvements because they hung like 'a millstone about the neck of the landed interest'.²⁴⁰ At last, Robert Hall thus commented: 'As a mode of union with parishioners, they are fruitful of contentions; as a restraint on the improvement of land, impolitic and oppressive; as a remnant of the jewish law, superstitious and absurd.' It would be better for the church to recede from making such a noxious claim.²⁴¹

There was, hence, a general call for ending such an oppressive imposition. Earl Stanhope urged Parliament to follow the example of France and replace tithes with some other kind of provision which might be 'less vexatious, less detrimental to Agriculture, more convenient for the Clergy, and less injurious to the Cause of Religion'.²⁴² Proposals had been made about how to secure a proper provision for the Church once tithes were abolished. Joseph Priestley consistently contended that the clergy ought to be left to subsist on 'the voluntary contributions of those who are benefited by their ministry'. It would be more consonant to both the spirit of the

²³⁹ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 314-6.

²⁴⁰ *Strictures on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 53.

²⁴¹ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 100.

²⁴² Earl Stanhope, *A Letter from Earl Stanhope, to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, p. 31.

Gospel and the practice of the primitive Christians. It would, most of all, make the church independent of the state, rendering it more attentive to the cause of religion.²⁴³ Benjamin Flower, on the other hand, wanted the clergy to stay in the pay of the state. He favoured the French mode of salarising clerics as public servants: 'This is certainly as just, fair, equitable, and satisfactory a mode as could well be devised.' It would be, no doubt, a more preferable alternative to the current one in England.²⁴⁴ Finally, Christopher Wyvill suggested a more moderate plan. He agreed that the present inconvenient system of provision ought to be replaced with a more unexceptionable one. His scheme, however, appeared to be rather a revision of the old system, aimed in the main to ease the vexations attendant on it:

if a valuation of the Tithes, payable to the Clergy. . . were made. . . on an average of their value for the three last years, and the average price of wheat for the same term were settled in a similar manner, it appears that a full and proper equivalent for the Tithes to be abolished might be obtained for each incumbent, in the shape of Corn-Rents, payable out of those lands which are now charged with the payment of Tithes; . . . and the quarterly payment of these rents in four equal sums to be enforced in the same summary manner.

An assessment in the mode of corn-rents, he asserted, would establish a more stable, adequate and permanent provision for the parochial clergy. It would help to quell those troubles issuing from the collection of tithes, so that the harmony of the parish would be maintained and the great business of religion 'more successfully advanced'.²⁴⁵

The last, and perhaps the most important, effort in this campaign for ecclesiastical reform was the attempt to secure universal freedom of conscience for all British subjects. Two tasks in this venture had to be completed: first of all, the repeal of the Test Laws and, secondly, the establishment of general toleration. The Dissenters naturally formed the main force in the campaign for the abolition of the Test Laws. Despite repeated defeats, Richard Price declared, the Dissenters were determined to persevere in their struggle to rid themselves of the injustice of exclusion from civil office. In view of the rising trend, throughout other parts of Europe, towards greater

²⁴³ Priestley, *Letters to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 81, 88-9, 95-6, 121-2.

²⁴⁴ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 312-3.

²⁴⁵ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 45-7.

toleration, he was optimistic that their grievance would be redressed in the end.²⁴⁶ The Dissenters, another writer claimed, would carry on their fight for the repeal of the Tests. He reasserted, meanwhile, that their efforts would still be pursued via, as usual, the 'peaceable and constitutional ways' of applications to Parliament. The Dissenters could count on the reason of a future 'just and enlightened legislature' which might be persuaded to reinstate them to 'the same irreproachable and eligible situation, in all respects, as the rest of our fellow subjects'.²⁴⁷ Samuel Heywood maintained that the sole end of the Dissenters was to repeal the Test Acts. He tried to assure anxious churchmen that the Dissenters bore no ill-will to the establishment and had no intention of overthrowing the Church. It was entirely without foundation to apprehend that the Dissenters, if once admitted into offices, would seek to increase their influence at the expense of the established church. He urged the churchmen to yield to the dictate of reason and drop their opposition to the claims of justice: 'They cannot make reparation for their *past* misconduct, but they may proceed with greater moderation and honesty *in future*' Should their resistance persist, he warned, 'the ruin of their church will probably record to posterity, their folly, and their crimes'.²⁴⁸

The Dissenters, to be sure, were not alone in the struggle. Their cause had its sympathisers from outside their own circle, especially from liberal Anglican churchmen. George Rous, for instance, did not hesitate to lend his support. There could be no possible interest, he argued, for a society to maintain religious tests:

To those, who are so unfortunate as not to comprehend or believe the relation in which man, as moral being, stands to his Creator, all tests are vain. They cannot hesitate to subscribe any dogmas, or perform any ceremonies, which convenience may require. Those, on the other hand, whose minds are awfully impressed with this great truth, find in *that opinion alone all the sanction which religion can possibly give to the discharge of social duties* To such, tests are useless.

The Test Laws, he pointed out, had originated in, and were still upheld by, the 'worst passions of the human heart'. Their institution, while oppressive to one part of the community, had contributed little to advance true religion and virtue. 'While, therefore,

²⁴⁶ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, pp. 30-2.

²⁴⁷ *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, Esq. from a Dissenting*^{Country}*Attorney*, pp. 92-3.

²⁴⁸ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 126, 138-9, 141-2, 194-5.

test laws subsist, all who dissent from the Church will labour its overthrow.²⁴⁹ Christopher Wyvill also favoured repeal, but from a different consideration. The enforcement of the Test Laws in England, he observed, had been rather partial and, indeed, preposterous. While the Dissenters were entirely excluded from offices, unbelievers of various sorts had been notoriously found to be filling superior stations of trust and honour. If such laws could even wink at persons who rejected Christianity and who admitted not a single article of religion, it was absurd for them to be particularly severe on those conscientious Christians 'who scruple to concur in some unessential particulars, but embrace the essential part of the Public Religion'. It would be politic, he stressed, to relieve the Dissenters from these oppressive restrictions: 'while men of capacity, for Public Affairs, are to be found among the various tribes of unbelievers, it is an advantage to the Public, that their defective Creed should be no bar to their employment.'²⁵⁰

The state of toleration in England, meanwhile, was under critical review. The English people, Richard Price claimed, had, in 1689, obtained only an imperfect toleration, which, though having been since improved, still remained insufficient. There still existed penal laws on account of religious opinions, which, if carried into effect, could, he warned, 'shut up many of our places of worship, and silence and imprison some of our ablest and best men'.²⁵¹ Samuel Heywood complained that the Act of Toleration had hitherto refused to tolerate those Dissenters who oppugned the Trinity, and that the recent relief of Catholics had not extended to those who failed to take the oaths of allegiance. Notwithstanding the moderate climate of the times, he pointed out, Englishmen would be surprised to learn that in this kingdom

all those sectaries who do not come within the protection of the Toleration Act, or the statute enacted. . . in favour of a particular class of Catholics, as oppugners of the Trinity, Moravians, Swedenborgians, Non-juring Catholics, Jews, &c. are liable to penalties in the temporal courts, for worshipping God according to their own modes, which reach their property, liberty, and even lives.²⁵²

It was true, indeed, that these statutes of persecution had seldom been strictly

²⁴⁹ Rous, *A Letter to the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke*, pp. 26-8.

²⁵⁰ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 27-8.

²⁵¹ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, p. 30.

²⁵² [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, pp. 66-70.

enforced. The spirit of the time, Christopher Wyvill observed, was more liberal than the letter of the law. With the indulgence of the government and the concurrence of the public, those intolerant laws which remained unrepealed were mostly reduced to a 'state of dormancy'.²⁵³ The actual state of toleration in England, thus, seemed rather complicated. It would be quite difficult, Benjamin Flower remarked, to apply the word 'toleration' with any degree of precision:

Englishmen are surely, in this respect, the most inconsistent mortals on the face of the earth. Our church, as by law established, is more intolerant than any of the reformed, and almost equally intolerant with any of the Catholic churches. Her ministers in particular. . . are confined more strictly than those of any other establishment. But if we look at *fact* instead of *law*, their situation is completely reversed, and no men in the world range with a greater licence. They preach and print, and act as they please, and scarce any notice is taken of them. . . We may, therefore, call the Church of England, with respect to their own members, the most tolerant, the most intolerant, or the most inconsistent, which ever we think proper.

Similar inconsistency also existed in the Church's conduct towards the Dissenters. The Church had, at various times, persuaded the government to enact penal laws against them, which had been since but partly repealed. At present, however, the Dissenters were actually so tolerated as to be able to worship God agreeable to their consciences, without the threat of molestation. In Flower's eyes, upon the whole, the entire system of religious policy in England appeared rather like a strange medley of persecution, toleration and connivance.²⁵⁴

For those astute reformers, none the less, indulgence and connivance could never form a solid basis for freedom of conscience. So long as intolerant laws were retained, there would always be the possibility that they might, again, be called into action. Benjamin Flower was not persuaded that those who pleaded for such statutes of persecution would not intend, on some occasion or other, to make use of them.²⁵⁵ The truth, to Robert Hall, seemed to be that, though there might be no immediate chance of exertion, the laws of persecution, while unrepealed, would be maintained 'as a body in reserve, ready to be brought into the field on the first occasion that shall

²⁵³ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England* p. 27.

²⁵⁴ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 402-4.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

offer'.²⁵⁶ They would still be able, Christopher Wyvill added, to 'operate to a greater extent, with no immediate hazard'.²⁵⁷ From such a perspective, then, most British reformers were disposed to see toleration institutionalised in the enlarged sense. Benjamin Flower proposed to extend toleration to such a degree as almost bordering on 'perfect liberty':

This is the case when an establishment is formed upon the most equitable principles possible; in which the means of instruction are adapted to answer the end, at the least expence to the community; and when all those who dissent from it, have not only the undisturbed enjoyment of their opinions and worship, but likewise, all the rights and privileges of citizens, equally with their conforming brethren.

He called upon all sects – Dissenters, moderate Anglicans, Methodists, Quakers, Catholics and Jews – to unite hand-in-hand in the struggle for this liberty.²⁵⁸ The aim of the Dissenters, Samuel Heywood pointed out, was now to secure a 'general toleration'

to all peaceable subjects, understanding by the word *Toleration*, not merely an indulgence as to the exercise of public worship, but *religious liberty*, allowing to all peaceable subject, the full enjoyment of their own religious sentiments and forms, without the infliction of any penalties or disabilities for preferring them.²⁵⁹

To Christopher Wyvill, toleration could never be too extensive. Experience had sufficiently proved that even a mitigated system of intolerance would be merely an ill attempt to promote uniformity in religion. It was, therefore, proper that 'more honourable measures should be tried, that the maxims of impartial justice and equality should more consistently govern the conduct of the State'.²⁶⁰ Capel Lofft was prepared to invest 'toleration' with the amplest import, or even to drop it, if necessary, directly in favour of 'religious freedom':

If the Term, Toleration, be too narrow for the rights which

²⁵⁶ Hall, *An Apology for the Freedom of the Press*, p. 80.

²⁵⁷ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, p. 35.

²⁵⁸ Flower, *The French Constitution*, pp. 404, 433-4, 475.

²⁵⁹ [Heywood], *High Church Politics*, p. 140.

²⁶⁰ Wyvill, *A Defence of Dr. Price and the Reformers of England*, pp. 25-6, 36, 38.

conscience, humanity, and the public interest requires us to recognize, let it be ennobled by giving it the most ample sense; or if found incapable. . . of a just and adequate import, let it sink into oblivion, and religious Freedom supply its place in our language, and in our practice.²⁶¹

A general toleration, Benjamin Bousfield contended, would contribute better to serve the cause of religion: 'This will operate more to reclaim the morals of the people, to promote christianity, to procure respect for all religious establishments, than all the denunciations of vengeance, which, for many centuries before, had been bellowed from the pulpit of intolerant bigotry.' In the end, he added, these reforms could also help to secure respect and stability to the civil government.²⁶²

²⁶¹ Lofft, *Remarks on the Letter of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke* pp. 34-5.

²⁶² Bousfield, *Observations on the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke's Pamphlet* p. 35.

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