

**POLITICAL ARGUMENT IN EDMUND BURKE'S *REFLECTIONS*: A  
CONTEXTUAL STUDY**

**BY**

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## ABSTRACT

The present thesis offers a historical interpretation of Edmund Burke's classic text, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. By contrast to the existing literature, it studies Burke's work as a purposive intervention in a domestic problem complex that turned upon the ways in which the French Revolution was refracted in various British contexts of argument. In short, British radicals put the principles and the very idea of the French Revolution to unique uses, employing them to increase the legitimacy and potency of their own arguments. To this end, they appealed to the authority of the French Revolution to augment their dynamic reading of the English Revolution of 1688, and denounced the lack of liberty in Britain by holding the French system of representation up as a model which would provide a genuinely accountable and participatory government. The thesis illustrates Burke's alarm at these developments, which he perceived as constituting a democratic threat to Britain's mixed constitution; such fears were compounded by the political behaviour of his moderate contemporaries, many of whom embraced natural rights arguments that were at odds with their aristocratic conceptions of politics. Guided by a critical acceptance of Quentin Skinner's interpretative injunctions, the thesis investigates Burke's response to these dilemmas by situating his utterances on the English Revolution of 1688, representation, and the French army in prevailing intellectual and political contexts. Adopting this approach, it highlights the complexity and originality of Burke's political argument by demonstrating that, in each case, Burke was manipulating the ideological conventions of Whiggism. Most significantly however, it stresses the anti-democratic character of his illocutionary intentions, for, in countering the democratic danger, Burke was stripping Whiggism of its populist potential and recommending increasingly conservative forms of political action.

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BJT

Moseley, 2011

## ABBREVIATIONS

CORR	<i>The Correspondence of Edmund Burke</i>
HPHOC	<i>History and Proceedings of the House of Commons</i>
PH	<i>Cobbett's Parliamentary History of England</i>
PR	<i>Parliamentary Register</i>
WS	<i>The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke</i>

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## INTRODUCTION

Edmund Burke. The name is almost synonymous with conservatism. This association is reproduced and reinforced in countless textbooks and dictionaries of political thought. Moreover, it was recently repeated to the wider nation (or at least the wider broadsheet reading nation) in the *Independent's* worthy series on "Great Philosophers", where Burke was presented as "one of the originators of modern political conservatism". Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the *Independent* explained, forms the "bedrock of his reputation" (Stangroom 2008: 9). Indeed, the text has undoubtedly achieved 'classic' status. In terms of sales figures it proved an "immediate success" when first published on November 1 1790, but its significance has since far outgrown such measures (Lock 2006: 332). *Reflections* is now regarded as Burke's "most important" work because it is taken to serve as his "membership card" to the "club" of "modern intellectual conservatism" (Quinton 1978: 59; Scruton 2007: 69). The association between *Reflections* and conservatism is largely informed by the text's "history of appropriations", which, particularly since the turn of the twentieth-century, reveals its uses in providing the "metaphysical dressing" for a variety of conservative ends (Whale 2000: 4). In this vein, *Reflections* is deemed relevant in our modern day battle against the "empire of unnatural vices" and "social disintegration", which were "long predicted by Burke" (Kirk 1990: xi; Henrie 1997: 204). More recently, however, it has been asserted that Burke's *Reflections* provides "the authentic voice of the coalition agreement" that currently exists between the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government in Great Britain. In particular, it is claimed that the Government's driving idea of the "Big Society", which provides an "alternative governing philosophy" to Labour's "simple-minded statism", would be "lost" without *Reflections*, since the concept is "distilled" from Burke's

attacks on “aggressive individualism” in 1790 (Rajan 2010; Marquand 2010). *Reflections* is certainly part of our intellectual inheritance. Yet these attempts to employ Burke’s ideas to legitimate contemporary projects force us to re-examine the nature of this inheritance. Alternatively put, if we describe Burke as the “hottest thinker of 2010”, it seems crucial to be clear about precisely *what* he was thinking (Rajan 2010).

The present thesis aims to achieve such clarity by offering a historical interpretation of Burke’s *Reflections*. Rather than studying the text in terms of the underlying coherence/incoherence of Burke’s entire corpus of work (as exegetes keen to ‘solve’ the ‘Burke problem’ have), I treat *Reflections* as a self-sufficient object of inquiry and conceive the text as embodying a series of linguistic acts. In adopting this approach I do not attempt to establish the political philosophy contained therein, neither am I (primarily) concerned with locating Burke’s utterances in various traditions of thought or political languages. Instead, I concentrate on studying the dimension of linguistic action in order to recover Burke’s basic purposes in using the arguments that he did in the manner that he did.

### **Understanding the British focus of Burke’s *Reflections***

The thesis makes a distinct and original contribution to Burke scholarship by highlighting and explaining Burke’s interventions in various British contexts of argument. Interpreters have commonly understood *Reflections* as a commentary on the French Revolution. To this end they have focused on explaining what the Revolution signified or represented to Burke, or on delineating his analysis of the landmark event. Of course, it is widely acknowledged that Burke issued his work as a warning to his British audience. However, scholars have

overwhelmingly considered this warning as arising from, and being bound up with, Burke's direct engagement with the French Revolution. By contrast, this study shifts the focus from France to Britain to demonstrate that many of Burke's arguments were aimed at addressing the ways in which the idea of the Revolution was refracted in existing contexts of debate in Britain. It is worth elucidating this point, since determining how far Burke's arguments were aimed at English or at French affairs is held to be "one of the most difficult questions in Burkean studies" (Pocock 1985: 211).

It is clear that Burke was extremely alarmed by domestic political developments *circa* 1790; indeed, just one week before *Reflections* went on sale he revealed in private correspondence that his "Object" in writing the text "was not France, in the first instance, but this Country" (Corr 6: 141). One of Burke's main concerns, it would seem, stemmed from the uptake of revolutionary principles amongst British radicals. As he later indicated, *Reflections* had been "published on the Idea, that the principles of a new, republican, frenchified Whiggism was gaining ground in this Country" (Corr 7: 52). The validity of this point is confirmed in the text itself. Introducing his *magnum opus*, Burke remarked that he was "solicitous chiefly for the peace of my own country", and throughout the work he sought to highlight the domestic dangers occasioned by "smugglers of adulterated metaphysics" who held the French Revolution up as a "model" for Britain (Burke 2001: 154, 255, 253). Further to the threat posed by British radicals, Burke was also concerned by the actions of political moderates – particularly those in his own party. His worries in this respect were primarily caused by the willingness of the party's leaders to tolerate (and even employ) natural rights arguments in political debate, and by the perceived association between members of his party and more radical figures. Accordingly, *Reflections* denounced the popular idea that the French

Revolution was following the example set by the English in 1688 and repeatedly warned its readers to

take good care how they are involved with persons who, under the pretext of zeal towards the [English] Revolution and constitution, too frequently wander from their true principles; and are ready on every occasion to depart from the firm but cautious and deliberate spirit which produced the one, and which presides in the other (Burke 2001: 145-6).

The most outstanding Burke scholar of the modern era suggests that Burke “feared the English radical and anti-war Whigs less as revolutionaries in their own right than as fellow-travellers with someone else’s revolution” (Pocock 1985: 211). This may well be the case. However, it is also apparent that British radicals did not rely solely on arguments borrowed from the French. Rather, they put French principles and the idea of the French Revolution to unique uses in a British context, employing them to provide existing arguments with increased legitimacy and potency. With this in mind, it is important to note that Burke characterised the French revolutionary government as a “despotic democracy” that was ruled according to the “code of the rights of men”. Burke’s difficulties with this “code” were numerous, but were ultimately rooted in the fact that “men, with them, are strictly equal, and are entitled to equal rights in their own government” (Burke 2001: 305, 390, 346). Consequently, his perception of the threat confronting Britain revolved around the various uses that domestic radicals made of these democratic ideas. Foremost, in this sense, were the radicals’ attempts to push for political reform by asserting strong ideas of popular sovereignty and declaring that liberty was directly proportional to participation in public life. These points were mainly, though not exclusively, expressed through a populist interpretation of the English Revolution and a plethora of grievances concerning the unreformed system of

representation. In studying Burke's *Reflections* the thesis highlights the extent to which his arguments on the English Revolution, the nature of representation and the French army address the radicals' arguments. It conceives each of Burke's aforementioned arguments as purposive interventions in prevailing intellectual and political contexts of debate that pertain to the contemporary political and social situation in Britain *circa* 1790.

### **Adopting a Skinnerian approach to the study of Burke's *Reflections***

As previously mentioned, the vast majority of scholarship on *Reflections* investigates Burke's interpretation of the French Revolution. To this end, some commentators have passed judgement on Burke's perception of the meaning of the event for Britain. My work is distinct in that I study what Burke was doing when he addressed the ways in which the principles of the French Revolution were refracted in a British context and used to reinforce reformist demands that were particular to Britain. In short, I offer what is to date the most comprehensive explanation of Burke's arguments as they pertained to late eighteenth-century British politics. I explore to the fullest Burke's interaction with this context by adopting an approach which is guided by a critical acceptance of Quentin Skinner's meta-theoretical writings.

Skinner's approach to the interpretation of past texts aims to "stress the historicity of the history of political theory and of intellectual history more generally" (Skinner 2001: 176). Influenced by J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, which indicates the performative nature of language, Skinner focuses on studying the dimension of linguistic action in order to grasp what the authors of past texts "were *doing* in writing them". These "illocutionary acts" are

performed by the author *in* writing what (s)he wrote, and therefore reveal the intended force with which an argument was issued or what the author “*meant by* writing in that particular way” (Austin 1980: 94-120; Skinner 1978a: xiii; Skinner 1988c: 76). Since texts such as *Reflections* are intended acts of communication, the author’s intentions in writing must, to a certain extent, have been conventional so as to “be recognizable *as* intentions to uphold some particular position in argument”. Consequently, Skinner’s methodological precepts direct one to investigate the prevailing conventions relating to the use of a certain concept or argument, so that one might uncover the “nature and range of things that could recognizable have been done by using that particular concept, in the treatment of that particular theme, at that particular time”. From a range of potential illocutionary forces, one can then determine the character of the linguistic act that the author was performing by inquiring whether (s)he held the beliefs and motives appropriate to the formation of certain intentions in writing (Skinner 1988c: 77, 78; Skinner 1988d: 278). Although one’s exegetical attention remains focused on recovering the answers that he/she offered to particular questions in a given text, previous writings and private correspondence can thus be incorporated into the study and employed in a corroborative fashion. This is rather different to the coherentist approach, in which the ‘text’ being studied consists of an author’s entire output containing a single structure of meaning.

The merit of adopting Skinner’s approach is that it enables us to move beyond a description of what arguments past authors were presenting, to see also “what questions they were addressing and trying to answer, and how far they were accepting and endorsing, or questioning and repudiating, or even perhaps polemically ignoring, the prevailing assumptions and conventions of political debate” (Skinner 1978a: xiii). I offer a more detailed exposition of the impact that Skinner’s interpretative injunctions have had on my

thesis in Chapter One. Nonetheless, since my Skinnerian approach serves to further distinguish the form and focus of my work from prior studies of *Reflections*, it seems appropriate here to briefly highlight the distinctiveness and advantages of studying Burke's text in such a manner. Essentially, previous scholars have interpreted Burke's arguments in very abstract terms, highlighted the aesthetic dimensions of his text, or depicted his appeals to contemporary political languages. Although authors pursuing these lines of enquiry have overwhelmingly focused on Burke's engagement with the French Revolution, my dissatisfaction with each of these modes of interpretation is that none of them investigate the dimension of linguistic action in *Reflections*. As a consequence, they are unable to offer a means of grasping the various linguistic (and hence political) acts that Burke was performing in using a given argument or concept in the manner that he did, or of recovering his basic strategies in argument.

By contrast, I situate Burke's understanding of the English Revolution of 1688, his utterances on representation, and his assertions about the relationship between democratic ideas and liberty (as evidenced through his discussion of the French army) in a variety of intellectual contexts in order to determine his point in employing each of these arguments. I conceptualise his political thought as political action and examine his "move[s] in argument", relative to the relevant linguistic conventions, which provide a framework for the use of certain concepts and arguments (Skinner 1988d: 274). Proceeding in this way, allows me to understand the particularity and complexity of Burke's use of these concepts and arguments. To take one such example: since J. G. A. Pocock's path breaking essay in the early 1960s it has commonly been held that the reading of the English Revolution which Burke gave in his *Reflections* serves to evidence his appeal to the wider political language of ancient constitutionalism (Pocock 1989b). Indeed, in Chapter Three, my own interpretation of



Burke's argument confirms as much. However, further to locating Burke in this tradition, I also investigate what Burke meant by presenting 1688 as a continuation of the nation's ancient constitution. Finding that his description of the event differs to that offered by the leaders of his party, and that Burke's view is in fact rather outmoded, I demonstrate that Burke was recalling the governing elite to an older position which repudiated radicals' arguments by depicting 1688 as passive rather than active history, thereby divesting it of any authority as a reformist precedent. Although this move was in line with an older, more conservative Whig discourse, it is fascinating to note that Burke's reading of the English Revolution also manipulated this discourse by portraying 1688 as having provided a constitutional full stop. In undertaking this move, Burke was simultaneously investing 1688 with enough authority to constrain future political action, thus ruling out any populist concessions and binding society into its existing constitutional arrangements.

In the same chapter, I also indicate that Burke's interpretation of the English Revolution dissociated the event from notions of popular sovereignty by downplaying, and thus reducing the applicability of, the Whig concept of the right of resistance. This, combined with the aforementioned evidence of what Burke was doing in associating 1688 with the ancient constitution, illustrates the anti-democratic character of his intentions in writing. I demonstrate a similar point in Chapter Four by highlighting the reactionary character of his arguments on representation, and by revealing the ways in which he refashioned the existing anti standing army argument to pinpoint democratic ideas as being the catalyst that would cause a state to succumb to the tyranny of a military dictatorship. In short, the thesis demonstrates that recovering Burke's intentions in writing his *Reflections* evidences his complex manipulation of the conventions of Whiggism; linguistic acts which he undertook so

as to nullify his opponents' democratic discourse and effect an ideological and political retrenchment in the governing elite which would shore up and protect the established order.

It is widely acknowledged that Burke was defending the existing order in his classic text. However, in reaching this broad conclusion, my study differs from others in two crucial ways. First, I investigate passages in the text which have hitherto received little by way of proper exegetical attention. For instance, scholars have previously been content to examine the accuracy of Burke's statements on 1688; moreover, in considering his utterances on the French army, they have only cooed over his "Cassandra-like prediction" of the eventual rise to power of "some popular general" (Hitchens 2004: 132; Burke 2001: 388).<sup>1</sup> By shining a light on these underexplored passages my thesis treads the same path as Derek Beales' essay showing the importance of Burke's defence of the French monasteries, and J. G. A. Pocock's masterful piece informing us of the political economy of Burke's analysis of the French Revolution (Beales 2005; Pocock 1985). Second, I highlight the conservative, reactionary, and, above all, anti-democratic character of Burke's political argument. Upon undertaking a detailed contextual study of Burke's text, I find that Burke was countering a perceived democratic threat to Britain by encouraging more inflexible or guarded forms of political action amongst the elite and by manipulating existing Whig arguments. Revealing that Burke was cleansing certain arguments of their populist potential for use in his anti-democratic arsenal presents a startlingly different picture than that produced by others who have portrayed *Reflections* as being ideologically "mainstream" (Pocock 1987b: xii). Indeed, by recovering the anti-democratic character of Burke's illocutionary intentions I am able to

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<sup>1</sup> Burke's phrase appears to anticipate the *coup d'état* effected by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. Nevertheless, it is poor scholarship to halt one's investigation at this juncture and simply marvel at Burke's "prophetic gifts" without investigating what he was doing in making this point (Kirk 1990b: x).

overturn the prevailing view that his classic work amounted to an “agonised attempt to hold together a middle ground” (Clark 2001: 97).

**Keywords: clarifying the use of certain key terms**

In broad terms, my thesis argues that we can only properly understand what Burke was up to in his *Reflections* if we acknowledge his fundamental opposition to democracy and grasp the anti-democratic character of his political argument. Arguing that Burke was vexed by ‘democracy’ could seem rather anachronistic, for very few of Burke’s peers would be considered democrats by modern standards. Indeed, J. C. D. Clark’s rejection of an anti-democratic reading of Burke is rooted in this latter point; “even Paine’s *Rights of Man*”, Clark states, “advocated representative government, not participatory democracy built on universal suffrage” (Clark 2001: 88).

I have tried (as much as one ever can) to avoid anachronistic, proleptic, or teleological interpretations of Burke and his contemporaries. Consequently, given the scepticism expressed by Clark and others, it is important to clarify what I mean by positioning Burke against democracy. Instead of the modern day, procedural version of democracy that Clark seems to contemplate, I consider a more fledgling concept grounded in the type of political, social, and cultural transformations that were being mooted and were occasionally taking place at the end of the eighteenth-century. As Don Herzog has noted, at stake in 1790 were “public standing and epistemic authority: who counts as a participant in public dialogue? Or, more generally, whom ought we listen to – and believe – and why?” (Herzog 1998: 496-7). This does not mean that those propelling this debate sought to include everyone in the “public

dialogue”, nor does the existence of this debate entail an inevitable drift toward the democratic system that we currently experience in twenty-first-century Britain. It does, however, mean that certain contributions to this debate are recognisably modern, to the extent that they incorporate democratically inclined arguments; i.e. arguments that champion the rights or roles of ‘the people’ (variously defined), exclusive of parliamentary elites. Throughout the thesis, I have attempted to convey this point by employing the phrase ‘democratic ideas’ rather than ‘democracy’. As a second point, it is crucial to stress that I am primarily interested in Burke’s *perception* of the nature of the threat that British radicals and political moderates posed to the existing aristocratic arrangements. In this vein, it is clear that Burke was unnerved by the propagation of what he termed “the principles of French Levelling” (Corr 6: 451). Consequently, even if we, as modern onlookers, would not describe the arguments that Burke countered as ‘democratic’, it is important to grasp that Burke and others did understand them in such terms (cf. Nugent 1780: 43-4; Rivers 1784: 225-31).

Lastly, in terms of clarification, it should also be noted that the terms ‘English Revolution’ and ‘1688’ are used interchangeably to refer to James II’s demise, the accession of William and Mary, and the subsequent Revolution Settlement.

### **Structure of the thesis**

Further to the Introduction and Conclusion, the thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter One undertakes a critical review of Burke studies by addressing the methodological and interpretative limitations of the existing literature on *Reflections*. To this end, it takes aim at

the hugely influential ‘Burke problem’ to demonstrate how being concerned with this scholastic dilemma, which involves conceptualising Burke’s thought in terms of the essential coherence/incoherence of his entire *oeuvre*, actually limits our ability to understand the subtleties and complexities of individual texts such as *Reflections*. Moreover, the chapter indicates two basic difficulties with those studies that do focus their interpretative attentions on *Reflections*: first, these works neglect to investigate the dimension of linguistic action in Burke’s text; and, second, they interpret Burke’s text as a commentary on the French Revolution, thereby overlooking his direct engagement with figures in Britain who sought to use the Revolution to further their domestic ends. After having engaged in this ground clearing exercise, the chapter sets out an alternative approach that employs the meta-theoretical writings of Quentin Skinner. It subsequently highlights the distinctiveness and merit of adopting a broadly Skinnerian approach by showing that, in writing his *Reflections*, Burke was countering a perceived democratic threat that he believed to have arisen from the various ways in which the principles of the French Revolution were refracting in prevailing intellectual and political contexts in Britain.

Chapter Two demonstrates that Burke held the type of beliefs that could lead him to form the kind of anti-democratic intentions in writing that I ascribe to him in later chapters. To this end, it illustrates Burke’s aversion to democratic ideas, his belief that the French Revolution fuelled a democratic threat to Britain, and his alarm at his moderate contemporaries’ inability to recognise this threat. The chapter reconstructs these key beliefs in the context of Burke’s political career. It argues that Burke’s opposition to democratic ideas stemmed from his aristocratic conception of politics, but that the Rockingham party’s dalliances with public opinion during the 1770s and 1780s fortified his belief that it was dangerous to encourage broad notions of political participation. Building upon this point, the chapter revisits Burke’s

private correspondence and his parliamentary speeches to demonstrate that, *circa* 1790, he viewed the Dissenters as dangerous political subversives. The fact that such figures drew inspiration from the French Revolution alarmed Burke, as did their use of natural rights arguments in the context of British political debate. However it would appear that he was equally concerned about the political behaviour of key members of his party, who hailed the French Revolution as a flowering of liberty and likewise believed that natural rights language could be reconciled with an aristocratic worldview. The chapter ultimately maintains that their differing responses to such issues were founded in contrasting perceptions of contemporary political problems. In short, the Foxite Whigs believed that the French Revolution and the Dissenters occasioned issues of participation, whereas Burke understood that the equalising implications of natural rights theory were incompatible with aristocratic Whiggism.

Having established that he held the requisite beliefs to support such intentions, Chapters Three and Four highlight the anti-democratic nature of Burke's illocutionary intentions in *Reflections*. Chapter Three offers a comprehensive contextual reading of Burke's appeal to the English Revolution of 1688. Upon outlining the political problems raised by reformist representations of the event, it situates Burke's discussion of the meaning and significance of 1688 in the context of seventeenth and eighteenth-century interpretations of (English) 'Revolution principles'. Overturning assessments offered in the existing literature, the chapter illustrates the conservative and reactionary nature of Burke's political argument. It demonstrates that, in his utterances on the English Revolution, Burke was largely dissociating the event from ideas of popular choice and rendering it passive rather active history, thereby limiting its significance as a political precedent. The chapter also notes, however, that in portraying 1688 as a constitutional full stop, Burke was also investing the English Revolution

with enough authority to prevent any wholesale constitutional changes. It thus shows that he was offering a reactionary argument that countered the perceived democratic threat by cementing Britain's attachment to its existing aristocratic arrangements and binding the nation into this model of governance.

Chapter Four undertakes a detailed historical study of Burke's arguments on representation and his discussion of the French army. As with the preceding chapter it sets out the prevailing context of radical and reformist argument, focusing on radical critiques of the system of virtual representation. It indicates that radical opponents of the Whig regime assailed the lack of liberty in Britain by associating liberty with political participation and that they reinforced their points by appealing to the new-modelled French system of representation which promised a genuinely participatory form of government. Importantly, the chapter also shows that the challenge posed by radicals' direct appropriation of the French example was compounded by the actions of moderate Whigs (including those from Burke's party), who employed the French Revolution in very different ways to further their own opposition to virtual representation. Conceiving his arguments as interventions in these prevailing intellectual and political contexts, the chapter demonstrates that Burke defended a conventionally conservative view of virtual representation that suppressed notions of popular political participation, but that he also manipulated the conventions of this conservative discourse to strengthen it, thus rendering it increasingly reactionary. Significantly, the chapter also offers the most extensive study of Burke's discussion of the French army hitherto undertaken. It repositions this section of the text as a contribution to the anti standing army literature and illustrates how Burke puts this contemporary discourse to novel uses in countering the view that democratic ideas increase liberty.

The conclusion restates the fundamental argument of the thesis. In doing so it emphasises that to fully understand *Reflections* entails recognising that Burke intended to address the ways which the principles and authority of the French Revolution were invoked by figures in Britain. Moreover, it also entails grasping the fundamentally anti-democratic nature of Burke's illocutionary intentions in addressing this domestic context of debate. Furthermore, the conclusion highlights the key contributions that the thesis makes, both to Burke scholarship and to the wider discipline of the history of political thought.

### **A note on the choice of texts**

It was, for some time, standard to use the Penguin edition of *Reflections*, which, since being issued in 1968, has been widely available and includes a lively introduction by Connor Cruise O'Brien (O'Brien 1968). In recent times there has been a wealth of new editions published, with introductory essays of varying quality. In undertaking the present study I have referred to the Stanford edition which was published in 2001. This is perhaps the most comprehensive edition of Burke's text ever released: it incorporates a detailed and historically grounded essay by the editor, J. C. D. Clark, is *extremely* well footnoted, and includes subsequent textual variations, as well as Richard Price's reply. I greatly appreciate Clark's efforts in compiling such a valuable and scholarly resource, even though we may differ markedly in our assessments of Burke.

In reconstructing Burke's empirical beliefs I have made extensive use of Thomas W. Copeland's ten volume *Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, which is published by Cambridge University Press. In referring to other works by Burke I have used the *Writings and Speeches*



series which is published by Oxford University Press under the editorial direction of Paul Langford.

For the vast majority of the more ephemeral works included from the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries, I have used the fantastic (and deeply absorbing) online databases gathered and published by Chadwyk-Healey and Gale Cengage Learning respectively. It should, however, be noted that institutional subscriptions are required to access both resources.

Chadwyk-Healey's Early English Books Online (EEBO) is available at:

<http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home>

Gale Cengage Learning's Eighteenth Century Collections Online is available at:

<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco>

## CHAPTER ONE

### HOW TO DO THINGS WITH BURKE: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF BURKE STUDIES

My thesis aims to procure a historical understanding of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* by situating his arguments in the prevailing discursive and practical political contexts of eighteenth-century Britain. The present chapter compliments this contextualised view of Burke by contextualising the approach and broad argument of the thesis in a critical review of interpretations of *Reflections*. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first two sections largely function as a ground clearing exercise in which I outline what have hitherto been the most prominent ways of studying Burke's *Reflections* and indicate my difficulties with these approaches. In section one I interrogate the idea of the 'Burke problem' and illustrate how interpreting *Reflections* in terms of the underlying coherence/incoherence of Burke's entire *oeuvre* can limit our understanding of his text. Next, in the second section, I delineate 'traditional' interpretations of *Reflections*, aesthetic interpretations, and interpretations that locate Burke's work in various traditions or political languages. I put forward two principal criticisms of this literature. First, I demonstrate that such studies are unable (or have been unwilling) to broach the question of what Burke was doing in offering certain arguments in his *Reflections*. Second, they invariably view Burke's work as a commentary on the French Revolution, thereby neglecting his anxiety over, and engagement with, the very different ways in which British radicals used the principles of the Revolution to further their existing arguments. In the third section of the chapter I outline my

own approach, which is guided by the meta-theoretical writings of Quentin Skinner. To adopt a Skinnerian approach to the study of Burke's text entails conceiving his political thought as political action; investigating Burke's text as a confrontation with "political life itself"; and attempting to recover the character of Burke's moves in argument, relative to prevailing conventions of use. In fleshing out how each of these injunctions has influenced my own study, I highlight the distinctiveness and merit of my work by contrasting it with other studies of *Reflections* that evidence elements of Skinner's method and illustrate how pursuing this approach enables me to recover the particularity of Burke's arguments on the English Revolution, representation, and the French army.

## **Section One: Interrogating the 'Burke problem'**

### 1.1 Resolving the 'Burke problem' by highlighting the fundamental incoherence in Burke's political thought

The 'Burke problem' has loomed large in Burke scholarship. Although scholars post subtle variations, the central theme involves investigating the coherence of Burke's body of work and understanding his thought according to the fundamental coherence/incoherence of his *oeuvre*. This dilemma was so frequently broached that it eventually coined the aforementioned label, which has since been used to define the focus of a number of studies and has even provided the title for one author's work (see, for instance, Furniss 1993; Kramnick 1977; Macpherson 1980; Wilkins 1967). It has occasionally been 'solved' by highlighting the incongruity between Burke's early and later writings. To this end, it has become standard to point to the perceived dichotomy between the 'liberal' position he

adopted earlier in his career and his ‘conservatism’ after the outbreak of the French Revolution. This idea was classically expressed by Robert M. Hutchins, for whom Burke’s pre-revolutionary writings evidenced a “clear and cogent” theory of the state which employed the natural law to support the rights of the individual (Hutchins 1943: 140). Derived from his *Tracts on the Laws against Popery in Ireland*, Hutchins argued that Burke’s natural law theory was founded in the idea that “men have equal rights because they are equally human” and, as such, it resulted in a genuine commitment to popular sovereignty (Hutchins 1943: 144, 141). Conversely, in his *Reflections*, Burke apparently defended a “static society”. Although he appealed to the “real rights of men”, Hutchins noted that in this text “the major members of this list are not rights but duties” and further stated that Burke’s “talk of rights is directed now to maintaining the power of the vested interests” (Hutchins 1943: 155, 146, 147; cf. Burke 2001: 217-8). This basic dichotomy is commonly appealed to and has most recently been recapitulated by Christopher Hitchens and Darrin M. McMahon (Hitchens 2004; McMahon 2003).<sup>2</sup> Adopting a Derridean approach, Tom Furniss promises to “transform” this resolution of the ‘Burke problem’, yet, despite offering some interesting insights into the tensions within Burke’s aesthetic theory, Furniss’ work is ultimately grounded in more mundane concerns with the “notorious about turn” that Burke apparently makes in his *Reflections* (Furniss 1993: 3).

Understanding Burke’s work according to a “progressive”/“reactionary” dichotomy is problematic for a number of reasons (McMahon 2003: 233; Hitchens 2004: 130). First, those employing such categories often do so by judging what we, as modern onlookers, would find “progressive” or “reactionary” in his writings, rather than investigating what may have appeared so to Burke and his contemporaries. A second and more inherent difficulty is that

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<sup>2</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Daniel I. O’Neill for pointing me towards Hitchens’ piece.

any attempt to divide Burke's thought according to "progressive" and "reactionary" or 'liberal' and 'conservative' periods will necessarily represent that thought in static and one dimensional terms. Indeed, those resolving the 'Burke problem' in such a fashion regularly give the impression that Burke adopted a consistently 'liberal' position before 1789 and an equally steady 'conservative' one thereafter. In truth, his thought was less fixed and far more fluid than such interpretations suggest. To take two brief examples: in his 'liberal' phase, Burke could articulate a radical understanding of the English Revolution of 1688 (describing William of Orange as "our new-elected king"), whilst also adopting a conservative stance on attempts to reform representation in the Commons; in his 'conservative' phase, he could likewise maintain the aforementioned stance on representation in his *Reflections*, whilst relaxing it somewhat when considering the plight of the Irish Catholics in his private correspondence (PH 18: 1230; Williams 1996: 32-3). Some commentators have explained this ideological dexterity by appealing to Burke's status as a practising politician. However a dissatisfaction with this approach is that it reduces Burke to being the "spokesman of a political party", thereby emptying his writings of any theoretical content and regarding his thought as being directly "provoked" or "evoked" by the prevailing "political or social situation" (Hill 1975: 8, cf. 47; O'Gorman 1973: 14). According to this view it is "futile" to inquire into inconsistencies in Burke's writings because he simply "moved on to different areas of political conflict and to fresh conflicts of principle" and undertook a "new objective" in writing *Reflections* (O'Gorman 1973: 143, 107). Notwithstanding the shortcomings of conceiving Burke's thought in terms of a fundamental split, consciously ignoring the differences in, say, his readings of the English Revolution seems equally likely to limit our understanding of his work. This is because, as John Brewer has pointed out, such differences are not solely determined by the varying "political or social situation". Rather, Burke's decision to offer a different treatment of the same theme is influenced as much by his basic

intentions in appealing to that argument (Brewer 1975: 200). Thus, while there may be little merit in pointing out inconsistencies between Burke's utterances *per se*, if we want to understand what Burke was doing in discussing the English Revolution in *Reflections*, it may be important to consider his use of the argument in this text in relation to his previous uses of it.

## 1.2 Resolving the 'Burke problem' by highlighting the fundamental coherence in Burke's political thought

Although many commentators have concentrated on highlighting the basic inconsistencies in Burke's writings, by far the most common way of addressing the 'Burke problem' has involved asking "in so far as there is an underlying consistency in all of [Burke's] thought, what is its basis?" (Macpherson 1980: 2). Indeed, for a long time, the field seems to have been obsessed with finding a concept or theoretical framework which could "accommodate virtually all of [Burke's] ideas without inconsistency" (Hindson and Gray 1988: 5). This coherentist obsession was born in the nineteenth-century when Victorian scholars framed Burke as a utilitarian. Writing of his "habitual recourse" to the "creed of utility" it was maintained that, in all questions, Burke was governed "not by traditions and principles ... but by large views of general expediency" (Morley cited in Stanlis 1958: 30; Buckle 1904: 263; cf. Lecky 1892: 476). In the mid twentieth-century a group of American scholars launched an intellectual assault (or "counter-revolution", as they termed it) on their British forbears to reposition Burke as a Thomist (Stanlis 1961: 273). The most prominent work in this vein offered a "systematic exposition of Burke's acceptance of the Natural Law" and, by contrast to Hutchins' assessment, claimed that "in every important political problem he encountered, in America, Irish, Indian, and domestic affairs, in his economic principles, and in the great

crisis of the French Revolution, Burke consistently appealed to the Natural Law and made it the basis of his political philosophy” (Stanlis 1958: ix, x; cf. Canavan 1960; Kirk 1951; Strauss 1953).

This revisionist reading was thus premised upon the notion that Burke’s moral belief in the natural law provided the terms on which one could judge “the unity of his thought” (Parkin 1956: 4). It serves as an important marker in the history of Burke studies as it undoubtedly sparked a “revival” and “acceleration in pace” of those studies (Copleand 1962: 89; Bryant 1962: 91). Interestingly, the rush of new interpretations rarely followed the Burke-as-Thomist line, which has certainly suffered from overt attempts to use Burke as a conservative seer in battles against the Cold War and the “empire of unnatural vices” which supposedly threaten our modern age (Stanlis 1958: 246-50; Kirk 1990: xi; cf. Kirk 1953: 23, 61).<sup>3</sup> However, notwithstanding the limited uptake of their arguments, it is significant that the revisionists transmitted their belief that understanding Burke’s thought involved grasping his “wholeness and consistency” (Parkin 1956: 4). To this end, Donald C. Bryant’s comprehensive review of trends in post-war studies of Burke concluded by observing that “discovering a philosophical system, or at least a unified philosophic view, supporting Burke is, no doubt, important” (Bryant 1962: 113).

Bryant’s coherentism was subsequently echoed in a plethora of studies, many of which challenged the idea that Burke’s thought could be explained by his adherence to the natural law, but substituted in its place various alternative theoretical frameworks. Although he accepted the natural law interpretation, in the early 1960s John C. Weston Jr. declared that

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<sup>3</sup> For a variety of criticisms of the natural law interpretation of Burke, see Conniff (1994: 37-48), O’Brien (1968: 51-62), O’Neill (2007: 62-3), O’Gorman (1973: 95, 104-5), and Pocock (1987b: xlvii-xlviii).

“almost all of Burke’s politics depends on his view of history or, at least, can be explained by it” (Weston 1961: 204). Shortly afterwards Neal Wood lamented the fact that Burke scholars were “plagued by the absence of architectonic intellectual structure [in Burke’s writings]”. Addressing the issue, Wood maintained that Burke’s aesthetic theory (as articulated in his early work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*) gave a “unifying element to Burke’s social and political outlook” providing “a degree of coherence and system to the welter of words which he bequeathed to mankind” (Wood 1964: 42).<sup>4</sup> By 1980 it was argued that the “key” to solving the “central problem of coherence” lay in “Burke’s qualities as a political economist”, yet by the end of that decade this key had proved defective and there was again “a need for a new interpretation to provide a foundation for Burke’s political theory which can accommodate virtually all his ideas without inconsistency” (Macpherson 1980: 4-5; Hindson and Gray 1988: 5). This latest “foundation” to Burke’s thought consisted of a “dramatic theory of politics” that served as a “comprehensive organising concept” through which one could understand “all of Burke’s political thinking” (Hindson and Gray 1988: 6). The most curious attempt to situate Burke’s writings in a wider framework came from a scholar who granted that Burke was “perhaps inconsistent” (Kramnick 1977: 9). Isaac Kramnick’s interpretation of Burke is, in one sense, extremely novel as it employs contemporary methods of psychoanalysis to discover that his writings are underpinned by “an unresolved ambivalence”. This ambivalence apparently stemmed from Burke’s “oedipal crisis” and his “troubled relationship” with his father, and was manifest through his conflicting “aristocratic” and “bourgeois” personalities. Kramnick thus discovered “two Burkes”, one of whom “loyally served and defended his betters while another despised and sought to replace them” (Kramnick 1977: 10, 87, 8, 4). Nevertheless,

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<sup>4</sup> Burke’s aesthetic treatise was first issued (anonymously) in 1757. The second edition, issued in 1759, contained a new “Essay on Taste” and although the text was reissued throughout the century it remained unaltered from thereon in. The standard scholarly edition was published in 1958, though the introductory essay has more recently been revised by the editor, J. T. Boulton (see Burke 1987).



despite its avowed originality this interpretation was ultimately undertaken according to a conventional coherentist mindset; ambivalence is deployed as an “organizing and interpretative construct” and it consequently becomes a catch-all concept for explaining every aspect of Burke’s life and thought (Kramnick 1977: xii).<sup>5</sup>

### 1.3 The logic and consequences of the coherentist resolution of the ‘Burke problem’

Having indicated the broad impact which the ‘Burke problem’ had on the field, the remainder of this section will be concerned with examining the logic and consequences of the coherentist resolution of this problem.

The justification for adopting a coherentist approach arises from two basic assumptions. The first is the assumption that finding an essential harmony across Burke’s writings equates with demonstrating the value of those writings. In this vein, B. T. Wilkins has accusingly stated that “critics who have emphasized his alleged inconsistencies have done so to convince us of his utter or near worthlessness”. Without a coherent underpinning Wilkins maintains that Burke would present “only another case of a politician projecting a deceptive image of philosophical depth and coherence”, and, if this were so, he “would rightly become the exclusive property of political historians”, for “occasional insights do not add up to a political philosopher – or to anything else of consequence” (Wilkins 1967: 8, 9). Second, coherentists seem to identify coherence with understanding; thus, for Charles Parkin, “it is a weakness of many political formulas which are offered as clues to Burke’s ideas that they fail to establish a unity on the plane of interpretation” (Parkin 1956: 4). Holding such assumptions has often

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<sup>5</sup> Kramnick’s approach is heavily criticised in Lipking (1979). Kramnick is rather candid about the weaknesses of his interpretation, stating that his conclusions are “by no means self-evident” from the material studied. More alarmingly, he also confesses that “there is no solid evidence that can be produced here which would positively sustain the interpretation of Burke’s sexual and psychic life offered in this book” (Kramnick 1977: xii, 87).

led exegetes to strive for coherence at all costs. One consequence of this has been that certain texts are pinpointed as being the “most important” for discerning Burke’s “political philosophy” (Plamenatz 1963: 333).<sup>6</sup> Likewise, to maintain their sometimes creaking interpretations, scholars working within this paradigm have found it necessary to dismiss a passage, argument, or even an entire text as an “aberration”, in which “Burke was somehow not himself” (Preece 1980: 268).

A further consequence of pursuing a coherentist resolution to the ‘Burke problem’ involves attempting to reconcile under a single heading any perceived inconsistencies in Burke’s thought, for it will be remembered that any such blemishes could illustrate the “weakness” of one’s interpretation or the “worthlessness” of Burke’s arguments. Engaging in such reconciliations has frequently meant conceiving Burke’s entire *oeuvre* as one text, divorcing particular arguments from their application and treating his work as “an assemblage of moral statement and assertion, to be articulated and reconciled within itself” (Parkin 1956: 3-4). The need to reconcile intellectual inconsistencies has served as a point of departure for some studies; hence C. B. Macpherson’s investigation of Burke’s thought is premised upon the need “to resolve ... the seeming incoherence between Burke the traditionalist and Burke the bourgeois liberal” (Macpherson 1980: 4). In this particular example, the resolution is achieved (in true Marxist fashion) by exaggerating the significance Burke placed on his writings on political economy and allowing the rest of his thought to be interpreted in terms of this economic dimension.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Macpherson uses reconciliation as a starting point, others have sought to reconcile Burke’s arguments after having decided upon, and in order to

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<sup>6</sup> Plamenatz reveals these texts to be “*Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770); the great speeches on America, on *American Taxation* (1774) and on *Conciliation with the Colonies* (1775); the long letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol on the *Affairs of America* (1777); and *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)” – though the latter is apparently “spoilt by excessive passion and also by ignorance of France” (Plamenatz 1963: 333).

<sup>7</sup> For a more extended discussion of Macpherson’s interpretation see Kramnick (1983).

sustain, their chosen theoretical structure. This exercise invariably results in neglecting what Burke *actually* said, in favour of guessing at what he “should” or “would say”, or occasionally even correcting him and passing judgement on “what he really means” (Wilkins 1967: 81; Weston 1961: 211).<sup>8</sup>

A third, and more extreme, form of reconciliation involves reinterpreting the wider context to uphold a given framework for understanding Burke’s works. As indicated above, Kramnick uses Burke’s ambivalence between “aristocratic” and “bourgeois” personalities as an “interpretative construct” to explain the latter’s life and thought and his “constant vacillation” between traditionalism and radicalism. To this end, he supports his reading of Burke by arguing that these two identities served as “the two great ideological currents whose confrontation dominated [Burke’s] age” and Kramnick accordingly maintains that the conflict within Burke “matched most perfectly the historical identity crisis then being experienced by the advanced societies of England and France” (Kramnick 1977: 7, 8, 190, cf. xii, 194). Nonetheless Kramnick’s “interpretative construct” is questionable as it relies upon drawing a false antithesis between aristocratic and bourgeois identities. Rather than evidencing a facile split between a traditional, rural, aristocratic identity and a radical, urban, bourgeois counterpart as Kramnick supposes, historically sensitive scholarship has demonstrated that, in fact, the Whig regime “was founded on an assumed identity of interests between a managerial landed aristocracy and a system of public credit, in which rentier investment in government stock stimulated commercial prosperity, political stability, and national and imperial power”; in short, “it was in defense of the Whig aristocracy that an ethos of commercial individualism

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<sup>8</sup> Wilkins argues that “the appearance of inconsistency comes only from a failure to recognize that Burke, the philosopher in action, speaks on different levels”. Ergo, “in certain contexts” he denies the relevance of theoretical questions concerning first principles in general, “when he should only deny their relevance on a particular occasion”. Moreover “sometimes he stops short with utility or with history in such a way as to suggest that there is logically no need to go further when what he really means is that in certain situations there is no need to do so” (Wilkins 1967: 81).

was first elaborated” (Pocock 1985: 195, 242). With regard to efforts at reconciling Burke’s inconsistencies, it should lastly be noted that not every attempt to harmonise Burke’s writings is successful. Despite the best efforts of coherentist scholars, on rare occasions the reconciliation is jeopardised by Burke’s obstinate refusal to play ball. Burke seems unaware, for example, that he held a view of history which “explained” his politics, as he “sometimes slips” (subconsciously?) from his established position, or, in his “practical Whig politics”, does “violence to his theory of history” by believing in preservation rather than progress after the English Revolution of 1688 (Weston 1961: 204, 205, 220).

Coherentist solutions to the ‘Burke problem’ thus focus on illustrating the “wholeness and consistency” of Burke’s politics, either by delineating an idea or concept which ‘explains’ the rest of his thought, or by understanding his works in light of an overarching theoretical framework such as the natural law. Pursuing this approach has had certain implications for coherentists’ interpretations of *Reflections*, the most curious of which arose from the aforementioned attempt to transform Burke into a utilitarian. Unable to find in this text the “purely utilitarian arguments” which they found in his other works, Victorian scholars cited the “uncontrollable violence” of Burke’s *magnus opum* as evidence of his descent into madness and his being in a “state of complete hallucination” when composing *Reflections* (Lecky 1892: 476; Buckle 1904: 264). Happily, the text has proved less troublesome for other scholars operating within this paradigm. Therefore, making good their claim to be able to encapsulate “all of Burke’s political thinking” within his “dramatic theory of politics”, Hindson and Gray note that in *Reflections* Burke turns the reality of the French Revolution into a drama. In offering a “dramatic interpretation” of the Revolution, Burke apparently neglected rational arguments in favour of “imaginative abridgement ... often blurring together different times, places and events” and was “imaginatively adapting certain times, places and

characters to fit the moral end of the play” (Hindson and Gray 1988: 6, 173, 42). Further to this, in line with his reading of Burke as a “systematic” Thomist, Peter J. Stanlis has argued that Burke’s “immediate practical intention” in writing *Reflections* was “to exalt a Christian and Natural Law conception of civil society” (Stanlis 1958: 69).

At this point, the more perceptive reader may notice a pattern emerging. Essentially, *Reflections* invariably serves as evidence of Burke’s continuing adherence to the particular theory or philosophical position which the coherentist claims to have discovered in his writings. There are two problems with this, the first of which lies in the coherentists’ characterisation of political thought. In coherentist studies *Reflections* inevitably becomes subsumed in one’s wider interpretative framework. By proceeding in this manner and collapsing Burke’s works into a single structure of meaning, one is bound to suppress (or is, at the very least, less able to detect) the subtleties and complexities contained in individual texts such as *Reflections*. The most obvious upshot of this is that one will be led to deny (or, again, will be less disposed to detect) the originality of Burke’s political argument in certain texts. It has consequently been asserted that the arguments in *Reflections* were “not new”, and included “the same assumptions” about society and government as Burke had articulated in his previous works (Plamenatz 1963: 340, 333).<sup>9</sup> In this vein, though more specifically, Macpherson has surmised that, since Burke had arrived at his “bourgeois individualist” position in the early 1760s, his “fundamental bourgeois assumptions [were] already settled”, and *Reflections* thus evidenced “no new development in his thinking” (Macpherson 1980: 21; cf. Stanlis 1958: 231).

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<sup>9</sup> Plamenatz, we can assume, is here referring to those works which he regards as counting towards establishing Burke’s political philosophy. See above, note 5.

A second, and perhaps more fundamental, difficulty arises from the coherentists' conceptualisation of the nature of political thought. It has elsewhere been demonstrated that the act of political theorising involves abstraction from one or more traditions of behaviour. The particular level of abstraction at which a past author carried out his/her thinking varies with the character of the problem which that thought was intended to solve (Pocock 1962: 185, 186). By attempting to endow Burke's thought with the maximum degree of rational coherence, one becomes imprisoned by one's coherentist pursuit and is obliged to present his thought as embodying a systematic theory or philosophy, thereby understanding it at the highest possible level of abstraction. A consequence of this is that one is prevented, first, from studying the actual process of abstraction, i.e. the ways in which Burke develops and employs existing traditions, and, second, from conceiving thought in a dynamic sense, as "*an activity*" directed towards problem solving (Pocock 1962: 190; Dunn 1968: 87).

Investigating thought at the highest possible level of abstraction means that one will be far more likely to fall victim to what Quentin Skinner has termed the "mythology of coherence". This particular "mythology" in the history of political thought involves misrepresenting the thoughts of a past author by converting them into a "closed system, which they may never have attained or even been meant to attain". In such an eventuality the coherence one finds "very readily ceases to be an historical account of any thoughts which were ever actually thought" (Skinner 1988b: 39, 40). Skinner's formulation was issued to warn against too strong a concern with coherence and did not deny that an author could evidence coherent beliefs across two or more texts. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that there have been two main criticisms of the "mythology of coherence", both of which revolve around the types of questions we ask of past texts. First, in an attempt to offer a "rehabilitated principle of coherence", Mark Bevir has gone to great lengths to point out the different coherence

constraints underpinning desires and beliefs, and the varying effect which a concern for either will have on one's tendency to pursue coherence in an author's works (Bevir 1997: 168). It is significant, however, that Bevir accepts that "historians can go too far in making someone's beliefs seem coherent" and, more tellingly, accepts that the examples cited by Skinner "merit his censure" (Bevir 1997: 185). A second, though related, criticism involves drawing a distinction between historical and philosophical approaches to the history of political thought; when undertaking a study it is suggested that "one either follows the path of the historian ... or one follows the path of the philosopher", each of which possesses its "own canons of validity" (Ashcraft 1975: 9; Warrender 1979: 940). To this end, those adopting the latter approach have complained that reprimanding coherentists is a way of imposing a "historical method" on interpreters who "have other interests" (Minogue 1988: 181).

Although (perhaps) of some analytical use, the idea that there is a strict distinction between 'historical' and 'philosophical' approaches to the history of political thought is, in practice, rather misleading. Just as the act of political thinking can be undertaken at varying levels of abstraction, studies of that act can evidence similar variations. Moreover, one's "interests" in studying the history of political thought bear a contingent, not a necessary, relationship to one's method. This means that we can certainly draw out the more "fundamental" elements of Burke's thought without adopting a completely 'philosophical' approach (Bourke 2000: 632). Still, although we can legitimately highlight the fundamental aspects of an author's works, unless we eschew all historical questions and *only* regard those works as occasioning a problem in conceptual resolution, we must do so in an intelligent way which remains sensitive to the fact that we are investigating the thoughts of a past author.

This point becomes even more apparent when we are studying the works of an avowedly unsystematic author such as Burke. For sure, Burke was keen “to preserve consistency” in his arguments and to convince his audience that in writing *Reflections* he had “not departed from his usual office” (Burke 2001: 415; cf. Burke 1791: 30). Nevertheless, the consistency that Burke claimed was a consistent adherence to the principles of a balanced constitution. He was extremely frank about seeking to “preserve” this “consistency” by “varying his means to secure the unity of his end”, and likewise rejected any imputation of systematic theorising on his part (Burke 2001: 415). Of *Reflections*, for example, he later explained, “I was throwing out reflexions upon a political event, and not reading a lecture upon theorism and principles of Government. How I should treat such a subject is not for me to say, for I never had that intention” (Corr 6: 304). As previously noted, it is a feature of coherentist studies of Burke that proponents of such studies become obliged to contemplate his thought at a very high level of abstraction and to present it as having been expressed in a systematic fashion. This would be unproblematic if coherentists gave up any claim to understand Burke’s historical actions and intentions. However, they do not. On the contrary, they frequently write as though they are describing the thoughts and actions of a historical agent, stating: that Burke “attempts to unite” Thomas Hobbes’ philosophy with John Locke’s social outlook; that his work is “an anticipatory refutation of utilitarianism, positivism, and pragmatism”; that it was his “aim” to develop a dramatic theory of politics that would challenge contemporary theories; or that his “immediate practical intention” in writing *Reflections* was “to exalt a Christian and Natural Law conception of civil society” (Wood 1964: 64; Kirk 1953: 58; Hindson and Gray 1988: 180; Stanlis 1958: 69).

## **Section Two: Interpretations of *Reflections***



The above section offered a critical review of studies that have approached Burke's writings through the prism of the 'Burke problem'. Adopting such an approach inevitably involves understanding *Reflections* according to the fundamental coherence/incoherence of Burke's thought as a whole. In this section, I delineate those studies that focus their exegetical attentions on understanding Burke's text. Some of the studies outlined below (most notably those emphasising the aesthetic dimensions of the text) highlight in *Reflections* the appearance of arguments, assumptions, or beliefs that Burke had previously articulated in earlier writings. Briefly, the work of such scholars is distinguishable from that of coherentist 'Burke problem' scholars in at least two ways. First, noting connections or common themes between texts by the same author is, for the reasons set out above, very different from attempting to understand that author's entire *oeuvre* according to a single, coherent structure of meaning. Second, the studies discussed below are primarily concerned with understanding Burke's *Reflections*; as a consequence, they do not broach the 'Burke problem' and do not attempt to use their reading of *Reflections* as a means of corroborating pronouncements on the "coherence and system" in Burke's corpus of work (Wood 1964: 42).

### 2.1 'Traditional' interpretations of *Reflections*

There are two 'traditional' ways of interpreting *Reflections*, the first of which is grounded in the association between Burke and conservatism. Burke's status as one of the founding fathers of conservative ideology serves as the starting point for countless text books and intellectual biographies on his thought. Since it is commonly regarded as providing the basis for this claim, Burke's *Reflections* is accordingly hailed as being the "most important" of his texts and is considered his "most influential work" (Quinton 1978: 59; Jones 2002: 133).

Indeed, it is argued that *Reflections* alone amongst Burke's writings "sets the tone" for conservatism (Greenaway 1996: 182). This ideological link is a relatively recent phenomenon, for, in Britain, Victorian conservatives were "strangely ambivalent" about their Burkean legacy (Sack 1987: 624). Nonetheless, their twentieth-century counterparts evidenced a far more settled attitude and, given the extent to which conservatives have since appealed to Burke's writings, it is doubtless correct to understand him as having influenced that particular tradition of thought.<sup>10</sup> However, there is a distinct difficulty with focusing so sharply on Burke's contribution to modern intellectual life as doing so tends to encourage one to adopt a rather undiscerning attitude toward his actual arguments. In short it is relatively easy to slip from describing the reception of *Reflections* amongst later conservative theorists to branding the text "a manifesto of modern conservatism", conceiving it as a "classic statement of conservative principles", or claiming that its pages contain a "distinctive body of conservative doctrine" (Tinder 1995: 35; Heywood 2003: 69; Cahn 1997: 665).

The problem here arises from reading history backwards and the result is to proffer an interpretation of *Reflections* which confuses the relationship between Burke and conservatism, and which characterises Burke as a 'conservative' political theorist.<sup>11</sup> On a basic level this introduces a form of linguistic anachronism into the study of Burke's text; the term 'conservative' was politicised by the French author, François-René de Chateaubriand, in the early nineteenth-century and did not enter Anglophone political discourse until later still. Nevertheless, the objection to this kind of reading of *Reflections* involves more than being

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<sup>10</sup> A less Anglo-centric author may, of course, adopt a different opinion as to Burke's significance.

<sup>11</sup> Quentin Skinner's "mythology of prolepsis" offers a similar criticism of histories of ideas more broadly. Skinner states that the "characteristic, in short, of the mythology of prolepsis is the conflation of the necessary asymmetry between the significance an observer may justifiably claim to find in a given statement or other action, and the meaning of that action itself" (Skinner 1988: 44). The proleptic approach to the study of past thought has recently been defended by Francis Oakley on the grounds that it renders our studies more "interesting" (Oakley 2006: 418).

pedantic about semantics. If we adopt a back to front approach to argue that the “criteria of conservatism” is “emphatically affirmed” in *Reflections*, or if we construe the text as providing “the best formulation of conservative ideology” we are bound to read our assumptions about conservatism into our interpretation of Burke (Quinton 1978: 56; Macridis 1986: 74). Consequently, although it purports to explain Burke’s political argument this ‘traditional’ way of interpreting his *Reflections* has a frequent tendency to tell us little about Burke and instead merely confirm that the exegete’s view of Burke fits with his/her view of conservatism.

The second ‘traditional’ way of interpreting *Reflections* involves delineating a series of abstract qualities from the text and framing Burke’s argument in such terms. This approach is undoubtedly related to that outlined above, as the “criteria of conservatism” that one finds in Burke’s text is usually expressed as a series of logical structures of argument, or “defining characteristics” (Quinton 1978: 56). The distinction between the two ‘traditional’ forms of study arises because these abstractions are not always used as a means of comparing Burke to conservatism. Examples of this second form abound and include interpreting *Reflections* as a defence of “experience”, “historical continuity and tradition”, “justice and liberty”, or “practical principles” against “abstract principles” (Nisbet 1986: 23; Suvanto 1997: 24; Kirk 1953: 19; Goodwin 2005: 166, 160). Since his work is taken to champion “evolution” over revolution Burke often emerges from such analysis as a “gradualist” whose *Reflections* was “knowledgeable, prudent, worldly and moderate” (Goodwin 2005: 160; Conniff 1994: 233). One dissatisfaction with this type of abstract assessment is that reifying Burke’s arguments can disguise their point, to the extent that an epiphenomenon of this ‘traditional’ interpretation is to produce a version of Burke that can be conveniently deployed by politicians “to confer respectability and authority” upon their arguments (Gove 1997: 152).

Indeed, when raised to a sufficiently abstract level Burke's arguments can be contorted to legitimate almost any practice, and he has been regularly, and shamelessly, invoked to support the politics of both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party in Britain (see, for instance, Plant 1997; Redwood 1997).

Notwithstanding their potential for being hijacked, it is unnecessary to reject the aforementioned abstract assessments out of hand. This form of interpretation could, for example, serve as an introduction to Burke's text. However, proponents of this 'traditional' mode of study rarely regard their work in such terms, despite the fact that it seems to offer a limited and, in many ways, incomplete understanding of Burke's arguments. If we understand Burke as having "defended the liberties of Englishmen", for instance, properly grasping the particularity and complexity of his argument at this point surely requires one to ask additional questions of his text concerning, amongst other things, the nature of the liberty he defended and the character of his defence (Kirk 1953: 19). In this vein, it is undoubtedly accurate to surmise that Burke railed against "the abstract, universalist conception of rationality upon which the revolutionaries relied when they evoked the rights of man" (O'Sullivan 1999: 62). Nevertheless, to conclude our investigation here leaves us with a restricted view of what Burke was doing in *Reflections*. By undertaking a detailed study of his text we may note, for example, that he defended the abstract idea of virtual representation and an abstract conception of prescription, which rested upon being able to "anticipate" rather than demonstrate long usage (Burke 2001: 336; cf. Lucas 1968). His readiness to elsewhere employ abstract modes of thought should surely move us to conduct a more comprehensive inquiry into the content of the arguments Burke issued against the revolutionaries' rights of man ideology.

## 2.2 Aesthetic interpretations of *Reflections*

It has rightly been suggested that ‘traditional’ interpretations of Burke, which, for a time, dominated the field supplied a “pretty monochromatic version of a richly-hued character” (White 1994: 23). Nonetheless, a surge in interest from literary critics and English scholars occasioned a number of novel and exciting developments in Burke scholarship, and, as a consequence, *Reflections* can now be enjoyed in ‘high definition’.<sup>12</sup> The most influential of these developments has involved studying the aesthetic dimensions of Burke’s text and thus highlighting the overlap between his aesthetics and his politics. In this respect, it is maintained that his early aesthetic treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, is of “particular significance” for understanding his *Reflections* (Musselwhite 1990: 143).<sup>13</sup>

The *Enquiry* was a systematic attempt to consider the effects that various types of experiences have on the human mind. Burke averred that our response to such experiences is governed, not by reason, but by the passions, and was thus able to proffer objective and uniform conclusions and to portray all human action “as a mechanical response to external stimuli” (Ferguson 1985: 131). His argument in this text is organised according to a basic

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<sup>12</sup> In this vein see, for example, Boulton (1963), De Bruyn (1996), Dowling (1982), Hodson (2007), Lock (1985), MacCracken (1971), and the collection of essays in Blakemore (1992) and Whale (2000).

<sup>13</sup> Political theorists traditionally dismissed any such links and instead preferred to retain a strict distinction between Burke’s “aesthetics” and his “political philosophy” (Wilkins 1967: 151; cf. Canavan 1960). This distinction is, however, premised upon a grossly anachronistic conception of aesthetics, derived from its modern association with the discussion of artwork. There existed no such theory of aesthetics in the eighteenth-century and, instead, what the period thought about works of art was “bound up with what it thought and said about the nature of human experience generally”. This meant that, to the eighteenth-century mind, aesthetics was less about art and more about “how we are formed as subjects, and how *as subjects* we go about making sense of our experience” (Ashfield and De Bolla 1996: 2). Although Neal Wood highlighted the influence Burke’s aesthetics had on the latter’s politics, Wood’s desire to find “coherence and system” in Burke’s writings arguably results in a strained interpretation. Wood’s assertions concerning the “political application” of Burke’s aesthetic theory, for instance, seem to be based on interpretative speculation rather than genuine textual evidence (Wood 1964: 60).

pleasure/pain dichotomy, which he expressed in terms of two gendered modes of aesthetic experience; the sublime and the beautiful. Objects of beauty are associated with the feminine passions of “love” and “affection and tenderness”, and Burke essentially claimed that that which is beautiful causes us to feel pleasure (Burke cited in White 1994: 28). As the second component in Burke’s “powerful binary paradigm”, sublime experiences evoke pain since they expose our vulnerability (Musselwhite 1990: 146). However, crucially, Burke sought to demonstrate that if it remains at a sufficient distance then the pain or terror which one feels can actually induce feelings of “delight” which arouse the masculine passions of “astonishment”, “awe, reverence, and respect” (Burke cited in White 1994: 28).

This last point has proved especially important for scholars emphasising the aesthetic underpinning to Burke’s rhetoric in his *Reflections*. Contemporary observers undoubtedly tried to explain the French Revolution by assimilating it to existing experiences or events. In Britain, adopting this strategy led many to equate the goings on in France with those of the English Revolution of 1688. Burke eschewed such a comparison, but Ronald Paulson has suggested that he instead confronted the “unthinkable phenomenon” by fitting the French Revolution “into the framework of aesthetic categories” and interpreting it as “the terrible of the sublime” (Paulson 1980: 250). This line of argument assumes that “for Burke revolutionary terror is itself a kind of sublimity” (Eagleton 1995: 50). Moreover, given the extreme levels of terror which he attributed to it, it is maintained that he conceived the French Revolution as producing “the effect of the sublime in the highest degree” (Furniss 1993: 3). Commentators are broadly united in stating that Burke viewed this extreme form as constituting the “false sublime”, since the intensity of the Revolution magnified one of the most threatening features of the sublime identified in his *Enquiry*, i.e. its “apparent ungovernability” (Paulson 1983: 66; Ferguson 1985: 136; cf. Neocleous 2004: 75). In short,

it consisted of “too much sublimity”, thereby perverting the “true sublime in government”, which evokes a mixture of fear and admiration, and producing “only fear and a grotesque energy” (Ferguson 1985: 136; Paulson 1980: 249). In this reading, Burke’s vivid depiction of the French Revolution is largely an attempt to mobilise a “rhetoric of terror” that would emphasise its immediacy rather than its distance, thereby directly exposing the reader to the terror of the Revolution and alerting his peers to its perils (Reid 1985: 42; cf. Paulson 1983: 71). It is commonly maintained that the terror was manifest in the ‘ungovernability’ of the French mob. Developing this point, Linda Zerilli has demonstrated the importance of Burke highlighting female participation in the October days, as this picture of politically active women (interpreted by Burke as “the furies of hell”) captured the terror of the Revolution by rupturing the “gendered semiotic code” outlined in the *Enquiry* and inverting the social world in which femininity had previously stood for “beauty, order and submission” (Zerilli 1992: 49; Burke 2001: 233). This fascinating analysis thus extends the idea that the French Revolution represented a “false sublime” to Burke and instead posits the notion of a “feminine sublime”, which Zerilli reads as being latent in Burke’s aesthetic theory (Zerilli 1994: 323-328).

A key benefit of such interpretations is to show that Burke’s aesthetics were “intimately allied” with his politics (Reid 1985: 34). Nonetheless, despite often indicating how Burke put his aesthetic theory to a “distinctly political” purpose in his critique of the French Revolution, the interpretations cited above fail to offer comprehensive assertions about the practical political applications of his aesthetics (Neocleous 2004: 74). Indeed, by neglecting to indicate how Burke’s aesthetic theory functioned in the broader understanding of political and societal institutions that Burke articulates in his *Reflections*, these aesthetic interpretations arguably relegate Burke’s aesthetics to a rhetorical technique that he employed

to induce panic in his readers about the inherent dangers of the events across the channel. Moreover, emphasising the intimacy of the relationship between his aesthetics and his politics has led some commentators to overstate their case in a way which suggests that Burke articulated his politics in a *purely* aesthetic way. For example, since they regard his aesthetically charged lament on the plight of Marie-Antoinette as providing the “climax” or “the central argument” of *Reflections*, aesthetic studies surmise that “Burke perceives the French Revolution in aesthetic terms” (Musselwhite 1990: 149, 150; Reid 1985: 38). The absolute character of this conclusion implies a rather broad brush approach to the problem of understanding Burke’s detailed and wide-ranging interpretation of the causes and consequences of the French Revolution.

Aesthetic interpretations have focused almost exclusively on analysing Burke’s view of the French Revolution and on “his representation of the complex historical event” (Zerilli 1994: 14). Burke opened his classic work by pondering whether the “great crisis” of France would spread to become a crisis “of all Europe” (Burke 2001: 154). Consequently, it is obviously of great interpretative significance to grasp his take on the French Revolution. Yet the upshot of concentrating so single-mindedly on this aspect of his text is to limit our understanding of the variety of problems that Burke was addressing. To this end, aesthetic interpretations say little of his fear concerning the uptake of revolutionary principles in Britain. Of course, commentators recognise that Burke’s aesthetic interpretation of the French Revolution was designed, in part, to alert his domestic readers. Nonetheless, they only tell half of the story by stating that “his primary intention” when composing *Reflections* “was to warn his own country about the immense danger looming across the channel” (White 1994: 60). Notwithstanding the danger that loomed “across the channel”, Burke was also extremely anxious about the way in which the principles of the Revolution were refracted in political



and intellectual contexts in Britain and by the threat carried by British radicals who employed the principles of the French Revolution to further their existing arguments. It is a shortcoming of aesthetic interpretations that they offer no explanation of Burke's perception of the nature and significance of this threat.

### 2.3 Political languages in *Reflections*

A third strand of interpretation has involved studying the discourses or 'political languages' in Burke's *Reflections*. This approach is premised upon markedly different assumptions from those that have hitherto been discussed. Coherentist studies proceed by understanding Burke's entire *oeuvre* according to a coherent structure of meaning, and in 'traditional' and aesthetic interpretations of *Reflections* the text is conceived in a similar way – i.e. as a document that intentionally expresses a coherent structure of argument. Without due care, adopting such an approach can lead to a rather one dimensional view of Burke's perception of the problems he addressed in *Reflections*, thus providing a limited grasp of what he was doing at various points in the text. Instead of asserting, for example, that "Burke perceives the French Revolution in aesthetic terms", those investigating the political languages in Burke's text consider the work as a "tissue of statements", each of which is independently intelligible; the aim is thus to recover these statements and understand their relation to the wider discursive context (Reid 1985: 38; Pocock 1985: 193).

One advantage of approaching *Reflections* in this way is that one remains alive to the fact that the French Revolution posed a range of questions to Burke, and is similarly aware that his answers "are often couched in more than one idiom or 'language game', with no clear priority granted to any" (White 1994: 2). Indeed, J. G. A. Pocock, the pioneer of this particular mode

of study, has written that Burke's thought "is largely an examination of what languages have been, and what appropriately may be, employed in English political debate" (Pocock 1989b: 25-6). To this end Stephen K. White acknowledges Burke's appeal to the languages of political economy and the common law, but ultimately determines that the latter's analysis of the French Revolution is "best brought to life" by attending to his use of the aesthetic language of the sublime and beautiful (White 1994: 5). White largely reiterates the aforementioned orthodox reading that suggests Burke depicted the Revolution as having perverted aesthetic life by replacing the "authentic sublime" with a "false sublime" (White 1994: 69). However, in doing so, he claims that the conceptual resources of aesthetic ideology helped Burke "to see political modernity as such a threatening phenomenon" (White 1994: 18). To describe Burke's "perception" of the French Revolution as involving a conscious confrontation with "political modernity" is misconceived and extraordinarily anachronistic, since it conflates Burke's view of the Revolution with our own belief that it constituted the "emergence of the modern political world" (White 1994: 5; Hampsher-Monk 2005: 1). Transposing our understanding of the Revolution onto Burke's deceives us into misinterpreting *Reflections* as a defence of a consciously outmoded society. In fact, Burke regarded the eighteenth-century Whig regime which he defended as 'political modernity' and, *pace* White, considered the French Revolution as a primitive and barbaric assault on this civilised world (Clark 2001: 88-9; O'Neill 2007: *passim*).

This perceived threat to the civilised world of eighteenth-century Whiggism underpins Pocock's studies of *Reflections*. Pocock reveals that Burke interpreted and responded to the threat occasioned by the Revolution in the language of contemporary political economy. Thus his horror at the lands of the French Church being used as security for the revolutionaries' new paper currency drew upon the language of "Queen Anne Toryism",

which had initially served to highlight the threat to property posed by a ‘monied interest’ that encouraged burgeoning levels of national debt in Britain (Pocock 1985: 197, 200-1). Burke’s argument also entailed a “historicist and traditionalist” transformation of Scottish Enlightenment discourse because it rooted the perpetuation of commercial society in the civilised system of manners that was guaranteed by religion and the nobility. By attacking these “natural protectors of society”, Pocock maintains that Burke believed the French Revolution was “in the process of destroying ... the structure of European civility” and would therefore “destroy the possibility of commerce itself” (Pocock 1985: 210, 199). Pocock’s distinguished academic career began with a study of seventeenth and eighteenth-century appeals to the ancient constitution, which he found had been regularly expressed in the language of the English common law (Pocock 1987a). Further to indicating the political economy of Burke’s analysis of the French Revolution, he has deepened our knowledge of Burke’s political argument by detecting this particular language in *Reflections*. Consequently, in a seminal article aimed at delineating the “historical genesis” of what had hitherto been conceived as Burke’s ‘doctrine of traditionalism’, Pocock’s careful scholarship illustrated that Burke interpreted English politics, not in terms of an abstract, unified theory of society, but according to assumptions characteristic to the ‘common-law mind’; namely “a common acceptance of a belief in immemorial customary law”. Conceived in this way, Burke’s ‘doctrine of traditionalism’ appears to be rooted “in a way of thought already traditional”. Hence it was more accurately classified by Pocock as “an account of contemporary practice” than a ‘doctrine’ as such (Pocock 1989b: 212, 231).

These pieces contain some of the most outstanding work on Burke’s *Reflections* to date. Nonetheless, as with the aforementioned aesthetic interpretations, they are primarily concerned with investigating Burke’s perception of the meaning and significance of the

French Revolution. This is important because, as Pocock notes, Burke's analysis of French and English affairs exhibits an "idiosyncratic character". For instance, in his essay uncovering the political economy of *Reflections* Pocock demonstrates that the threat to landed property posed by the 'monied interest' in France could not be duplicated in Britain because of the "Whig 'miscibility' of landed and monetary property". Thus despite recognising that Burke was concerned by the revolutionary potential of British radicalism, he states that Burke "must have known that there were limits to what it could achieve by further disestablishment in the economic field" and accepts that Burke's fears in this respect "are not explained by his analysis of French affairs" (Pocock 1985: 211, 201).

In addition to observing that Pocock does not offer a comprehensive account of Burke's battle with British radicalism in *Reflections*, it is also worth highlighting three peculiarities that are associated with adopting political languages as one's unit of analysis. First, it seems that at the outset one will inevitably be struck by the related problems of finding a point of entry into the context and then closing the context. These difficulties arise because the context is potentially the entire vocabulary in which a nation (or wider, for Pocock has argued that the "chain of transmitters" of such languages "must be thought of as open-ended and immemorial") has expressed its political, religious, social, economic &c. experiences over time (Pocock 1980: 147). It must be said that Pocock manages to traverse this barrier because of his unprecedented level of scholarly expertise; his studies of Burke, for example, are often born from prior studies of wider eighteenth-century thought. However, such an obstacle is less easily negotiated by more regular historians of political thought. Second, while focusing on traditions of thought or political languages enables one to detect what Pocock has termed the "historical genesis" of an author's argument, it is undoubtedly true that an author could be engaging in a wide variety of political actions even when appealing to

the same tradition or language. This being the case, concentrating only on aligning an author with a given language offers no real means of indicating “the range of things which can in principle be done with them (and to them) at any given time” (Skinner 1988f: 107). Third, Pocock’s studies of Burke have tended to treat the political languages detected in his *Reflections* in isolation. At the beginning of his article situating Burke’s text in a tradition of political economy Pocock highlights his earlier study of Burke’s appeal to the common law, yet reveals that his later essay “will not be much concerned to inquire into the relations between the two traditions” (Pocock 1985: 194). This stance has proved difficult to accept for one commentator who remains “curious” about the “coherence” of the two languages and has argued that Pocock’s approach leaves him “insufficiently troubled by inconsistencies [in the relations between the two languages] and so insufficiently interested in coherence” (Bevir 1997: 170-1). Burke was undoubtedly addressing a variety of problems and doing a great many things in writing *Reflections*, thus it is not necessarily the case that each of his answers or undertakings can be explained in terms of a singular aim or point. Nonetheless, it seems oddly unhistorical to treat as discrete entities two languages which overlap chronologically and which appear in the same text, without also thinking to inquire into the interaction between these languages, either historically or in the mind of the author.

### **Section Three: Outlining a Skinnerian approach to the study of Burke’s *Reflections***

The chapter has thus far offered a critical review of prevailing studies of Burke’s *Reflections*. In this final section I aim to flesh out and distinguish my broadly ‘Skinnerian’ approach from those previously identified. After offering a brief indication of the thrust of Skinner’s meta-theoretical writings I identify three significant ways in which Skinner’s work has influenced

my own study in order to highlight the distinctiveness of my approach, and to illustrate the interpretative advantages of attempting to recover Burke's intentions in writing his classic text.

### 3.1 *Quentin Skinner's approach to the history of political thought*

Quentin Skinner's approach to the interpretation of past texts aims to "stress the historicity of the history of political theory and of intellectual history more generally" (Skinner, 2001: 176). His seminal article, first issued in 1969, exposed the various "mythologies" proffered by two "orthodox" approaches to the history of political thought; in short Skinner demonstrated that insisting "on the autonomy of the *text* itself as the sole necessary key to its own meaning" or conceiving "an idea itself as an appropriate unit of historical investigation", renders one likely to succumb to gross anachronisms and likewise ensures that one is unable to grasp the particularity of an individual author's use of a given concept or argument. The upshot of pursuing either approach, he revealed in typically provocative fashion, is to reduce the history of political thought to "a pack of tricks we play on the dead" (Skinner 1988b: 32, 29, 54, 37).

In a series of subsequent essays, Skinner has advanced a comprehensive alternative to the aforementioned "orthodox" approaches which is directed toward recovering the "actual historical meaning" of a classic text.<sup>14</sup> This entails recovering the "complex intentions of the

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<sup>14</sup> Skinner has broadened his focus from his early essays in which he was primarily concerned with the "basic question" that arises when we confront classic texts, namely "what are the appropriate procedures to adopt in the attempt to arrive at an understanding of the work" (Skinner 1988b: 29). He has since considered wider theoretical issues governing the description and explanation of beliefs, the concept of understanding, and the links between linguistic and social innovation (see Skinner 1970; 1971; 1988d; 1988a). The complexity and breadth of his work is treated in three very different monographs on his thought. James Tully's *Meaning and Context* focuses on the methodological and meta-theoretical dimensions in Skinner's writings, Kari Palonen's

author in writing it”; a task which must begin by asking what the author, “in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of [a] given utterance” (Skinner 1988f: 102; Skinner 1988b: 63). Such a formulation encourages us to study political thought as a purposive activity. To this end, Skinner is undoubtedly influenced by R. G. Collingwood’s philosophy of history and, in particular, his “logic of question and answer” which asserts that understanding a certain argument entails not only studying an author’s statements, but also recovering the question to which that argument was intended as an answer (Collingwood 1978: 29-43; cf. Skinner 2001). However, Skinner developed Collingwood’s position by employing J. L. Austin’s speech-act theory, a conceptual tool that emphasises the performative nature of language. Essentially, Austin demonstrated that utterances carry an “illocutionary force” that is coordinate with, though distinguishable from, their grammatical meaning. To gain “uptake” of the intended force with which an utterance was issued is to understand the “illocutionary act” that an agent performed *in* saying something – an act that is distinct from the act *of* saying something (a “locutionary act”), and is likewise distinct from the effects achieved *by* saying something (a “perlocutionary act”) (Austin 1980: 94-120).<sup>15</sup> Austin maintained that grasping this dimension of language was akin to knowing what an agent was “doing in” saying something, but Skinner has deftly noted that it is similarly equivalent to understanding an agent’s “primary *intentions* in issuing that particular utterance”, or, in the case of a text, understanding what its author “*meant by* writing in that particular way” (Austin 1980: 122; Skinner 1988c: 74, 76). His use of speech-act theory is

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*Quentin Skinner: History, Politics, Rhetoric* appraises Skinner as a political theorist, and the collection of essays in *Rethinking the Foundations of Modern Political Thought* review Skinner’s historiographical contributions (Tully 1988; Palonen 2003; Brett, Tully, and Hamilton-Bleakley 2006).

<sup>15</sup> The distinction has proved difficult to grasp for some commentators, and Skinner has been variously misunderstood as being concerned with recovering authors’ intentions “to produce certain effects in the reader” (i.e. perlocutionary acts) and with studying “what authors meant to say” (i.e. the locutionary dimension of language) (Ball 2007: 353; Lacapra 1980: 254).

therefore significant because it allows him to recognise that utterances can be used to perform actions further to the simple answering of questions, and it likewise enables him to move beyond the idea that intentions are necessarily prior to utterances. This being the case, Skinner is mainly concerned with enquiring into the wider dimension of “linguistic action”, and with understanding those authorial intentions which serve to *characterise* a linguistic act (Skinner 1971: *passim*).

Aside from briefly observing the importance of the context of occurrence, Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* said little about the process involved in gaining “uptake” of what an agent was doing in issuing a given utterance (Austin 1980: 100). In an important article addressing this lacuna Skinner noted the “essential conventionality” of speech-acts, in the sense that, to be capable of being understood, a speaker or author must be expressing a “socially conventional intention”, i.e. one that falls “within a given and established range of acts which can be conventionally grasped as being cases of that intention” (Skinner 1970: 133). The resulting injunction is thus to investigate the prevailing conventions, or “linguistic commonplaces”, governing the use of certain concepts or arguments in order to ascertain what an author could recognisably have been doing in appealing to a given argument in a given manner at a given time (Tully 1988: 9; Skinner 1988c: 77). This means, for example, understanding Burke’s appeal to concepts such as virtual representation or the right of resistance in light of previous uses of these concepts in order to determine

how far he may have been accepting and reiterating accepted commonplaces, or perhaps rephrasing them and reworking them, or perhaps criticising and repudiating them altogether in order to attain a new perspective on a familiar theme (Skinner 1985: 51).



By pursuing this form of explanation we are arguably able to understand an author's basic purposes in writing a text and thus to recover the "precise historical identity" of that text (Skinner 1985: 51). Given the "logical connection" between intentions and beliefs, Skinner's second recommendation is to focus on the "mental world" of the author in question to determine whether (s)he possessed a set of beliefs which could generate the kind of intentions one is assigning to him/her. In a similar vein, we can corroborate ascriptions of intentionality by enquiring whether an author had a motive to perform the type of linguistic action suggested by one's interpretation of his/her work (Skinner 1988c: 78, Skinner 1988d: 278). Investigating an author's beliefs and motivations thus offers a further means of closing the context to determine the "exact force and direction of their arguments" (Skinner 1978a: xiii). With regard to the present study, Chapter Two attempts to establish Burke's negative attitude to democratic ideas and likewise demonstrates that, in 1790, Burke was highly concerned that such ideas could exert undue influence on the British polity. By doing so it lays a foundation for the arguments in Chapters Three and Four, which highlight the antidemocratic intentions embodied in Burke's manipulation of the ideological conventions of Whiggism.

Skinner's meta-theoretical writings have received extensive critical attention. However, it is worth noting that critics of his attempt to employ Austin's insights accept that there is "much which is helpful" in Skinner's assertion that texts in the history of political thought contain an illocutionary dimension, and in his admonishment of those who believe that the "whole significance" of a past text can be recovered "merely by reading the words on the page" (Graham 1980: 147; cf. Graham 1988: 154-5). In this vein, Ian Shapiro's attempt to refine Skinner's approach outlines the interpretative advantages of retaining a notion of illocutionary force that is "roughly equivalent" to Skinner's. Shapiro also admits that there is "no question" of the merit of Skinner's historical work (Shapiro 1982: 560). Perhaps the

most elusive aspect of Skinner's approach concerns the attempt to identify, from a spectrum of illocutionary *forces* that an argument could potentially bear, the illocutionary *act* performed by an author in issuing that argument. As James Tully has pointed out, the difference here turns upon the "distinction between the ideological point or points of a text relative to the available conventions and the author's ideological point or points in writing it" (Tully 1988: 10). I have indicated above that Skinner maintains that we must inquire into an author's system of beliefs and his/her motives in order to close this gap. With this in mind, the following chapter revisits Burke's private correspondence and parliamentary speeches to present a compelling array of evidence demonstrating Burke's fears about the propagation of democratic ideas in Britain. Reconstructing his beliefs in this way provides a foundation for the argument in Chapters Three and Four, thus enabling the thesis to offer a convincing account of Burke's illocutionary intentions in writing his *Reflections*.

In the final subsections of this chapter I draw out the benefits of adopting a Skinnerian approach when investigating Burke's text. In doing so, I highlight those studies that evidence elements of this approach and distinguish the focus and argument of my work from these previous studies. Yet before doing so, it is important to briefly ponder the status of Skinner's work, since it has recently been argued that his contextualist approach has now acquired "orthodox status" amongst historians of political thought (Lamb 2009: 52). This statement is arguably a little premature: regarding the discipline as a whole, prominent scholars continue to contend that "there seems no sound reason to privilege 'contextual' above 'textual' assertions"; moreover, the aforementioned preoccupation with the 'Burke problem' has meant that Skinner's approach has thus far had a limited impact on studies of Burke's *Reflections* (King 2000: 225). Rather than reiterating an established orthodoxy then, taking a

Skinnerian line will enable the present study to make a telling and original contribution to Burke scholarship.

### 3.2 Studying Burke's political thought as political action

A key feature of studying the dimension of linguistic action is to conceive texts as “acts” (Skinner 1988d: 279). In short, this entails considering *Reflections* as a purposive intervention in particular intellectual and political contexts; an intervention which embodied a series of linguistic performances and which aimed to affect these contexts by issuing certain arguments in a certain way. To conceptualise Burke's thought as action is to study *Reflections* by primarily employing a microscopic rather than telescopic lens (Pocock 1979: 101). For example, in his utterances on the English Revolution of 1688 Burke maintained that this event had ensured the continuation of Britain's ancient constitution. Instead of using this point to locate Burke in the wider tradition of ancient constitutionalism, I seek to understand what he was up to in appealing to 1688 in this manner. Furthermore, recovering the linguistic acts performed by Burke at given points in his text allows me to fully appreciate the intricacy and complexity of his political arguments. This is not possible if we simply characterise his arguments as, say, ‘gradualist’. Consequently, I investigate the minutiae of his arguments, particularly those on the status of 1688 and on representation to determine whether he meant his arguments on these topics to be taken in a way that would justify a gradualist reading of his approach to political change.

To adopt such an approach is to fly in the face of convention. Studies of Burke have traditionally severed the association between thought and action, either by diminishing the dimension of political action and functionalising his *Reflections* into an “architectonic

intellectual structure”, or, as Iain Hampsher-Monk observes, by diminishing his political thought and regarding Burke as “a pragmatist, a political practitioner who responded to the needs of individual situations” (Wood 1964: 42; Hampsher-Monk 1988: 456). In an innovative essay, Hampsher-Monk rehabilitates the “explanatory link” between Burke’s thought and actions by illustrating the latter’s adherence to the Aristotelian tradition of classical rhetoric. Acknowledging Burke’s intellectual debt to this tradition offers a means of reconciling the variety of different political languages in his *oeuvre*, but, crucially, it also provides a deeper insight into his “rhetorical conception of political activity”. This conception turned upon the belief that managing and maintaining the emotional ties or opinions (defined as “manners, beliefs and prejudices”) shared between a political community was essential for preserving political order in that community (Hampsher-Monk 1988: 457, 461).<sup>16</sup> This is significant because recognising this feature of *Reflections* greatly enhances our understanding of the relation between thought and action in the text. Hampsher-Monk’s essay turns us onto the idea that Burke’s theorising carried a political point and reveals, for instance, that Burke meant his critique of the composition of the French National Assembly to be taken as a warning to the “custodians of political culture” of the destabilising effects of allowing inexperienced and impulsive men to engage in political speculations (Hampsher-Monk 1988: 478).

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<sup>16</sup> Whereas Hampsher-Monk seeks to understand how Burke’s actions as a politician informed his political thinking, Richard Bourke has recently approached the same issue from the opposite end. Bourke recognises a “wide political vision” in Burke which he suggests is shaped by a prolonged engagement with the “politics of conquest”, i.e. the task of progressing past militancy toward a secure constitutional settlement. However, Bourke’s scepticism of attempts to transform Burke’s political statements into “grand discursive abstractions” motivates him to look beyond the “theoretical significance” of Burke’s arguments to also consider their “strategic purpose” by interpreting his thought “in the context of political action” (Bourke 2007: 405, 406, 428). His work enables us to recognise that, for example, in articulating his idea of the “politics of conquest” in the parliamentary debates over the Quebec Bill in 1774, Burke was questioning whether following the prevailing notion of prescription would secure “legal civilization” in the regulation of Canadian property (Bourke 2007: 421). Bourke does not, however, extend his analysis to the *Reflections*.

There is much to agree with in Hampsher-Monk's claim that rhetoric and opinion each played a "central role" in Burke's political thinking and activity (Hampsher-Monk 1988: 461). Indeed, in Chapter Four, I employ this insight to demonstrate that, in charting revolutionary France's degeneration into a military dictatorship, Burke was, in part, alerting his readers to the tyrannical consequences of removing the controlling power of opinion from society. However, despite the advantages of the above approach, locating Burke in the tradition of classical rhetoric seems to stop short of developing some aspects of his political argument. Although it "renders consistent" his use of a range of different political languages, it does not tell us enough about the particularity of Burke's use of these languages or their application (Hampsher-Monk 1988: 482). In other words, we learn why he was able to successfully employ potentially contradictory arguments (rhetoric imposes different standards of coherence to philosophy), but this does not explain why he selected certain arguments over others, or why he considered the specific arguments he employed in *Reflections* to be the most appropriate arguments for maintaining opinion at that time. Hampsher-Monk recognises that Burke's opposition to abstract, rationalist thought animated him in *Reflections*, yet he suggests that this had been a perennial battle which Burke had been waging since "early in his career". He likewise avers that Burke feared the societal effects of "the intrinsic properties of *any* abstract, i.e. philosophical theory" (Hampsher-Monk 1988: 474, 475).<sup>17</sup> Whilst these are valid points, framing Burke's concern in *Reflections* as an extension of the concerns he had addressed throughout his career downplays the uniqueness of the democratic dilemma posed by the spread of rights of man ideology *circa* 1790. Consequently, in order to understand Burke's use of certain arguments it is necessary to delve deeper into the nature of the problems that Burke saw himself addressing when he employed the arguments that he did in his *Reflections*.

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<sup>17</sup> The emphasis in this quote is mine.

### 3.3 Studying Burke's confrontation with "political life itself"

For Quentin Skinner "political life itself sets the main problem for the political theorist, causing a range of issues to appear problematic, and a corresponding range of questions to become the leading subjects of debate" (Skinner 1978a: xi). This excellent formulation enforces the association between thought and action by indicating that "thinking politically is an aspect of the activity of politics itself" (Palonen 2003: 3). Further to this, it also directs us to investigate individual authors' interpretations of the problems they faced up to in their texts. To move beyond the idea that Burke was continually concerned to mobilise opinion against rationalism, we must inquire into his "assumptions, conceptions, 'mental set', and intentions" so that we can appreciate the precise nature of the threat that moved him to write *Reflections* and can thus begin to understand why his text took the form it did (Brewer 1975: 200). Adopting this approach, the present study finds that Burke was stirred by a perceived democratic threat that emanated from the principles underpinning the French Revolution but which he believed was also carried by British radicals.

Mark Neocleous has recently pursued the notion that Burke was anxious about the propagation of ideas that encouraged the people to develop independent political capabilities. Conceiving Burke's text as a pioneer in Gothic literature, Neocleous argues that the former employed the "metaphor of the monster" in *Reflections* to convey his fear of the mass political action he saw in France. "Implicit in this fear", Neocleous insists, "was a sense of a new collective force emerging on the historical landscape: the proletariat" (Neocleous 2004: 78). It is worth distinguishing this claim from my own, for although it is clear that Burke was aghast at the political and social democratisation that he believed to be taking place in France,

it is less clear that he perceived this process in such starkly defined class terms; that is, he did not see democratic ideas as empowering *only* those whom we might now regard as the working classes. Instead, his difficulty with democratic ideas was rooted in the fact that they politicised *everyone* who was excluded from participating under the aristocratic model of governance. This is evident from his critique of how he believed rights of man ideology was operating in France. Thus he certainly aimed a volley of discontent at the politicisation of those occupying “servile employments”, but he also took umbrage, for example, at the fact that the French National Assembly was composed of lawyers, doctors and stock brokers, rather than “the natural landed interest of the country” (Burke 2001: 411, 198). Since these groups are not generally taken as examples of the working classes, Burke’s diatribe in this instance works against Neocleous’ Marxist analysis, rendering incorrect his claim that Burke conceived “the multitude” as “the emergent modern proletariat” (Neocleous 2004: 84).<sup>18</sup>

Two very different yet equally stimulating studies have argued that Burke was primarily confronting a perceived democratic threat in his *Reflections*. In Don Herzog’s *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders* Burke’s fear is underpinned by his “sweepingly general contempt for the lower orders” – an aspect of *Reflections* which is routinely overlooked by many commentators. Herzog analyses the “antidemocratic weaponry” that Burke employed to counter the danger posed by the empowering principles of the French Revolution (Herzog 1998; 510, 184, cf. 469, 493, 545). Advancing upon Hampsher-Monk’s account of Burke’s attempt to manage and maintain society’s established opinions, Herzog stresses that Burke’s

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<sup>18</sup> The validity of this point is confirmed in a quotation that Neocleous distorts in order to secure his own interpretation. Neocleous substitutes “the mob” in place of “the body of the people” in a passage where Burke attempts to remind the reader that “the body of the people” must adhere to the principles of “natural subordination” and must generally know their place in society (Neocleous 2004: 82; Burke 2001: 411). The effect of this alteration is to narrow Burke’s focus and, since Neocleous equates “the mob” with the “proletariat” in Burke, further the idea that Burke was *solely* concerned by the effects of democratisation on the working classes.

rhetorical appeals were tailored for different audiences and different objectives. Whereas his concept of tradition as “narrative continuity” persuaded the elite of the political rationality in following inherited practices, his use of a language of veils, prejudice and illusion was designed to suppress notions of popular participation and “to maintain a schism between deferential subjects, instinctively loyal, and argumentative citizens, instinctively sceptical” (Herzog 1998: 29, 511). The idea that Burke was unsettled by the possibility of public agency is developed in Daniel I. O’Neill’s *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy*, which offers one of the most perceptive recent accounts of *Reflections*. O’Neill’s basic premise is that Burke equated democracy with savagery as it encouraged unfettered notions of liberty and equality. *Reflections* thus struck such an alarmist chord because Burke interpreted the French Revolution as an attempt to combine political democracy with “intentional policies of social, cultural, and sexual democratization” (O’Neill 2007: 196). This “deep democratization” of the public and private spheres proceeded by subverting the church and the nobility, the institutional embodiments of Burke’s aesthetic principles of the sublime and beautiful which guaranteed civilisation by working as the respective “carrot and stick to keep the masses in that state of habitual social discipline vital for a people ... to emerge and develop in a civilized fashion” (O’Neill 2007: 127, 143).<sup>19</sup> By removing a sense of hierarchy and subordination, and simultaneously encouraging ideas of popular sovereignty and equality in the masses, the French Revolution threatened anarchy and, O’Neill maintains, signified in Burke’s mind the “the wholesale collapse of civilization into savagery” (O’Neill 2007: 196).

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<sup>19</sup> By contrast to the aesthetic interpretations outlined above, O’Neill’s argument is particularly compelling because he illustrates the practical political application of this dimension of Burke’s thought by demonstrating how the latter’s “aesthetic” understanding of religion and feudal ideals was embodied in his view of the civilising role of the church and the nobility (O’Neill 2007: 134). It is also important to acknowledge that O’Neill’s study of the *Reflections* does not suggest that Burke prioritised the sublime over the beautiful, as commentators such as Musselwhite and Reid have been wont to maintain (Musselwhite 1990: 159; Reid 1985: 42). Rather, in O’Neill’s account, the two aesthetic principles operate in tandem to reinforce the hierarchical order of the Burkean polis.



Each of these previous studies has informed my own work. Our common point of departure is the suggestion that grasping Burke's belief that the principles of the French Revolution posed a democratic threat to the existing aristocratic order is crucial for understanding what Burke was up to in his *Reflections*. Nonetheless, both O'Neill and Herzog investigate Burke's text as a commentary on, and direct engagement with, the French Revolution. O'Neill is interested in the "debate" between Burke and Wollstonecraft "over the meaning of the French Revolution". He is keen to know what the event "seem[ed] to *signify* in Burke and Wollstonecraft's theoretical imaginations" and consequently regards *Reflections* as a text "about the French Revolution", without broaching its connection with the contemporary context of argument in Britain (O'Neill 2007: 9, 6). Moreover, although Herzog recognises that Burke was "exercised" by Richard Price's dissenting sermon, he is primarily concerned with elucidating Burke's attempts "to motivate a crusade against the French Revolution" (Herzog 1998: 13, 27). It is worth noting that a great number of scholars have adopted a similar approach and have either focused on delineating his analysis of the Revolution, on outlining his interpretation of the revolutionaries' actions, or on explaining what the event represented to Burke. To this end, 'traditional' studies have sought to find "the best way of stating Burke's fundamental objection to the [French] Revolution"; aesthetic interpretations maintain that Burke's attack on the revolutionaries' treatment of Marie-Antoinette provides "the central argument" of the text; and those concerned with mapping out the various languages in Burke's text suggest that one must determine which language "best accounts for the depth and intensity of Burke's fear of what the French Revolution represented" (Hart 1967: 224; Musselwhite 1990: 150; White 1994: 4).

By contrast to Herzog's and O'Neill's attempts to understand *Reflections* as a response to the democratic threat occasioned by the French Revolution, and, indeed, by contrast to the vast majority of existing studies of the text, my thesis considers the work as an intervention in various *domestic* contexts of debate. This does not entail denying that the French Revolution played a significant role in shaping many of Burke's arguments. At certain points in his text (for instance his belief that the Revolution heralded a "reversion to savagery" or his analysis of the revolutionaries' "paper-money despotism"), it is clear that Burke was tackling the French Revolution head on (O'Neill 2007: 10; Pocock 1985: 200; 1987b: xxii). However, it is equally clear that Burke was doing a great many things in his *Reflections*. Although the goings on in France were a cause of much concern it can be argued that he was just as concerned by the "smugglers of adulterated metaphysics", i.e. the British radicals who transferred the principles of the French Revolution to a domestic setting (Burke 2001: 255). As Burke continually highlighted in his text, the French Revolution was employed in Britain as a "model" which would to increase the legitimacy of existing reformist arguments (Burke 2001: 253). Crucially, the actions of political moderates who either tolerated appeals to natural rights arguments or remained keen to push for political reform also provided a source of much consternation to Burke. Thus it is arguably the case that the immediate danger did not come from the Revolution itself, but from the *unique uses* of it by figures in Britain.

With this in mind my study shifts the focus from France to Britain. It would be absurd to suggest that no-one has noticed that Burke was perturbed by the potential effects of the Revolution on Britain. In this vein, J. G. A. Pocock has even gone so far as to say that "it was with [Burke's] perception of its meaning for England that his perception of its wider meanings began" (Pocock 1987b: xxii). Similarly, it is conventional to note that Burke conceived his text as a warning to his British audience of the dangers of revolutionary excess.

Nevertheless, I am not primarily concerned with Burke's perception of the "meaning" of the French Revolution *per se* or even with his view of revolutionary change in general. Rather, I focus on investigating what Burke was doing when he addressed the ways in which the idea of the Revolution and its guiding principles were refracted in existing intellectual and political contexts in Britain. To put it another way, I demonstrate that the principles of the French Revolution fed into prevailing radical arguments, buttressing those arguments by providing them with a seemingly legitimate example of democratic ideas in action. More specifically (though inexhaustively) the Revolution was used to imbue the radical interpretation of the English Revolution of 1688 with increased potency, to give added impetus to attempts to reform the system of representation, and as a vehicle for criticising the lack of liberty in Britain. In Chapters Three and Four I therefore examine Burke's appeal to the English Revolution, his arguments on representation, and his assertions about the relationship between democracy and liberty in order to discern how these various lines of argument countered the British radicals' perceived democratising agenda and how Burke meant his arguments to be taken by the governing elite.

#### 3.4 Studying Burke's moves in argument

It has thus far been illustrated that my thesis is influenced by Quentin Skinner's conceptualisation of political thought as political action and his suggestion that classic texts in the history of political thought are grounded in their authors' interpretations of "political life itself". Such injunctions contain heuristic value as they have directed my interpretative focus to Burke's assessment of the political problems which he faced up to in his *Reflections* and to the study of Burke's linguistic acts, i.e. to the notion that he was doing things in issuing certain arguments in his text. Elements of the approach hitherto outlined have been

employed in some key studies of Burke's text. Nonetheless, the distinctive mark of the present study as erewhile described arises from its grounding in Burke's alarm at the perceived democratic threat facing Britain *circa* 1790 and the attending investigation of *Reflections* as a purposive intervention in various domestic contexts of argument. This is complimented by one final aspect of Skinner's approach which I have found especially useful, namely his claim that we should regard a proposition as constituting a "move in argument" (Skinner 1988d: 274).

The notion that authors engage in moves in argument is premised upon the aforementioned idea that, in writing their texts, past authors were confronting certain perceived problems. However, it also encourages to us to understand the concepts and arguments that they employed to express their response as mutable entities which are capable of being put to a range of different uses (Skinner 1985: 51). In order to understand Burke's utterances on the right of resistance, for example, we must view them as the linguistic equivalent of a chess move, undertaken in relation to corresponding moves by opponents. To understand the character of Burke's move in this instance, that is to grasp what he was doing in appealing to the right of resistance, it is necessary to study historical uses of this concept and to examine his utterances in relation to these prevailing conventions (Skinner 1988c: 77). In a recent study of Burke's stylistic practices in *Reflections* the context of contemporary ideas about language is conceived as "background material" (Hodson 2007: 20). By investigating Burke's moves in argument the thesis avoids constructing such rigid, unhistorical distinctions in which text and context are viewed as two separate units of analysis. It thus regards *Reflections* as being woven into the surrounding intellectual context; rather than forming a passive "background" the prevailing conventions of use concerning the right of resistance (and other arguments) impact upon Burke's particular use of this concept by providing a

basic framework for his own argument. At the same time Burke's linguistic acts invest this framework with meaning by contributing to, manipulating, and stretching the existing conventions (cf. Skinner 1975: 216).

I study Burke's *Reflections* in relation to the prevailing conventions of Whig political argument covering the period from the English Revolution of 1688 to the debate over the French Revolution in the 1790s. In two of his more recent studies, J. G. A. Pocock has undertaken a similar task. First, Pocock has demonstrated how Burke's depiction of the "unchecked intellectual and political energy" unleashed by the French Revolution involved redefining the eighteenth-century concept of 'enthusiasm' by divorcing the concept from religion and instead employing it in an atheistic context and contemplating it "as the central feature of an eschatology" (Pocock 1989a: 34, 33). It will be remembered that Pocock has previously highlighted the "idiosyncratic character" of Burke's analysis of French and English affairs (Pocock 1985: 211). His use of the term "eschatology" reinforces this judgement and indicates that he understands Burke's redefinition of the concept of enthusiasm as contributing to our attempts to get to grips with Burke's interpretation of the French Revolution, rather than his perception of the contemporary threat posed by British radicalism. The same cannot be said of his essay examining Burke's description of the English Revolution as a 'just war'. Here, Pocock illustrates how Burke employed this seventeenth-century Tory reading of the event to reassert an older understanding of the term 'revolution' that was logically tied to the notion of civil war (Pocock 1992: 63). In reaching this conclusion, his study provides a very good example of the idea that the use of a single argument or concept can entail the performance of a range of illocutionary acts. For Pocock, Burke was recalling his audience to the danger of revolutionary change; an act which was important because the concept had become sanitised in Britain after the largely bloodless

affair of 1688. In Chapter Three I investigate the same passage in *Reflections* but find that, in describing the English Revolution as a just war, Burke was deemphasising the notion of resistance at this period and thereby limiting the future application of any popular right of resistance.

In addition to these studies by Pocock there have been a number of other attempts to measure the text against the Whig tradition. Frederick Dreyer has described Burke's work as being "compatible with Lockean principles". Accordingly, Dreyer maintains that Burke's theorising amounted to "orthodox Whiggism" because it restated "the Lockean assumptions of his age" (1979: 5, 83). Rightly sceptical of Dreyer's "brusque relegation of the differences between Locke and Burke", Reed Browning has instead portrayed Burke as the "last of the Walpoleans" (Browning 1984: 58, 71).<sup>20</sup> Although Browning's is marginally more convincing, each of these assessments downplays the complexity and originality of Burke's political argument. Browning, for instance, reduces him to an outmoded spokesman for Walpole by understanding his theorising as an attempt "to apply the essence of Walpolean and Pelhamite doctrine to the somewhat altered political scene of the late eighteenth century" (Browning 1984: 65). In a similar manner Dreyer surmises that "there is nothing in the text of [Burke's] writings to suggest that he rebelled against the orthodoxies of his time". To regard Burke as an "original thinker", he informs us, "is to misread the principles that he actually asserted" (Dreyer 1979: 83).

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<sup>20</sup> Dreyer introduces such an array of caveats and equivocations that he empties his comparison of any meaning. Bizarrely, he admits that his interpretation runs "against the grain of conventional scholarship [which often finds in Burke] a fundamental and deliberate rejection of the principles of Lockean politics" (Dreyer 1979: 73). Moreover, regarding eighteenth-century political thought more generally, Dreyer's unexamined assumption concerning the "Lockean premises of [Burke's] age" has since been overturned by J. G. A. Pocock's essay, *The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform: A history of ideology and discourse* (Dreyer 1979: 83; Pocock 1985: 215-310).

Interestingly, this essential idea is repeated in more sophisticated scholarship. In his introduction to the Hackett edition of *Reflections*, J. G. A. Pocock declares that Burke was writing “in the mainstream of English political thought”, and states that the latter’s interpretation of the English Revolution “was orthodox, not reactionary” (Pocock 1987b: xii, xiii). J. C. D. Clark’s attempt to “explain [Burke] historically” ploughs the same furrow. Pointing to his “Whig orthodoxy” and his “mainstream Whig reading of 1688”, Clark eventually concludes that Burke’s defence of the British constitution in *Reflections* was “not a formula for reaction” (Clark 2001: 12, 41, 35). These judgements connect with the idea that Burke opposed revolutionary change with a moderate, “gradualist” approach (Conniff 1994: 233). They appear reasonable because Burke’s rhetoric encourages his readers to reach such views and to consider his text as a measured restatement of standard Whig assumptions; indeed, as Dreyer acknowledges, “the last thing that Burke wanted was to possess a reputation for inventiveness” (Dreyer 1979: 83). However, by contrast to these works and, again, by contrast to the vast majority of interpretations of *Reflections*, my own study emphasises the originality in Burke’s political argument. By investigating his moves in argument I am able to recover the particularity of his individual use of arguments; that is, I am able to understand what he was doing at certain points in his text, relative to previous uses of the same arguments. It is true that Burke does frequently conform to mainstream, or establishment, Whiggism; though it should be noted that this was, in itself, a conservative strand of the ideology. Nonetheless a significant upshot of my approach is to recognise those moments in *Reflections* when Burke either departs from prevailing conventions or (as in the case of his appeal to the anti standing army discourse) when he puts an existing argument to entirely novel uses. Given that Burke is primarily engaged in a rearguard action, defending the balanced constitution against a perceived democratic threat, it is no surprise that his original contributions involve shifting Whiggism onto a more conservative and, occasionally,

reactionary footing. In this respect he is consistently concerned to dissociate Whiggism from ideas of popular sovereignty, and to stress the danger of encouraging any form of political participation beyond the extremely limited levels guaranteed under the mixed constitution. Such conclusions may not be amenable to those who wish to cling to the view that *Reflections* amounted to an “agonised attempt to hold together a middle ground” (Clark 2001: 97). However, contextual analysis of his arguments illustrates that Burke often abandons the middle ground in favour of more guarded forms of political action. These crucial aspects of his text simply must be highlighted if we are keen to grasp what Burke was up to in writing *Reflections* and thus if we are to properly appreciate the intricacies of his classic work.

To conclude, this chapter has sought to outline the distinctiveness and merit of adopting a Skinnerian approach to the study of Burke’s *Reflections*. Rather than understanding the text in terms of the fundamental coherence/incoherence of his entire *oeuvre*, highlighting the aesthetic elements of the text, or aligning his arguments to particular traditions of thought, I focus on studying the dimension of linguistic action. As indicated above, this entails investigating *Reflections* as a purposive intervention in prevailing intellectual and political contexts with a view to grasping what Burke was doing in issuing certain arguments. In recovering this aspect of his text I offer a detailed contextual explanation of Burke’s appeal to the English Revolution, his arguments on representation, and his discussion of the French army. However, it is important to note that Burke’s intentions in writing were shaped by his perception of the extent and nature of a series of contemporary political problems. As I have sought to indicate, my thesis differs from the vast majority of scholarship because it shifts the focus from France to Britain. Rather than examining Burke’s interpretation of the French Revolution, I ground my study in his perception of the danger that arose from British radicals’ uses of the principles of the Revolution. Such uses, combined with the attitude of



his moderate contemporaries, caused Burke to become alarmed at the perceived democratic threat posed to the existing aristocratic model of governance. My aim in the next chapter is to set about establishing the validity this claim, which serves as a foundation for Burke's response, which I evaluate in Chapters Three and Four.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A “STRANGE CHAOS OF LEVITY AND FEROCITY”: THE POLITICAL GENESIS OF EDMUND BURKE’S *REFLECTIONS*

In broad terms, the aim of the thesis is to demonstrate that one of Edmund Burke’s key intentions in writing *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was to abate the increasing influence of democratic ideas in English politics. As indicated in the previous chapter, the focus in this respect is on authorial intentions which serve to *characterise* a linguistic act, rather than those which are antecedent and which serve as *motivations* for such an act. Nevertheless, in order to ascribe even this form of intention we must recognise a “logical connection” between our ability to attribute intentions to agents and our knowledge of their beliefs (Skinner 1988c: 78). This being the case, the present chapter is crucial as it aims to establish that Burke held the empirical beliefs necessary to support the overall argument of the thesis. In short the chapter will illustrate, firstly, Burke’s aversion to democratic ideas and, in particular, strong notions of popular sovereignty; secondly that Burke believed that, in 1790, English society was under threat from a democratic ideology; thirdly, that Burke was extremely alarmed at his moderate contemporaries’ response to this threat. Highlighting Burke’s beliefs in this way will also serve to demonstrate that he considered it necessary to mobilise political opinion behind his own ideological position. Given Burke’s status as a practising politician, it would be of limited benefit to set about this task by simply collecting quotations, abstracted at will from his vast corpus of work. Burke’s political beliefs were actively informed through his political experiences, his interaction with contemporaries and

his sustained engagement with the problems of his age. Consequently, with this in mind, the chapter proceeds by reconstructing Burke's beliefs in the context of his career.

In the opening section it is argued that Burke's aversion to democratic ideas is rooted in his aristocratic conception of politics, but that his fear of the consequences of encouraging strong notions of popular sovereignty are largely informed by his experiences with extra-parliamentary opinion in the decades preceding the French Revolution. In the second section the aim is to evidence Burke's belief that British society was under threat from a democratic ideology. Here, it is essential to remember that the purpose is to establish how Burke *perceived* the nature of the threat; hence it is immaterial whether Burke overestimated or misinterpreted that threat or whether we, as modern onlookers, would not consider the ideas circulating at this time in such terms. To this end I indicate that Burke was shocked by the democratic nature of the French Revolution and argue that, from January 1790, he feared that democratic French principles could be used to effect political change in Britain. Burke's belief in this respect was largely derived from reading Richard Price's dissenting sermon. Price offered a populist interpretation of the English Revolution and hailed the French struggle for liberty. This was completely unpalatable to Burke. Moreover Price's championing of natural rights arguments and his call to imitate the French example led Burke to identify the leading Dissenters as dangerous political subversives. The third section of the chapter illustrates Burke's alarm at his contemporaries' response to both the French Revolution and the Dissenters claiming equality as a natural right. In doing so it argues that their differing responses to such issues are founded in their contrasting perceptions of the political problem in 1789/1790. Burke's contemporaries viewed the French Revolution and the Dissenters as occasioning issues of participation, i.e. participation in an English-style liberty or in the existing socio-political system. By contrast, Burke believed that the

equalising implications of natural rights arguments were completely at odds with an aristocratic conception of politics. Rather than being a question of participation in the system, Burke regarded the use of natural rights theory as an attempt to overhaul the existing system. The belief that his contemporaries failed to grasp this point thus heightened Burke's fear and added to his key political concern during this period; namely the imminent threat posed to the aristocratic constitution.

## **Section One: Burke's aversion to democratic ideas**

### **1.1 Burke's aristocratic conception of politics**

Burke's aristocratic conception of politics was a reflection of his wider ontological assumption that society was organised according to a natural hierarchy. His belief in each respect was reinforced through the relationship he developed with the Rockingham Whigs and, in particular, his political patron the Marquis of Rockingham.<sup>21</sup> Initially employed as his private secretary, Burke declared his attachment to the principles and fortunes of the Marquis' parliamentary grouping shortly after his election as MP for Wendover in December 1765 (Corr 1: 279). Although they adopted an aristocratic outlook, Burke and the Rockinghams were committed to a mixed constitution in which the Monarchy and the Houses of Lords and Commons exercised equal influence. As Burke explained in his *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (a text that was intended to advertise the Rockingham

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<sup>21</sup> Burke was deeply attached to his leader. Upon being accused of self-interest and subservience, on account of his connection with Rockingham, Burke denied the former charge claiming the connection was premised upon his knowledge of the Marquis' virtues. Subservience, though, he admitted. "When I find good men I shall cling to them, adhere to them, follow them in, & out. Wash the very feet they stand on. I will wash their feet, & be subservient, not from interest, but from principle" (Burke cited in Lock 1998: 267).

party “Creed”), “any new powers exercised in the House of Lords, or in the House of Commons, or by the Crown, ought certainly to excite the vigilant and anxious jealousy of a free people” (Corr 2: 136; WS 2: 267). It is crucial to acknowledge the eighteenth-century distinction drawn between an aristocratic *constitution* and the aristocratic *principle*. Devoted to upholding the liberty secured through the English Revolution of 1688, Burke renounced the former as it carried pejorative connotations of government by a corrupt and oppressive few (Lock 1998: 282). However, his rejection of this particular constitutional model was perfectly consistent with a firm adherence to the aristocratic principle. He could, therefore, in the same text, announce, “I am no friend to aristocracy”, and simultaneously claim that allowing landed property to fulfil its “natural operation”, i.e. to exercise “a great influence in the kingdom”, was “the method by which the spirit of liberty acts, and ... the means by which it is preserved” (WS 2: 268). Although each point in the tripartite constitution was important, Burke arguably placed greater emphasis on the role of the aristocratic principle. To this end, he understood the Rockingham party to be an “Aristocratick party ... in the true Sense of the word” – i.e. “equally removed from popular giddiness and profligacy on the one hand, and from servile Court compliances on the other” (Corr 6: 450). Subsequently commenting on the events of the French Revolution, Burke lamented greatly France’s loss of this pillar, without which, he argued, any nation would become “a mere despotism of the Prince, or the brutal Tyranny of a ferocious and atheistick populace” (Corr 7: 160).

Burke had two fundamental reasons for lauding the aristocratic principle in this way. First, he identified a key cultural role for the landed elite in maintaining the existing social hierarchy. It has elsewhere been demonstrated that, for Burke, “political community is constituted by, and survives through, the persistence of a body of shared manners, beliefs and prejudices – in short, opinions” (Hampsher-Monk 1988: 461). The great aristocratic families

signified cultural continuity to Burke, yet individual aristocrats were similarly crucial because of their capacity to represent, and ensure the continuation of, those opinions which guaranteed deference and subordination amongst the wider populace. Indeed, owing to their education, their standing, and their possession of hereditary property, such figures served as the “the very cynosure of [Burke’s] society’s prejudices” and thus became “an object of moral and aesthetic appreciation” (De Bruyn 1987: 49). In this way they encouraged the masses to voluntarily accept the harsh inequalities of life in eighteenth-century Britain by engaging their affections for their superiors (O’Neill 2007: 143). This belief concerning the essential cultural role of the landed elite formed part of Burke’s critique of rights of man ideology during the revolutionary period, for he interpreted the “Great Object” of such democratically inclined ideas as being “totally to root out that thing called an *Aristocrate* or Nobleman and Gentleman”, the consequences of which would be to destroy the prejudices and opinions that they helped to reproduce (Corr 6: 451; cf. Corr 7: 62). As he cautioned in a letter to Lord Fitzwilliam, French principles “can have no other Effect than to root out all principle from the Minds of the Common people, and to put a dagger into the hands of every Rustick to plunge into the heart of his Landlord” (Corr 6: 451).

Further to the cultural role he identified for the landed elite, Burke’s second reason for lauding the aristocratic principle was rooted in his accompanying belief as to their essential political function. In *Thoughts* Burke argued that the prosperity of the country was inevitably linked to its being governed by wealthy Whig grandees; men of “natural and fixed influence”, drawn together through “vast property; obligations of favours given and received” and “ties of blood, of alliance, of friendship” (WS 2: 264). The aristocracy were ideally suited to performing this role since they enjoyed sufficient wealth to guarantee their independence from political corruption and, in addition to conveying civic virtue, their possession of “vast

property” ensured that they had enough of a share in the system to act as a constitutional safeguard against their mismanagement (see Langford 1991: 51-70, 288-95).<sup>22</sup> Emphasising this point in a letter to the Duke of Richmond, a prominent member of the Rockingham party, Burke contrasted those at his station, who may shine briefly but ultimately “leave no sort of Traces behind us”, with the wealthy, hereditary families who act as “great Oaks that shade a Country” perpetuating their benefits “from Generation to Generation” (Corr 2: 377). The political advantages offered by such leaders was thus not to be conceived in local or temporary terms. Rather, by exerting a “natural and fixed influence”, a government headed by members of the aristocracy related a lasting benefit to the nation. Within this group Burke, of course, believed the Rockingham Whigs to be the “Natural Leaders” of the people on account of their possessing not only “Rank and fortune”, but also by virtue of “the goodness of their characters” and their experience of governing (Corr 3: 218).

The need to exercise independent political judgement was a key element of Burke’s model of governance. Further to lauding the political independence of the landed aristocracy, he likewise contended that it was essential to maintain an MP’s right to exercise his free judgement, unencumbered by the whims of the crown or ‘the people’ – interests that represented “the perilous extremes of servile compliance, or wild popularity” (WS 3: 70). That he regarded majority opinion as a “perilous extreme” further illustrates the extent to which Burke’s conception of politics clashed with the democratic ideas promoted by radicals *circa* 1790. However, although he undoubtedly rejected the ideas espoused by Richard Price

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<sup>22</sup> The prevalence of this view during the eighteenth-century is demonstrated by the statutory property requirement for aspiring MPs. The Qualification Act of 1711 stipulated that MPs must own an unencumbered freehold estate providing an income of at least £600 per annum for county members and £300 for borough members (Lock 1998: 249). Moreover, the importance attached to the possession of green acres is evidenced by the observation of a contemporary sitting through one of Burke’s early speeches in Parliament. Admiring the latter’s eloquence and knowledge, Charles Lee noted that “he wants nothing but that sort of dignity annexed to rank, and property in England, to make him the most considerable man in the Lower House” (Lee cited in Lock 1998: 250).

and Thomas Paine, it would be wrong to assume that he rejected democratic notions out of hand. Indeed, the people, in the form of the House of Commons, constituted one part of the tripartite constitution, serving as a check against the power of the monarchy and the aristocracy. Moreover, it was not that Burke did not acknowledge public opinion. On the contrary, Whig theory suggested that government power was founded in the people. In practical terms this amounted to little as the architect of establishment Whiggism, Lord Somers, had not attributed any special wisdom to the people and had denied that extra-parliamentary opinion had any right to command the Commons. Nevertheless, by justifying the right of the Kentish Petitioners of 1701 to express their views in the face of a hostile Tory House of Commons, Somers had enshrined the concept of ‘the people’ in Whig ideology (Gunn 1983: 74). Burke therefore accepted a notion of public opinion and even accepted that Parliament should listen to such opinion. In his speech upon being elected for Bristol, for instance, Burke articulated the need for an MP to maintain “the most unreserved communication with his constituents”, for theirs was “a weighty and respectable opinion” (WS 3: 68, 69).

However, Burke’s difficulty with the radicals was rooted in his opposition to their strong notions of popular sovereignty which apparently prioritised the democratic over the aristocratic or monarchical elements in the mixed constitution. Rather than obtaining a constitutional balance, to Burke’s mind, this meant adopting an absolute model. The concentration of power in any extreme constitutional model led Burke to equate such models with despotism, but he regarded an absolute democracy as the most oppressive form of government. Commenting on events in France, for instance, he noted that “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” (Corr 6: 96). This was partly



because a democratic model necessarily subverted the “natural and fixed influence” of the aristocratic elite, and partly because it located political authority in popular opinion, for it is important to understand that, although Burke may have respected the opinion of his constituents, he did not feel bound to adhere to their judgements. Moreover, he certainly did not recognise a legitimate political voice beyond the narrow confines of the electorate. Indeed, it has been argued that his refusal to acknowledge the emergence of a plebeian public sphere in the 1790s explains his inability to attract the kind of mass appeal enjoyed by those who spearheaded the popular loyalist response (Gilmartin 2000: 96, 100). By contrast to radicals and, in some ways, to ‘vulgar’ conservatives also, Burke distrusted popular judgement and consequently did not believe that representatives should be directly accountable to the people.<sup>23</sup>

Burke’s distrust of popular opinion was arguably founded upon two underlying beliefs. First, he believed that, as a group, the people lacked the political acumen to grasp complex affairs of the state. Their collective failure to back the Rockinghams and their “heavy lumpish acquiescence in Government” provided a source of frustration to Burke throughout the sixteen years separating the two Rockingham administrations (Corr 3: 381). Recurring themes during this period were his exasperation at popular support for the war against America, in spite of the economic hardship such action had brought, and his irritation at the nation’s inability to detect either the supposed secret political influence of the crown or the corruption of the ministry (Corr 3: 399, 382). On one such occasion in Parliament, Burke vehemently decried “the people” as “a servile degenerate herd, destitute of capacity to distinguish, or virtue to relish, what was good” (WS 2: 392). This lack of regard for their political capabilities naturally led him to oppose any attempted reform of Parliament which

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<sup>23</sup> For the term “vulgar conservatism”, see Philp (1995).

aimed at widening political participation or making Members more accountable to the electorate. In 1780, for example, Burke voted against political allies such as Charles James Fox and Lord John Cavendish when he opposed John Sawbridge's annual motion for shorter parliaments. Whilst the Rockingham group supported the motion in an effort to maintain their uneasy alliance with the more radical county movement, Burke was unable to adopt such a pragmatic view and opposed it on the grounds that shorter parliaments would decrease the independence of Members by either increasing the power of the court or by encouraging "the violent and furious popular Spirit" (WS 3: 591). Wary of this latter consequence, he announced to the Commons that it was "easy to pretend a Zeal for Liberty" by proposing to increase MPs' "dependence upon the people", yet he reminded those present that it was their shared "Duty ... to give [the people] information and not to receive it from them" (WS 3: 590, 591, 592).

Burke's second key difficulty with popular opinion was that he did not believe the people were actually capable of independent thought. Indeed, in the aforementioned debate, his assertions as to the role of an MP bottomed in his belief that to "dutifully serve" them would be to "scandalously betray the people; who are not capable of this service by Nature" (WS 3: 592). Discussing the people in private correspondence, Burke had earlier insisted that "God and nature never made them to think or to Act without Guidance and direction" (Corr 3: 218, cf. Corr 4: 295). Rather they simply followed whichever stimulus they were exposed to. This belief that they required "Guidance" underpinned Burke's conception of the appropriate relationship between the governing elite and the wider populace and, as indicated above, he believed that the Rockingham party provided the most appropriate stimulus for the people. Consequently, Burke consistently urged the party's peers to generate popular support by exerting their aristocratic influence upon public opinion, claiming that "all direction of public

humour and opinion must originate in a few” (Corr 3: 190). An exchange of letters with Charles James Fox in 1777 indicates the importance Burke placed upon this strategy. However, it likewise demonstrates the complexity of his attitude to those members of the aristocracy who failed to perform their proper political function. Echoing Fox’s complaint at the Rockinghams’ inactivity, Burke reiterated his belief in the need to “guide and direct public opinion”, further suggesting that the failure of the party to do so was “intimately connected with honest, disinterested intentions, plentiful fortunes, assured rank, and quiet homes” (Corr 3: 381). Notwithstanding his despair at their acquiescing to the ministry rather than following the Rockinghams, ultimately, the people were not to blame for their behaviour since they had obeyed “the only impulse they have received” (Corr 3: 217-8).

Burke’s weak notion of popular sovereignty was expressed most notably in his complete commitment to the theory of virtual representation.<sup>24</sup> Initially challenged by the American colonists in the 1760s, by the late 1770s this theory was increasingly contested by advocates of *actual* representation, largely circulating their ideas in opposition to the American war.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, at this time it was still commonplace to suggest that the aristocratic elite in the House of Commons were able to represent, to a satisfactory degree, all interests in society (Cannon 1973: 31-3).<sup>26</sup> Upon being elected for Bristol in 1774, Henry Cruger, Burke’s fellow Member for Bristol, repudiated this conventional view and asserted the reformist theory of actual representation. Stating that his new constituents were possessed of “a right

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<sup>24</sup> Lucy Sutherland (1968) does a commendable job of setting Burke’s use of this theory in the wider context of eighteenth-century theory and practice in instructions to representatives. The theory, and Burke’s unswerving commitment to it, are both explained in detail in Chapter Four.

<sup>25</sup> For examples of works containing such ideas see James Burgh (1774-5a; 1774-5b); John Cartwright (1776); Richard Price (1776); Richard Woodward (1775).

<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that, in the unreformed House of Commons, representation was conceived in terms of interests, rather than individuals. Consequently, although radical authors such as those cited in the above footnote were beginning to argue that representation was an individual right, much of the clamour for increased representation at this time was understood in terms of the representation of, for instance, commercial, financial or mercantile interests. For information on vested interests and pressure groups in the eighteenth-century see Dickinson (1995).

to instruct their members”, Cruger indicated that he considered himself as a “servant” to his constituents, “subservient to their will, not superior to it” (Cruger cited in Dickinson 1995: 38-9). Diametrically opposed to such sentiments, in his own speech to the electorate, Burke employed the Whig rhetoric that government had originated in the community and acknowledged that an MP should live “in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents” (WS 3: 68). Crucially, however, he stopped short of transferring this theoretical point into political practice. Contradicting Cruger, Burke informed his audience that an MP’s “unbiased opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you”, for “your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion”. Parliament, Burke maintained, could not be led by popular “Will” or “inclination”, since “Government and Legislation are matters of reason and judgement”. In this vein, he targeted the recent trend for electorates to issue “*authoritative* instructions” or “Mandates” to MPs and declared such practices “things utterly unknown to the laws of this land”, further stating that they arose “from a fundamental Mistake of the whole order and tenour of our Constitution” (WS 3: 69).

Burke’s opposition to Cruger’s view was rooted in his belief that extra-parliamentary opinion was fundamentally unsound. Indeed, the danger of encouraging public agency lay in the fact that the bulk of the populace could not be trusted to refrain from forming “an hasty Opinion, evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the Community” (WS 3: 69). It was thus unwise to conceive an increased political role for the people, further to their septennial involvement at general elections. Burke understood the people to be impulsive and lacking in any capacity for independent thought; “if they are not Led to take a part on one side, they will follow the impulse they receive on the other, and will move very generally in that direction”

(Corr 3: 223). Consequently, by not being directly accountable to the people, the free thinking representative helped to maintain Burke's aristocratic conception of politics, providing a bulwark against the potential influx of subversive ideas. Having clarified these points, it is easy to understand why Burke was so sensitive to the potential threat from radical authors who propagated strong notions of popular sovereignty in late 1780s/early 1790s. Such figures represented a grave threat to the existing system precisely because the people were wholly susceptible to their designs. Indeed, this was the very danger which Burke anticipated from Thomas Paine. Discussing him in a letter to William Cusac Smith, Burke affirmed his concern that Paine's intention to "corrupt" the people could be carried off since the latter were "very corruptible" and could "very readily comprehend what flatters their vices and falls in with their ignorance" (Corr 6: 304).

### 1.2 Burke and extra-parliamentary opinion: the lessons of experience

Holding to a patrician view of politics, Burke was naturally opposed to strong notions of popular sovereignty. Nevertheless, it can be argued that key events in the decades preceding the French Revolution fortified his belief in this respect demonstrating, firstly, that popular opinion could not be adequately controlled and, secondly, that such opinion was essentially unpredictable. With regard to the first point, Burke's views were confirmed following the Rockingham Whigs' flirtation with extra-parliamentary opinion in the petitioning movements of the 1770s. Vindicated during both the English Revolution and in Lord Somers' *Jura Populi Anglicani: or, the Subjects' Right of Petitioning*, the right of the public to petition either the King or Parliament was a key tenet of Whig ideology and was thought by some to be "the first principle of the Constitution" (Sir Anthony Abdy MP, cited in Phillips 1961: 259). Burke echoed this belief by claiming that petitioning derived its authority directly from

the Bill of Rights (PH 16: 1268). In his dalliances with public opinion, Burke thought the Rockinghams could use petitioning to exert pressure on the Commons, thus influencing parliamentary opinion in their favour. In an effort to do just this, the party used the petitioning strategy on three main occasions: during the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1765-6, during the Wilkite petitioning movement of 1769-70 and during their association with the county movement in 1779-80. In an excellent article outlining the Rockinghams' political manoeuvrings during this period, John Brewer rightly highlights a "persistent and studied ambivalence" in their employment of this tactic, for it is important to emphasise that, despite wanting to mobilise popular opinion, they had no wish to encourage genuine participation or popular sovereignty. They thus simultaneously attempted to check the operation of such opinion by assigning it only a "corroborative" role (Brewer 1975: 196; cf. Smith 1966).

This view of the broader party mirrors exactly Burke's own aristocratic conception of politics and his belief in the need to "guide and direct public opinion" (Corr 3: 381). Indeed, Burke was a keen supporter of the petitioning strategy and frequently urged the political benefits of "playing the popular engines" (Corr 2: 138). His enthusiasm in this respect was undoubtedly influenced by the success of the strategy in contributing to the repeal of the Stamp Act, an achievement described by one historian as the "the greatest work of the first Rockingham ministry" (O'Gorman 1975: 136). Petitions opposing the Act were intended to appear as spontaneous eruptions of extra-parliamentary opinion which, by coincidence, would evidence nationwide support for the Rockinghams' policy. However, in truth, they were managed by the Rockinghams both through their association with the newly formed committee of London merchants and through the covert efforts of MPs. Being recently elected, Burke was unlikely to have had a role in devising this plan. Nevertheless, it is suggested that he played a "significant part" in its implementation, promoting petitions, lobbying MPs and organising

the evidence to be presented to the Commons' Committee (Lock 1998: 216). The effectiveness of the tactic convinced Burke that public opinion could be a powerful weapon in the Rockinghams' armoury and, accordingly, during their years in opposition Burke implored their leader thus; "if we mean to get redress, we must strengthen the hands of the minority within Doors by the accession of the publick opinion" (Corr 2: 51-2).

Unfortunately for Burke and his affiliates, it was not quite so straightforward. Future attempts to employ extra-parliamentary opinion and repeat their success in repealing the Stamp Act revealed such opinion to be an unstable and potentially dangerous ally. The Rockinghams had unhappy experiences during their association with both the Wilkite petitioning movement and the county movement, in each case being unable to circumscribe the more radical designs of their partners within their own modest aims.<sup>27</sup> In the first instance, the Marquis acquiesced to their involvement with radical metropolitan groups only after Burke's insistence that repeating the petitioning strategy would be the most effective means of furthering the party's aims (Corr 2: 41). However, the aristocratic grouping found themselves at pains to limit the petitions to their desired focus and faced a constant struggle as their more radical allies used the opportunity to express a much wider list of grievances covering issues such as parliamentary reform, the recent violence of the militia and the plight of the American colonists. Eventually exasperated by their behaviour, Burke began referring to their radical allies as "a rotten subdivision of a faction amongst ourselves", conceding that

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<sup>27</sup> In the former episode, the Rockinghams sought to jump aboard the popular bandwagon surrounding Wilkes's exclusion from the House of Commons. After a meeting at the Thatched House Tavern in May 1769, the Rockinghams aligned themselves with an assortment of parties, including fellow opposition groups and more radical societies from the London area. Despite billing their involvement as an attempt to safeguard the rights of the electorate it seems that their true aim was to further their own political objectives by hassling the ministry and thus hastening their return to government. The Rockingham's performed a similar trick during their uneasy alliance with Christopher Wyvil's Yorkshire Association. Both groups were keen to exploit the other in order to achieve their respective ends of economic reform (which was in fact an attempt by the Rockinghams to curb the influence of the court) and parliamentary reform. These events are well documented in Christie (1962).

they “have done us infinite mischief by the violence, rashness and often wickedness of their measures” (Corr 2: 150).

He experienced similar feelings of vexation during the Rockinghams’ involvement with Christopher Wyvill’s Yorkshire Association in 1779-80. Ostensibly united under the banner of economical reform, the latter had rather more radical aspirations and, from the beginning, arguably regarded economical reform “as no more than a preliminary to parliamentary reform” (Canon 1973: 76).<sup>28</sup> Burke had initially believed he could use public opinion for his own ends without enacting any shift in the balance of power between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary opinion. Indeed, when he presented his eagerly anticipated economic reforms to the House in 1780 he flatly denied being instructed by popular opinion. “It is our duty when we have the desires of the people before us”, Burke reminded his fellow Members, “to pursue them, not in the spirit of literal obedience”. Thus, rather than following “the sense of the people”, he revealed that “I met it on the way, while I was pursuing their interest according to my own ideas” (WS 3: 493). Nevertheless, Burke either overestimated the strength of aristocratic ideology or underestimated the power of public opinion. By May 1780 the Rockinghams were unable to dominate the county movement and, in a vain effort to maintain their hold over the creaking alliance, were forced to side with parliamentary radicals and vote in favour of Sawbridge’s motion for shorter parliaments. This was too much for Burke to accept and he voted against his party (see PH 21: 594-615). Although the motion was defeated, in the longer term, Burke’s strategy of courting popular opinion backfired dramatically. Further to being unable to control the designs of the county movement, by

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<sup>28</sup> Indeed, shortly after Burke’s Establishment Bill had failed to pass through the Commons, Wyvill and his deputies declared a new programme favouring the addition of county members, annual parliaments, equal electoral areas and tests for prospective candidates. County associations such as Westminster, under the chairmanship of Charles James Fox, voted to accept the new reformist agenda. Burke’s county of residency, Buckinghamshire, only agreed to restrict its petition to the original aims after his timely intervention urging “a more cool and more mature consideration” be given to matters (Corr 4: 226).



courting popular opinion the Rockinghams had publicised the reformist ideas of their more radical allies and unwittingly presented the people with an alternative impulse to follow. Thus the reformist Society for Constitutional Information formed in the immediate aftermath of the failure of Burke's economical reform package (Black 1963: 30). Moreover, an additional upshot was to put parliamentary reform on the political agenda. The Duke of Richmond, a former ally of Burke's, was emboldened to introduce radical proposals to the House of Lords and, over the course of the next four sessions, William Pitt would present three further motions which aimed at widening participation and increasing the number of politically active members of society.

Besides realising that popular opinion could not be controlled, Burke's personal experiences during the Gordon Riots and the general election of 1784 confirmed to him its essential unpredictability and therefore cemented his existing belief that such opinion was absolutely untrustworthy. The former event offered evidence to Burke of his belief that the people would respond to any impulse and demonstrated just how terrifying their response could be. After being egged on by the populist Lord George Gordon (leader of the Protestant Association) a large crowd which had gathered outside Parliament to await the reception of their petition against the Catholic Relief Act of 1778 eventually became unruly and engaged in an astonishing display of mob violence and destruction. Ostensibly an anti-Catholic uprising, the Riots outgrew this origin and from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> June 1780 London "went mad" (Black 1963: 161).<sup>29</sup> Burke was heavily involved in the episode. Perceived to be a Catholic

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<sup>29</sup> Edward Gibbon, a contemporary of Burke's, suggested that "the month of June 1780 will ever be marked by a dark, and diabolical fanaticism which I had supposed to be extinct, but which actually subsists in Great Britain perhaps beyond any other country in Europe" (Gibbon cited in McCalman 1996: 354). During the Riots over £100, 000 worth of damage was caused as chapels and properties (owned by Catholics and non-Catholics alike) were destroyed and Newgate prison was burned to the ground. Four-hundred and fifty arrests were made and twenty-six people were executed for their role in the Riots (Dickinson 1995: 128). For information on the Protestant Association and the events of 2<sup>nd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> June see Black (1963: 131-73).

sympathiser, the government dispatched a detachment of soldiers to protect his house and he took the further precautions of arranging for his wife to be temporarily relocated and for his furniture to be moved to another address (Lock 1998: 468). Such measures did not completely abate the threat though and, on one occasion, Burke was forced to draw his sword when accosted by a group of rioters (Corr 4: 246 n). It has been suggested that the Riots served as a “dress rehearsal” for the French Revolution and that Burke’s typology of the rioters and his “language of terror” in the aftermath anticipated his assessment of the Revolution in *Reflections* (McCalman 1996: 352-4; cf. Neocleous 2005: 26). This view exaggerates the coherence of the Riots and ignores the absence of any ideological underpinning to the events of 1780. However, Burke’s shock at how easily the “wicked instigators” had managed “to blow up the blind rage of the populace”, and his highly defensive response to the Riots certainly informed his thinking during the later period when he displayed a heightened awareness to the speed with which rights of man ideology could spread (WS 3: 655; Corr 6: 272-3).<sup>30</sup>

Further to being exposed to the terror which could be unleashed when the people follow impulses from a populist figure, Burke likewise experienced the unpredictability of popular opinion in the general election of 1784. In this election Burke’s party, now effectively led by Charles James Fox, suffered a huge defeat after their coalition government had been dismissed from office by the king following the failure of Fox’s East India Bill (drawn up largely by Burke) to pass the through the House of Lords (see Kelly 1981: 63-7). Although subject to the same levels of corruption, bribery and patronage that characterised all elections to the unreformed House of Commons, careful research has demonstrated that, within the

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<sup>30</sup> Whilst some Whigs lamented the “despotism” of the ministry’s reaction in imposing martial law, Burke, along with other members of his party, wholeheartedly supported their decision and even criticised the government’s hesitation to put the army in control (Holcroft 1780: 39; cf. Christie 1970: 110-111).

limits of the existing system, popular opinion favoured Pitt to the extent that “a mandate could scarcely have been more emphatic” (George 1939: 167; cf. Kelly 1974: 733). Former allies during the county movement of 1779-80, such as Wyvil and Cartwright actively supported Pitt and both trading and dissenting interests likewise abandoned Fox for Pitt. These interests had previously been pillars of support for the Rockingham party and Burke found their defection particularly galling, to the extent that he retained a lasting bitterness towards the Dissenters which impacted significantly upon his stance years later during their attempts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, when a dissenting correspondent enquired whether Burke would back their efforts in 1789, the latter recalled the events of 1784 and dramatically highlighted to his correspondent the Dissenters’ role in exposing him to “publick Odium, as one of a gang of Rebels and Regicides, which had conspired at one blow to subvert the Monarchy...and totally to destroy this Constitution” (Corr 5: 471). Prior to the 1784 election Burke had considered the Rockinghams to be the most principled and virtuous parliamentary grouping; the “Natural Leaders” of the people. Consequently, he found such obvious popular rejection more disturbing even than the horrors enacted during the Gordon Riots;

“the leaders of the mob were a thousand times worse than Lord George Gordon...Had his mob destroyed the Bank, the country’s wealth might have rebuilt it: had they destroyed St. Paul’s Cathedral, the piety of the nation would have rebuilt it: but the mob of 1784 destroyed the House of Commons, destroyed their best friends” (Burke cited in George 1939: 135).

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<sup>31</sup> The effects of the events of the 1784 election upon Burke were highlighted by Joseph Priestley in his *Letters to the Right Honourable Edmund Burke*. Indicating a perceived incongruity between attitudes Burke displayed in *Reflections* and those which he had displayed earlier in his career, Joseph Priestly ascribed “this change in Mr. Burke’s views and politics, to his resentment of the treatment of the *coalition* by the Dissenters” (Priestley 1791: vi).

The aim in discussing Burke's experiences with popular opinion has not been to suggest that his political problems in the decades preceding the French Revolution mirrored the problem he faced in 1790. The extreme threat to the constitution, as perceived by Burke in 1790, did not exist in 1780. Despite, for example, evidencing severe mob violence, the Gordon Riots did not carry the same ideological threat which radicals posed in the later period. Burke acknowledged as much, suggesting that although he had been concerned by the promiscuity of public opinion at this time, it was the absence of rights of man theories which "prevented our being irresistibly hurried, out of the highway of heaven into the vices, crimes, horrors and miseries of the French Revolution" (WS 9: 151). Nevertheless his involvement with the petitioning movements and his experiences in the Riots and the general election of 1784 were undoubtedly crucial in shaping his reaction to events in 1790. To this end it is argued that reconstructing Burke's beliefs as they relate to his political experiences can provide a point of entry into his thinking in the late 1780s/early 1790s. Burke realised that public opinion could not be managed or controlled as he had believed and that "playing the popular engines" could have disastrous consequences. Moreover, the Riots confirmed his belief that popular opinion was impulsive and demonstrated just how dangerous this impulsiveness could be. Finally, an important upshot from the 1784 general election was that Burke came to realise the possibility that such opinion could actually exercise a determinate choice. Explaining away the Foxites' remarkably heavy defeat in Parliament, Burke questioned the reliability of public opinion by reiterating the familiar line that it had either been corrupted by "the lustre of the crown" or duped by radicals (PH 24: 944-5). In private though, he admitted that the public had in fact been "perfectly well aware" of the choice they were making and that they had consciously rejected the former Rockinghams; "the people did not like our work; and they joined the Court to pull it down" (Corr 5: 154). As a consequence of these experiences, when confronted with rights based theories espousing strong notions of popular sovereignty in

1790, Burke took decisive action. In his Commons speech following the 1784 election he had strained to convince MPs that it was their “duty...to resist the sense of the people, when it appeared that the people were deceived or misled” (PH 24: 944-5). By *Reflections on the Revolution in France* he was fully alive to the dangers of encouraging popular opinion and employed strategies of argument which sought to limit the involvement of such opinion in politics, showing that adhering to a weak notion of popular sovereignty was perfectly in accordance with the Whig tradition to which his contemporaries professed to subscribe.

## **Section Two: The propagation of democratic ideas in Britain**

### **2.1 Burke's early reaction to the French Revolution**

Burke's earliest recorded reaction to the French Revolution is in a letter to Lord Charlemont, dated 9<sup>th</sup> August 1789. Enmeshed in a political and financial crisis for some time, the French state had by this point declared itself bankrupt. The authority of the king had been severely weakened and the storming of the Bastille had taken place in the ensuing furore. Burke expressed his utter amazement at events thus far and declared that all of England was “gazing with astonishment at a French struggle for Liberty and not knowing whether to blame or to applaud!” Nevertheless, even at this early stage, he offered a cautionary note to his correspondent. Initiating a theme which he would later develop in *Reflections*, Burke regretted the “ferocity” with which liberty had been sought and insisted that “men must have a certain fund of natural moderation to qualifye them for Freedom, else it become noxious to themselves and a perfect nuisance to every body else” (Corr 6: 10). By late September Burke was questioning whether the Members of the French National Assembly were “possessed of

any real deliberative capacity or the exercise of free Judgement” in the face of the “popular voice” which called for “the subversion of all orders, distinctions, privileges impositions, Tythes, and rents”. He was, at this time, clearly shocked by the democratic basis of the French constitutional proposals, to the extent that he doubted whether “in the End France is susceptible of the Democracy that is the Spirit, and in a good measure too, the form, of the constitution they have in hand”. Indeed, aside from their apparent desire to maintain a hereditary monarchy, Burke confessed that the constitution being considered in France was “much more truly democratical than that of North America” (Corr 6: 25).

Dating from the summer and autumn of 1789, this correspondence indicates Burke’s wariness about the course of events in France. He expanded upon these sentiments in his first proper assessment of the French Revolution, undertaken in a letter written, but not sent, in November 1789 to the young Frenchman Charles-Jean-François Depont. Here, Burke revealed to his correspondent that he would “delay my congratulations on your acquisition of Liberty”, since “every days account [of events in France] shews more and more, in my opinion, the ill consequence of keeping good principles and good general views within no bounds” (Corr 6: 46, 50). Burke’s trepidation was based upon concerns about the “perilous extremes” to which the principles adopted by the French revolutionaries would lead (Corr 6: 49). Labelling their new system a “collection of Democracies”, he contrasted negatively the conditions of liberty, property and personal safety in France with those in Britain (Corr 6: 45).<sup>32</sup> In short, the root cause of French deficiencies in each case lay in their adherence to theories of the rights of man. “You have enough concerning the Rights of Man”, Burke informed Depont, but, he cautioned, “it may not be amiss to add a small degree of attention to

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<sup>32</sup> It is suggested that, in using the phrase “collection of Democracies”, Burke was thinking of the proposals for the establishment of municipalities and the electoral and administrative assemblies which were introduced to the National Assembly on 29<sup>th</sup> September. The legislation was passed on 14<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> December (Corr 6: 45 n3).

their Nature and disposition” (Corr 6: 46). For example, rather than imitating Britain, where “Liberty is secured by the equality of restraint”, Burke believed that observing the rights of man led the French to pursue a “solitary, unconnected, individual, selfish Liberty”. This caused them to beget moderation and act “as if every man was to regulate the whole of his Conduct by his own will” (Corr 6: 42).

The above evidence illustrates that, even at this early stage, Burke viewed the French Revolution as a democratic affair. He was apprehensive about the operation of rights of man ideology and it is significant that he sought to distinguish the actions of the English during their Revolution of 1688, which captured the “grand secret” of government, from the French who “may have made a Revolution, but not a Reformation” (Corr 6: 46). However, this assessment was offered only at Depont’s behest. Moreover, unfavourable though it was, if the French were to aim for a “real *practical* Liberty”, Burke accepted “that the same Object may be attain’d in many ways, and perhaps in ways very different from those which we have follow’d in this Country” (Corr 6: 45). At this point, Burke was detached and regarded events across the channel as posing no threat to Britain; rather he perceived affairs in France as “the folly of our Neighbouring Nation”, by which Britain was “not yet affected” (Corr 6: 55). Indeed, during the summer of 1789, British politics was only beginning to recover from its own constitutional dilemma, Parliament having been embroiled in the Regency Crisis since the summer of 1788. Burke too was most pressingly concerned at this time with his involvement in the impeachment of Warren Hastings.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless, this was soon to change. In February 1790, during his *Speech on Army Estimates*, Burke roared that, in France, “a cruel, blind, and ferocious democracy had carried all before them”. Surveying the

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<sup>33</sup> The Regency Crisis is given full length treatment in Derry (1963). The House of Commons resolved to impeach Hastings in 1787 over his actions when Governor-General of Bengal, 1772-1785. Burke’s involvement as a manager of the trial dominates the second volume of his most recent biography (Lock 2006).

situation, he informed the Commons that, “all at once, the army of France, the laws, the religion, the manners, the order of subordination, and the constitution itself, had been destroyed” and, on this basis, asserted that “of every species of despotism, a democratic despotism was the most abominable” (PR 27: 90, 91).

Crucially, Burke now claimed that the influence of the French Revolution loomed large on the domestic horizon. Insisting that it was “well known” that some in Britain “favoured the wild theories of the times”, he revealed to the Commons that he “dreaded our being induced ... to select any part of what had happened in France for our imitation” (PR 27: 93). Burke’s fear in this respect arose in part because he was alarmed at the conduct of his fellow MPs (the importance of this factor in shaping Burke’s *Reflections* is discussed below). However, his worries about the domestic political situation were also grounded in his concerns over the political behaviour of British radicals. Two key events brought this latter point to Burke’s attention in January 1790. First, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of that month Thomas Paine wrote to Burke, hailing the achievements of the French Revolution and expressing his belief that it was “certainly a Forerunner” to others throughout Europe. Paine gave details of “matters beginning to work” in other countries and joked about the idea, prevalent in British newspapers, that there would be a counterrevolution, suggesting it was as likely “that those who pulled down the Bastille should build it up again and consent to be shut up in it” (Corr 6: 71, 72). Paine’s letter certainly worried Burke. However, he found Richard Price’s sermon even more distressing. Price had delivered his sermon the previous November but, up to this point, though he had heard of it, Burke had not yet read it. After an animated discussion with a Dissenter during dinner at a friend’s house, Burke returned home and read the text late into the night, discovering “shocking Sentiments, and seditious principles”, immediately resolving to publish his thoughts on the matter (Corr 7: 56, 57). This moment thus arguably awakened



Burke to the idea that Britain was equally under threat from French inspired, democratic ideas and he henceforth perceived the leadership of the Dissenters, many of whom had a history of political radicalism, as dangerous political subversives.

## 2.2 Burke's perception of the threat from Richard Price

The arguments offered in Richard Price's sermon, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country*, form an immediate context of the utmost importance for understanding Burke's *Reflections*. A basic strategy in Burke's work is to deny Price's arguments as to the meaning and significance of the English Revolution and assert his own interpretation of this event. Notwithstanding this more obvious example (Burke names his target and quotes Price's interpretation of 1688 at length) in many other ways Price's arguments provide a foil for Burke's. Though not commonly acknowledged, key aims in the remainder of the latter's text are to nullify and redefine his opponent's use of concepts such as liberty and political legitimacy (as it relates to political regimes). Likewise, Burke reasserts establishmentism, an idea explicitly questioned by Price. The two authors held to profoundly different epistemological and ontological positions and were well known to each other; Price being a part of the radical Bowood Circle, whose patron, Lord Shelburne, was a prominent rival to the Rockinghams. The philosophical differences underpinning their clash during the French Revolution period have been highlighted by Frederick Dreyer, who encourages us to study *Reflections* as "a specific reply to a provocation by a specific person" (1978: 464).<sup>34</sup> Dreyer seems to overstate his case somewhat, for it seems unlikely that one person, no matter how intensely Burke disagreed with him, would have occasioned a response such as *Reflections*.

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<sup>34</sup> The "philosophic consistency in the intellectual, religious, social and political contrasts between Price and Burke" is also explored in Cone (1966-7).

Moreover, upon consulting Burke's speeches and correspondence it is evident that the provocation for his being alerted to the democratic threat came from the broader Dissenting leadership. With these points in mind, Chapters Three and Four reconstruct the relevant intellectual contexts to properly demonstrate the potency of the domestic threat that Burke faced. Nevertheless, although Price did not singularly set the terms of the debate, his arguments, underpinned by notions of popular sovereignty, prompted Burke into action and captured a great deal of the threat, as he perceived it. Hence, in order to grasp the nature of this threat, it is necessary to outline Price's arguments.

Richard Price delivered his sermon on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1789 to the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain, a group more commonly (and herein) known as the Revolution Society. An offshoot of the reformist Society for Constitutional Information, the Revolution Society was one of a number of groups founded prior to the centenary of 1688 and was used by radicals as a "pressure group" to help secure the repeal of the restrictive Test and Corporation Acts (Black 1963: 208).<sup>35</sup> Discussing both groups in *Reflections*, Burke professed not to have heard of the Revolution Society until "very lately". However their subversive nature was confirmed upon his learning of their corresponding directly with the French National Assembly. Such actions were deemed "improper and irregular" without the "express authority" of one's own government, though Burke's further worry in this case was that the Society's correspondence would appear, to the National Assembly, as an official approach, sanctioned by Parliament (Burke 2001: 148, 149).<sup>36</sup> This would give the

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<sup>35</sup> Eugene Black notes a tradition amongst London Dissenters of meeting at a tavern on 4<sup>th</sup> November to commemorate the events of the English Revolution. Such meetings were not conducted under the name of the Revolution Society, which, it seems, was only formally instituted in 1788 (Black 1963: 214).

<sup>36</sup> It seems that the Revolution Society's actions were highly unconventional. In his letter to Depont, Burke was careful to stress to his correspondent that his observations did not extend to commenting on the effects of events "upon your Country as a State". To go further than his stated remarks, Burke insisted, "is not my business, as a Citizen of the World" (Corr 6: 46).

dangerous impression that the British state supported the French Revolution. In his sermon, ostensibly a panegyric to the English Revolution of 1688, Price professed to discuss “the nature, foundation and proper expressions” of patriotism, though admitted at the outset that he would “touch on more political subjects” than was usual in such a form of address (Price 1991: 177, 178).<sup>37</sup> To this end, he condemned most governments as “usurpations on the rights of men”, advanced disestablishmentarian arguments, highlighted the inequalities suffered by Protestant Dissenters, and argued the inadequate state of political representation (Price 1991: 181, 183-4, 191, 191-2).

Underlying Price’s arguments is a strong sense of popular sovereignty. He stated that political power was exercised by government as “a trust derived from the people” and likewise declared that “civil authority is a delegation from the people” (Price 1991: 187, 190). Moreover, he carried this point through when commenting on regal authority. Thus, he claimed that the British monarchy held one of the only lawful crowns in the world as it was owed “to the choice of the people”, and further asserted that the King should consider himself more like “the *servant* than the sovereign of [the] people” (Price 1991: 186). Price’s views in this respect were informed by a radical interpretation of the meaning and significance of the English Revolution. This will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Three. However, the thrust of his point was that the people, at that time, moved to expel a despotic king and, in doing so, established certain principles which became enshrined in precedent. For Price, these principles were

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<sup>37</sup> Price develops an interpretation of patriotism which significantly subverts the conventional understanding, dissociating the concept from an attachment only to one’s own country and instead tying it to the idea that we are “citizens of the world” and hence must maintain “a just regard to the rights of other countries” (Price 1991: 181). It would seem that, by reinterpreting patriotism in this way, Price is seeking to implicitly justify his position on the French Revolution.

First, the right to liberty of conscience in religious matters.  
Secondly, the right to resist power when abused. And  
Thirdly, the right to chuse our own governors, to cashier them for misconduct, and to frame a government for ourselves.  
(Price 1991: 189-90).

The thought that the English Revolution had infused the constitution with notions of popular sovereignty was abhorrent to Burke. Given the authoritative nature of arguments from ‘Revolution principles’, to accept such an idea would justify undertaking subsequent actions in the same vein, thus providing a potential threat to the existing patrician model of politics. This threat was enhanced by Price’s open admission that despite furnishing the populace with such rights, the English Revolution had not gone far enough; it was “by no means a perfect work”. To this end, “the [religious] toleration then obtained was imperfect”, yet, for Price, “the most important instance of the imperfect state in which the Revolution left our constitution, is the inequality of our representation” (Price 1991: 191-2). In line with many radical opponents of the Whig establishment, Price equated “true liberty” with a “fair and equal” system of representation. He thus desired to “extend and improve” the liberties established in 1688 by rectifying this “fundamental grievance” and “supplying what is left deficient”. To achieve this aim, Price indicated to his audience that “we should always bear in mind the principles that justify [the English Revolution]” (Price 1991: 192-3). Crucially, however, in addition to employing the principles of the English Revolution, Price also looked to France for inspiration. Highlighting the limited impact of William Pitt’s attempted reforms, he lamented the “inattention” currently paid to the issue by “our present Minister” and suggested that the situation would remain unchanged “perhaps, till the acquisition of a pure and equal representation by other countries (while we are mocked with the shadow) kindles our shame” (Price 1991: 192). Pursuing this point, he hailed the “favourableness of

the present times to all exertions in the cause of public liberty” and proclaimed his joy at having “lived to see the rights of men better understood than ever” (Price 1991: 195).

Combining his interpretation of English ‘Revolution principles’ with an appeal to the authority of the French Revolution buttressed Price’s arguments. In 1789/90 the latter event was commonly equated with the former and therefore served as an additional, more recent precedent. Nonetheless, this was ominous for Burke because acknowledging such arguments meant accepting the democratic principles of the French Revolution and importing the rights of man into the British context of debate. The universal implications of a democratically inclined, rights based theory presented a fundamental challenge to his belief that political and social inequality was natural. As he would make clear in his *Reflections*, “men, with them, are strictly equal, and are entitled to equal rights in their own government” (Burke 2001: 346). Once appealed to, such rights could not be withheld from any member of the community. This being the case, even moderate reform enacted according to the rights of man could potentially pave the way for the democratic overhaul of the British constitution. Price’s sermon raised this possibility and served as a fist pumping, rallying cry to “all friends of freedom and writers in its defence”. “Tremble all ye oppressors of the world!”, Price declared,

Take warning all ye supporters of slavish governments and slavish hierarchies! Call no more (absurdly and wickedly) reformation, innovation. You cannot now hold the world in darkness. Struggle no longer against increasing light and liberality. Restore to mankind their rights and consent to the correction of abuses, before they and you are destroyed together (Price 1991: 195, 196).

### 2.3 Burke’s perception of the wider Dissenting threat

Burke arguably viewed Richard Price as being representative of the wider democratic threat, largely constituted by the leading Dissenters. In broad terms, the arguments appealed to in *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* appeared as evidence of a wider shift in reformist attitudes, detectable from the 1760s onwards. Social historians have attributed this shift to industrialisation and a subsequent “cultural explosion”, resulting in both increased literacy and popular interest in politics (Plumb 1968: 10). However, it seems that a more convincing explanation for this development can be found in the world of ideas, where the transition contrasted with economic trends and political ideologies “moved in the opposite direction from property to persons as the demanded basis of representation” (Clark, 2000: 378). These points are explored in greater detail in Chapters Three and Four. Yet, in noting such change, it is important to bear two things in mind. First, despite a marked increase in reformist activity, there was very little change in terms of high politics during the eighteenth-century. By the end of the century, both court and parliament remained dominated by a narrow aristocratic elite. Second, it is essential not to view the increase in reformist activity as a part of an inevitable movement towards democracy.<sup>38</sup> To adopt such an assumption is not only grossly anachronistic but it also neglects the huge ideological differences between the reform movements with which the Rockinghams were briefly allied and those active in the late 1780s and early 1790s. Despite this difference in tone between the various reform movements, a consistent feature of reformist activity during this period was the involvement of leading Dissenters.

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<sup>38</sup> This seems to be the assumption in Veitch (1913).

Those dissenting from the Church of England were subject to statutory restrictions under the Test and Corporation Acts which constrained their ability to participate in public life.<sup>39</sup> Protestant Dissenters were afforded a limited measure of tolerance, firstly, under the Toleration Act of 1689, which offered some exemption from the penal laws and, secondly, under an act passed in 1719 “for the quieting and establishing Corporations”, which qualified the Corporation Act and ensured that Dissenting members of municipal corporations who refused to take the sacrament could only be prevented from taking office if prosecuted within six months of their election (Goodwin 1979: 70-1). On account of their support during the Sacheverell affair and during the Jacobite rising in the early eighteenth-century, Dissenters had traditionally been associated with Whiggism, which, in turn, prided itself on extending to them a limited toleration (Ransome 1941: 85).<sup>40</sup> Burke evidenced this conventional attitude throughout the 1770s, for example, by supporting the Dissenters’ Relief Bill in 1772 which would have alleviated Dissenting School Masters of their statutory requirement to subscribe to (most of) the Thirty-Nine Articles; the defining statements of Anglican doctrine.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, despite this measure of tolerance, no permanent statutory concessions were enacted and, by the late 1780s, the Test and Corporation Acts were still in force.<sup>42</sup> In a valuable article charting its changing ethos, Richey argues that the rationale for dissent gradually altered over the course of the eighteenth-century to become increasingly politicised.

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<sup>39</sup> The Corporation Act of 1661 decreed that no-one could enter civic or municipal office unless “he had taken the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper according to the rights of the Church of England within a year previous to his election.” The Test Act of 1673 stipulated that “all who held offices or places of trust under the Crown, whether civil or military, were required to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy, to sign a declaration repudiating the doctrine of transubstantiation, and to receive the sacrament according to the rites of the Church of England” (Goodwin 1979: 77).

<sup>40</sup> Dr Henry Sacheverell was subject to a Whig show trial for apparently attempting to reconcile the English Revolution with the Tory doctrine of non-resistance in a sermon delivered at St. Pauls to mark the twenty-first anniversary of William of Orange landing at Torbay. Geoffrey Holmes’ *The Trial of Doctor Sacheverell* offers the definitive full-length treatment of the trial, whilst J. P. Kenyon’s *Revolution Principles* contains a neat review of the arguments employed by the prosecution and defence (Holmes 1973; Kenyon 1977: 128-45).

<sup>41</sup> The Toleration Act of 1689 ensured that Protestant Dissenters were exempt from Articles 34 to 36 and parts of Article 20 (Lock, 1998: 333).

<sup>42</sup> Although there was no lasting relief, Walpole had, in 1727, instituted a policy of passing Indemnity Acts every year which suspended the operation of the Test Acts.

In searching for a new identity, he demonstrates that Dissenters began to define themselves, not just negatively, in terms of their opposition to the established Church, but also positively, in terms of their commitment to liberty. This was initially stated as a commitment to supporting liberty of conscience but later developed to incorporate a more radical commitment to political liberty and, in particular, to notions of popular sovereignty, commonly expressed through the doctrine of the rights of man (Richey 1973-4: 185-91).<sup>43</sup> As the century wore on, elements of the dissenting interest increasingly attached themselves to reformist causes. The Club of Honest Whigs, with members such as James Burgh, Andrew Kippis, Richard Price, and Joseph Priestley, was essential in inspiring this new agenda. Attacking the religious tests was a natural undertaking, but the new self-understanding compelled them to strive for the liberty of others too, hence support for American independence and parliamentary reform. To this end, Price's *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*, which put support for the colonists' independence on a natural rights footing, and Burgh's lengthy *Political Disquisitions*, which questioned the over representation of landed interests in Parliament, arguably showed that Dissent had begun to "take on democratic overtones" (Price 1776; Burgh 1774-5a; 1774-5b; Clark 2000: 384). In support of this judgement, one commentator has similarly written of "the vital significance of the Dissenting interest in the history of the British democratic movement" (Goodwin 1979: 66).

In addition to other radical Dissenters such as Major John Cartwright and John Jebb, members of the Club of Honest Whigs were involved in founding the radical Society for Constitutional Information (SCI) in 1780.<sup>44</sup> It is unnecessary for the purposes of this chapter

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<sup>43</sup> Joseph Priestley, a leading radical Dissenter, suggested that "the break came in the present reign at the time of the Middlesex Election" (Priestly cited in Goodwin 1979: 72 n27). This was around the time of the aforementioned Wilkite petitioning movement in which Burke and the Rockingham Whigs were heavily involved.

<sup>44</sup> The activities and fortunes of the SCI are well documented by Black (1963: 174-212).



to go much further in outlining the exact nature and status of British radicalism during this period. As indicated at the outset, the aim here is to establish that, by 1790, Burke believed that the existing British constitution faced the serious threat of being altered according to the democratic whims of leading radicals. It is clear that Burke did not hold such beliefs in this earlier period. Indeed in the late 1770s, the professed aim of most reformers was to effect change from *within* the existing system. Thus in 1778 Burke was comfortable with supporting the Irish Toleration Bill which included a clause giving increased toleration to Irish Dissenters. To this end, he revealed to Lord North that, if the wider issue of toleration to all Dissenters came before Parliament then he “should certainly” vote for repeal of the Test Act (Corr 4: 7). However, by 1790 his views in this respect had come full circle. Price’s sermon was certainly important for highlighting the danger, as Burke perceived it, but his fears were confirmed when the Dissenters’ attempt to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts in 1790 was underpinned by arguments which echoed the natural rights tone adopted by Price. As previously mentioned, the SCI and its offshoot, the Revolution Society, were both active in campaigning for the repeal and both were subsequently highlighted in *Reflections* as subversive organisations whose recent activities provided a cause for concern (Burke 2001: 146, 148).

Three efforts were made at overturning the Test and Corporation Acts in the late 1780s.<sup>45</sup> When sponsoring the first two attempts, in March 1787 and May 1789, dissenting MP Henry Beaufoy couched his appeal in moderate language (for the parliamentary debates see PH 26: 780-832 and PH 28: 1-41). During the third attempt, moved in March 1790, more radical methods were resorted to both in extra-parliamentary and parliamentary terms. With regard

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<sup>45</sup> Motions to this effect were moved in Parliament on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1787, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1789 and 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1790 and were lost by the respective margins of 176 to 98, 122 to 102 and 294 to 105.

to the former, the moderate London Application Committee, which had coordinated the two previous repeal attempts, was assailed by metropolitan extremists such as Richard Price, Joshua Towers and Capel Lofft and was supplanted across the country by more radical, provincial organisations (Henriques 1961: 63-4). In Burke's former constituency of Bristol, for example, the Bristol Dissenters argued that the Test and Corporation Acts deprived "persons of their religious persuasions, of their just and natural rights" (Corr 6: 102 n1). This ideological shift occasioned a grassroots campaign for the abolition of ecclesiastical tithes and a potential challenge to the concept of virtual representation, through a mooted attempt to secure pledges of support from candidates in the upcoming general election of 1790 (Goodwin, 1979: 90-1; Ditchfield, 1974: 572-3; see also Dickinson, 1995: 84-6).<sup>46</sup> The radical language of extra-parliamentary groups was echoed by those supporting the motion in the Commons debate with Charles James Fox, sponsoring the motion, Sir Henry Hoghton, seconding, and Henry Beaufoy all appealing to natural rights language to buttress their arguments (PH 28: 402 & 448, 403, 424).<sup>47</sup>

As indicated above, Burke had previously supported extending a limited tolerance to the Dissenters. Owing perhaps to this fact he was approached by Richard Bright, a Nonconformist Bristol merchant, in 1789 and asked to support the second attempt at repealing the Test and Corporation Act. Although expressing support in principle, Burke ultimately declined Bright's request, suggesting that his heavy workload and ill-health would

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<sup>46</sup> Ursula Henriques suggests that the policy of securing pledges of support from parliamentary candidates was actually adopted by the London Application Committee in December 1788 (Henriques 1961: 62). Whether this is the case or not is immaterial for my purposes. Burke certainly *believed* that such a policy had been adopted and his forming this belief contributed to his perception of the nature and seriousness of the threat at this time. The radicals' actions were taken seriously by other loyalists, producing a defensive reaction involving over twenty meetings being held during January and February 1790, in which Dissenters were denounced as "King-killers" and "Levellers" (Goodwin, 1979: 90).

<sup>47</sup> The repeal movement has previously been regarded as an English revolutionary movement (see for instance Lincoln 1938: 2). This idea is historically unsustainable, though it is quite possible that Burke viewed the movement in such terms.

prevent him from attending the Commons' debate (Corr 5: 470). In truth, he was still sore at the Dissenters for having supported Pitt over the Foxite grouping in the 1784 election. Indeed, he even alluded to this grudge and noted the irony of the Dissenters' shifting attitude towards him; in 1784, "a great Change took place; and all of them who seem'd to act in Corps, have held me out to publick Odium". Now "I am in a situation to be asked by them...for my poor Vote" (Corr 5: 471). Apparently not realising the gist of Burke's letter, Bright renewed his request prior to the third attempt at repeal in 1790. On this occasion Burke left his correspondent in no mind as to his feelings on the matter. Replying on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1790, he drew attention to the "direct contrary Character" of the leaders in comparison to the main body of Dissenters.<sup>48</sup> Summarising his position, and indicating his belief as to the threat posed by the former, Burke argued that

Extraordinary things have happend in France; extraordinary things have been said and done here, and published with great observation, 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. I think such designs, as far as they go, highly dangerous to the constitution and the prosperity of this Country. I have had lately put into my hands, and but very lately, two extraordinary works, so sanctioned, as to leave no Doubt in my mind that a considerable party is formed, and is proceeding systematically, to the destruction of this Constitution in some of its essential parts (Corr 6: 83).

This letter is of the utmost importance in aiding our understanding of the happenings that motivated Burke to issue his *Reflections*. It illustrates perfectly his belief that the British constitution faced the threat of "destruction" from a "considerable party" who aimed to draw Britain "into a connexion" with, or "imitation" of, the principles underpinning the French

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<sup>48</sup> This is a point which escapes James Bradley (1975: 5, 10). Further to this letter, Burke distinguished between the leaders and the main body of Dissenters on numerous other occasions. See for instance, his *Speech on Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts* and his comments in a letter to John Noble (PH 28: 432-443 at 439, 441; Corr 6: 102).

Revolution. Burke's use of the phrase "party" to describe those who carried the threat is likewise significant because it demonstrates that he believed that the domestic threat was carried by an organised and coherent group; a group such as the Dissenters. These beliefs henceforth formed the basis of Burke's political argument whenever he applied himself to the problems raised by the refraction of the French Revolution in a British context. Indeed, it is crucial to note that he repeated this line of argument in the Commons on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1790 in his first public foray into the debate over the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. In a thunderous speech, he declared that, ten years ago, he would have supported the motion. However, contrasting the "utmost zeal" with which he had previously supported the Dissenters' cause, he warned that, under the present circumstances, it would be "imprudent to meddle" with the statutes (PH 28: 441). Again Burke highlighted the leading Dissenters, stating that their dangerousness was evident in "their acts, their declarations, and their avowed intentions" (PH 28: 436). In an effort to impress upon his audience the seriousness of the threat, Burke produced numerous pieces of evidence (including two dissenting texts containing disestablishmentarian sentiments, Price's aforementioned sermon, and a letter written by Joseph Priestley), and argued that the Dissenters were attempting to inculcate a new generation of enemies to the established Church by disseminating disestablishmentarian literature amongst their children. Ultimately, his evidence showed a "determination" amongst the leading Dissenters "to proceed step by step till the whole of the church establishment was levelled to its foundations" (PH 28: 436, 439). Reiterating the belief he had first revealed in correspondence with Richard Bright, Burke stressed the influence of the French Revolution upon the Dissenters' designs, conjecturing that dissenting preachers were "recommending the same sort of robbery and plunder of the wealth of the church as had happened in France". This was an important point to make as the Revolution had hitherto been favourably received by many figures in his party. Correcting those who "were weak

enough to imagine a happy revolution had taken place”, Burke warned his fellow MPs that the English establishment was currently “in much more serious danger than the church of France was in a year or two ago” (PH 28: 436-7, 439-40).

Burke’s immediate focus in this debate concerned the perceived threat to the established Church. However, it is clear that his aim in making this speech was not limited to dissuading MPs from repealing the Test and Corporation Acts. Rather, he was concerned to alert his peers to the wider threat carried by the leading Dissenters. As he later revealed, the very notion of the church establishment being endangered encompassed a wider threat to the existing aristocratic constitution, since the established Church was “connected, in its safety or danger, with many *other* establishments which form parts of our constitution” (Corr 6: 104). This threat was apparently grounded in the Dissenters’ adherence to democratically inclined ideas, their willingness to propagate such ideas, and their desire to undertake democratic reforms of the existing socio-political establishment. Two crucial factors highlight the validity of this point. First, it is evident that other Members present during the debate associated the Dissenters’ claims with a democratic threat. Recounting the on goings in the Commons, Lieutenant General James Grant, MP for Sutherlandshire, wrote to Lord Cornwallis, the Governor General of India, specifically describing the dissenting interest as “those levelling gentlemen” (Grant cited in Ditchfield 1974: 565). Moreover, other figures wrote in similar terms about the Dissenters’ wider aims. Asking what they had “further in reserve”, William Keate, for instance, wondered “if it be a democracy, with a nominal King, as it is at present in some countries abroad, or a government without a head, together with the abolition of all orders and distinctions” (Keate 1790: 32). Second, and more importantly, Burke’s own evaluation also supports this point. Upon dissecting the Dissenters’ arguments, he analysed the source of their menace as lying in their recourse to rights based arguments.

Delivering his speech Burke declared that it was their founding their arguments in an appeal to natural rights which proved the most dangerous aspect of the Dissenters' case (PH 28: 435).

Burke repeated this point shortly after the Commons debate in response to a letter from a Nonconformist friend in Bristol, which asked if he would be willing to consider moving, on behalf of the body of Dissenters, for a smaller alteration to the statutes. Answering in the negative, Burke reiterated that his principal objection was to the Dissenters claiming what they desired as a right. "As long as they continue to claim what they desire as a *Right*; so long will they find it difficult to obtain", for "this high claim of *Right*", he continued "leaves with Parliament no *discretionary* power whatsoever concerning almost any part of *Legislation*; which is almost all of it, conversant in qualifying, and limiting some *Right or other of mans original Nature*" (Corr 6: 102). It is of note that Burke likewise indicated that he had been unnerved by the Dissenters' policy of seeking pledges of support for their cause from prospective parliamentary candidates. To this end, he recalled that

the corporation part of the proposed Repeal was what gave the greatest alarm, on account of the late Conduct of the dissenters, which, publicly and declaredly, went to make a subservience to *their* views and purposes the *sole* condition, by which (to their power) any Member could sit in Parliament" (Corr 6: 102).

Such a ploy challenged Burke's patrician conception of politics. By making Members acquiesce to extra-parliamentary opinion, it served to jeopardise not only the independence of MPs, but also the notion that Parliament virtually represented the entire nation rather than the interests of specific groups or individuals. Evidencing this point, Burke wrote that "between different ecclesiastical parties, not a shadow of Liberty would be left to the House" and

“every claim in individuals to public confidence from *General Service*, would be swallowed up in this *particular* merit or demerit”. “In such a dilemma”, he argued, “We might choose our *Church* Interest – but we must forget that we had a *Country*” (Corr 6: 103). Given his aforementioned anxieties over what he perceived as the Dissenters’ attempts “to draw us into a connexion and concurrence with [France] upon the principles of its proceedings”, it is highly instructive to recognise that Burke viewed this challenge to the idea underpinning virtual representation as an example of the Dissenters’ being “disposed to connect themselves in Sentiment and by imitation, (and perhaps by something more) with what was done and is doing in France” (Corr 6: 103).

### **Section Three: Burke’s alarm at the political behaviour of his party**

Thus far, the chapter has demonstrated two essential points: firstly, that Burke held to a conception of politics which was fundamentally opposed to encouraging greater notions of public agency; and, secondly, that by 1790 Burke believed that British radicals, inspired by events in France, were propagating democratic ideas which posed a serious threat to the nation’s mixed constitution. The aim in this final section is to show that, for Burke, the political problems which he faced at this time were amplified by the reaction of the political elite. In particular Burke was alarmed that prominent members of his party were *willing* to support the Dissenters’ rights based argument for repealing the Test and Corporation Act and were *unwilling* to condemn the French Revolution. It is argued that his difficulties in each case stemmed from contrasting perceptions of the problems posed by each issue.

#### **3.1 Burke’s divergence from his party**

Since the death of Rockingham in 1782, Charles James Fox had effectively become the leader of the Rockinghamite group in the Commons. Although allied politically, key personal differences meant that Burke never felt the same sense of loyalty to Fox, nor held for him the deep admiration which had marked his political relationship with the Marquis of Rockingham. Consequently, Burke's dissatisfaction with Fox's leadership of the party was evident before 1790 (Lock 2006: 12-13). Nevertheless his extreme alarm at the direction in which the party was being taken arose from Fox's leading stance on two key events in this year: the third attempt at repealing the Test and Corporation Acts, and the French Revolution.

It is crucial to understand that Burke viewed the Rockinghamite party, both during and after its being led by Rockingham, as being fundamentally aristocratic; it was "in its composition and in its principles, connected with the solid, permanent long possessed property of the Country". This particular virtue ensured that the party remained "equally removed from servile court compliances, and from popular levity, presumption, and precipitation". Indeed, the whole point of the party was to uphold "aristocratic principles" and protect "the aristocratic interests connected to them" (Corr 7: 52, 53). Burke's unease in 1790 stemmed from his belief that supporting either the Dissenters or the French Revolution was incompatible with defending an aristocratic outlook, and was thus opposed to the interests of the party; as he indicated in private correspondence, "they, who cry up the French Revolution, cry down the Party" (Corr 7: 54). Detecting an ideological shift from the "Creed" he had previously outlined in *Thoughts*, Burke intended for *Reflections* to caution his "Party of Gentlemen" against this shift and was mortified when Fox publicly declared against his text, apparently favouring instead the new "French Whiggism" (Corr 2: 136; Corr 7: 62;



Corr 6: 273).<sup>49</sup> Worse still, whereas the bulk of the party had previously been in concurrence with his views, Burke now perceived it to have succumbed to a radical force which aimed to subvert the conventional Whig doctrine which he claimed to articulate in *Reflections*;

almost systematic pains were taken to discredit that work in the Party, to get its principles disclaimed; and of course (for medium there is none) to get the Principles of Paine, Priestly, Price, Rouse, Mackintosh, Christie &ca &ca &ca magnified and extolled, and in a sort of obscure and undefined manner to be adopted as the Creed of the party (Corr 6: 273).

This was an undoubted exaggeration; nevertheless prominent figures in the Fox-led grouping were at the forefront of the attempt to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts, either overtly avowing radical natural rights arguments (as in the case of Fox) or implicitly accepting the validity of such arguments by supporting the motion. To this end, further to Fox introducing the motion, key party members such as Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Earl Fitzpatrick took an “active part in promoting it” and, most alarmingly for Burke, the motion was likewise backed by his political disciple, William Windham (Ditchfield, 1974: 562).<sup>50</sup>

The party’s position on the French Revolution was a further source of worry to Burke, for the Revolution was almost unanimously understood as a flowering of liberty in a nation that had long since suffered under an absolute monarch. In this vein, Fox promoted France’s new constitution as “the most glorious fabric ever raised by human integrity since the creation of

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<sup>49</sup> Fox considered *Reflections* to be “in very bad taste” and as “favouring Tory principles” (Fox cited in Mitchell 1992: 113). This view was echoed by Gilbert Elliot, a member of the Rockingham party who remained close to both Fox and Burke. In a letter to his wife, Elliot told how he regretted the publication of *Reflections* “extremely”, because it threatened “to embark Fox in a set of opinions, and in a course of politics, which will not do him credit, and in which it will be impossible for the truly respectable and weighty part of his support to follow him” (Eliot cited in Mitchell 1992: 113). The contrast between the new, or Frenchified, Whiggism and the traditional variant, to which Burke argued he remained faithful, was developed in the latter’s *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791).

<sup>50</sup> Windham appeared in a list of MPs thanked for their efforts by the ‘Friends of Repeal’ in St. James’s Chronicle 27<sup>th</sup> February to 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1790 (Ditchfield, 1974: 562 n).

man”, and sought to persuade his colleagues in Parliament that her “new form” of government “would render her a better neighbour, and less disposed to hostility” than in recent times (PR 29: 249; PH 28: 332). Likewise, Windham reiterated a commonly held view when he dismissed reports of disorder across the channel as “a great deal of exaggeration” (Windham cited in Corr 6: 21). Burke found such sentiments alarming because he believed that they misinterpreted the character of the French Revolution and therefore underestimated the threat arising from its principles. Additionally, by referring to the revolution in France as “a most glorious revolution”, Burke’s moderate contemporaries interpreted the French Revolution through a British lens, equating it with the English Revolution of 1688 and thus hinting that the more recent event could be conceived as a similar point of reference for British politics (Mercer cited in Corr 6: 93).

In the Commons debate on the army estimates on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1790, Burke took the opportunity to awaken his peers to the perceived dangers of the French Revolution. Indeed, it was unusual for Burke to attend debates on this topic and, in his opening remarks, he admitted that discussing the Revolution was the “the principal cause for which he came down that day” (PR 27: 90). Progressing quickly from the actual subject of the debate to broach his chosen topic, Burke declared that Europe now contained “a great gap, a vast blank, no longer of importance, and that was the space hitherto occupied by France” (PR 27: 89). His first aim in this part of the speech was to highlight the true nature of the new regime in France. Consequently, he repeatedly depicted the French government as a “cruel, blind, and ferocious democracy” which was possessed with a “determination to destroy all order, subvert all arrangement, and reduce every rank and description of men to one common level” (PR 27: 90, 91). From here, he pointed out that the threat to Britain should be conceived not in military terms, as the current debate presupposed, but rather in ideological terms, from the

“probable effects” of the “late dangerously-levelling principles” on the British constitution, where “the House of Commons itself was a species of aristocracy”. Moving to his second aim Burke spoke to the party, expressing his hope that no “set of men” would “think any part of the late transactions in France a fit object for our imitation”. Repeating this warning, though this time implicitly addressing Fox, he similarly hastened against imitating France upon the inducement or advice “of any man, however deservedly great his authority” (PR 27: 92).

Responding, Fox moved to allay Burke’s fears by disavowing democracy as a constitutional model and reiterating his shared commitment to upholding the aristocratic element in the mixed constitution and to a concept of liberty that was inherently tied to the nation’s existing system of government. Moreover, Fox confirmed his animosity towards “any cabal or scheme” which sought to effect “dangerous innovation into our excellent constitution” (PR 27: 95). However, a notable difference between his and Burke’s position in this respect was that Fox seemed not to acknowledge either the threat from, or even the existence of, such groups. By contrast, Burke’s key point was that the democratic ideology had *already* crossed the channel and now loomed large at home, posing a serious threat to the constitution. Furthermore, to Burke’s consternation, Fox restated the aforementioned interpretations of the Revolution which downplayed any suggestion that its principles might somehow prove a threat to the British constitution. For instance, he dismissed the violence which had taken place in France, arguing that “anarchy and confusion” were “incidental to such a revolution” and, crucially, argued that the bloodshed would be justified if it enabled the French people to escape the “severe tyranny” and “yoke of despotism” which characterised the rule of Louis XVI (PR 27: 76-77, 96). A further point of note is the contrast between Burke and Fox’s views on the English Revolution. This is of particular interest because disputes over the

meaning and significance of this event structured political argument throughout the eighteenth-century, hinging around the nature and location of sovereignty. In short, one's interpretation of the English Revolution could be regarded as a yardstick for measuring the extent of one's support for ideas of popular sovereignty. It would be wholly inaccurate to say that Fox's view of 1688 encouraged such notions. Nevertheless, by admitting that the former event was "certainly more parallel to the revolution in France, than [Burke] was willing to allow", he implicitly legitimatised the events in France (PR 27: 96). To this end, his reformist reading of the English Revolution clashed with Burke's own interpretation, which denied that a revolution (or indeed any change) had occurred at this time, and which suggested that 1688 had only "fixed and confirmed" the existing constitution (PR 27: 90). By contrast, Fox asserted the precise opposite: he maintained that 1688 had witnessed "a revolution in our Government", and averred that future constitutional amendments, such as reforming parliamentary representation, were not only permissible but were also necessary (PR 27: 96).

After the exchange between Burke and Fox, Richard Brinsley Sheridan rose to declare that he "differed decidedly" from the former "in almost every word that he had uttered respecting the French Revolution". He towed the prevailing Foxite line, by arguing that revolutionary measures had been essential in France to rid the nation of the "evil" that marked its former "despotic Government", and likewise minimised the constitutional effects of the Revolution by claiming that France had merely amended her constitution (PR 27: 98, 99). In addition to echoing Fox's belief concerning the parallels between the English and French Revolutions, Sheridan also questioned Burke's reading of 1688, asserting that the current constitution had in fact been "obtained" at this time and that the English Revolution had henceforth established their government's "reverence for the rights of man" (PR 27: 98, 100).

Following the debate on the army estimates, Burke regarded Sheridan as an “ardent admirer” of French principles (Corr 6: 452). As a result his political influence, both in relation to Fox and to the wider party, provided a further source of worry. Henceforth viewing Fox and Sheridan as the “two Leaders” of the party, Burke recorded his dismay at “the entire Revolution which has taken place in the party” and maintained that “the Leaders have ever since gone on, and are with all their might going on, to propagate the principles of French Levelling” (Corr 7: 63, Corr 6: 450). As time wore on, he became increasingly distanced from his colleagues and, having announced during his *Speech on Army Estimates* that he was henceforth “separated in politics” from Sheridan, he eventually endured an emotional split from Fox in May 1791 (PR 27: 100; Lock 2006: 371-5). By August 1791 he announced himself “separated from the party” (Corr 6: 336). Burke’s difficulty lay in the fact that most people had been left stupefied by events in France. Confusion reigned across all political groupings, particularly in the ministry, and sure mindedness on either side was regarded with suspicion. To this end, Burke’s vehement and early criticism of the Revolution was perplexing for many, especially to the younger members of his party (Derry 1972: 297, 301). Colleagues, likening the event to the English Revolution, thought Burke was exaggerating the dangers and simply did not understand the sense of urgency which he obsessively tried to drill into them. Indeed, some regarded the French Revolution as already being concluded and thus found Burke’s warning about its far-reaching ideological effects rather bizarre (see, for example, Corr 6: 93 hn). For his part, Burke readily acknowledged the chasm between himself and other parliamentarians, stating;

I have the misfortune totally and fundamentally to differ with that party in constitutional and publick points of such moment, that all

those, on which I have hitherto ever differed from other men and other Parties, are, in comparison, mere toys and Trifles (Corr 6: 275).

However, his awareness of this fact only heightened his belief in the severity of the situation.

### 3.2 Burke's different perception of the issues and his response

Although aware of his colleagues' lack of public support for his views, Burke struggled to properly understand their reactions. This quandary accounts for his offering a variety of explanations for their conduct, ranging from their having adopted French principles, to their differing from him as a result of "mistaken prudence", to their actually agreeing with his assessment of the situation, though not publicly admitting so for fear of occasioning a split in the party and "hurting Fox" politically (Corr 6: 273, 336, 360). However, the root cause of their divergence was arguably a varying perception of the political problems which confronted them. In the early months of 1790 most regarded the French as striving to escape despotism and as attempting to claim an English-style liberty, a view consistently articulated by the party's leaders, Fox and Sheridan, in the Commons (PH 28: 451; PR 27: 96, 100). By opposing this viewpoint, Burke was widely perceived to have performed a political *volte-face*, an accusation which would eventually fuel twentieth-century academics' obsession with the 'Burke-Problem' (for which see Chapter One). Indeed, the presumption (based on his support for the American colonists in the 1770s) that Burke would react favourably to the French Revolution arguably underpinned both Depont's and Thomas Paine's decision to write to Burke, hailing events in France. Further to such beliefs about the nature of the French Revolution, prominent figures amongst the Foxite grouping, either implicitly or explicitly, supported the Dissenters' appeal to natural rights arguments when attempting to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts in March 1790. It can be argued that Burke's

contemporaries adopted such positions on these matters because they regarded each as an issue of participation. As indicated above, it was commonly assumed that the French were participating in the Whig brand of liberty, as bestowed upon England after the Revolution of 1688 (see, for example, PR 27: 95). Likewise, the Dissenters' third repeal attempt was largely considered in terms of their being extended civic and religious equality so that they could participate in the existing political system. In this sense, their claims were viewed in a similar vein to previous reform attempts, such as the petitioning movements of the 1770s or the attempts to improve parliamentary representation in the 1780s. When introducing his motion in 1790 Fox framed it as an issue of "participation", suggesting that to continue to exclude the Dissenters from the "common rights which their fellow-citizens enjoyed" would be "highly unjust and oppressive". Moreover, he disavowed the notion that the Dissenters posed any threat to the existing constitution by drawing a specific comparison between the disestablishmentarian sentiments uttered by Joseph Priestley and previous motions on constitutional reform presented to the Lords and Commons by the Duke of Richmond and William Pitt, respectively (PH 28: 392, 401).

The Foxite MPs looked upon themselves as upholding the Whig tradition. Whilst some, such as Charles Grey, were keen advocates of parliamentary reform, it would be wrong to regard them as political radicals in the mould of, say, Thomas Paine or Richard Price. Consequently, their belief that both of the aforementioned issues could be regarded as a problem of participation is founded upon the accompanying belief that an appeal to either natural rights or the rights of man could be reconciled with support for the aristocratic political system which existed in eighteenth-century Britain. This was precisely the line of argument taken up by both Fox and Sheridan in the Debate on Army Estimates. Upon being challenged by Burke over his lauding the French Revolution, Fox reiterated his view that the

aristocracy were an integral element of Britain's tripartite constitution; if the aristocracy were destroyed, insisted Fox, "the good effect of the whole ... would ... be at an end". Echoing such sentiments, Sheridan openly declared that his support for the rights of man and for the "radically amended" government now operating in France was "consistent with the spirit of the most perfect constitution", that being when the monarch retains "all the powers, dignities, and prerogatives" in a country (PR 27: 95, 99, 100). It would seem that similar beliefs were maintained by those who neither subscribed to the rights based theories nor supported the repeal attempts. Writing to Henry Dundas about the "new doctrines", Burke stated that both the Duke of Portland and Earl Fitzwilliam "hate them as much as I do", though revealed his frustration that neither they, nor the ministry could "be brought to think that there is any danger of the prevalence of such doctrines in England" (Corr 6: 418). By contrast, Burke identified the "daily growth of the French mischief, both at home and abroad" (Corr 6: 273). In this vein, in a letter recounting a conversation with Lord Stormont, Burke told how the Lord saw no danger from Fox's apparent approval of the radical doctrines but instead believed "that the sole danger consists in having the Question of the danger discussed", and thus exposing a split in the opposition (Corr 6: 335). It is also the case that other members who voted against repealing the Test and Corporation Acts perceived the issue as a problem of participation. Debating the second motion for repeal, Lord North noted that the Dissenters were already possessed of toleration and urged MPs to "pause then, and pass not at one step from toleration to participation" (PH 28: 22). In the third repeal debate William Pitt, First Lord of the Treasury, repeated this line of argument, stating that he was not willing to admit to the dissenters "a full and complete equality of participation" (PH 28: 406).

By contrast to his contemporaries, Burke did not regard either the actions of the French or the claims of the Dissenters in terms of a problem of participation. This differing diagnosis of



the political problem proved to be the crux of Burke's dilemma in 1790. Unequivocal in his belief that the democratic underpinnings of appeals to natural rights were incompatible with the existing patrician model of politics, he foresaw both the French idea of liberty and the Dissenters' claims to equality as having dangerous implications. As a result, Burke consistently tried to highlight to contemporaries that the prevalence of such rights-based arguments meant "that the world is threatened with great changes" and strove to convince them to "keep things in their old and safe Course" (Corr 6: 272). His extreme reaction at this time was undoubtedly informed by his previous experiences with extra-parliamentary groups. The Rockinghams had given a platform to such groups in the 1770s, believing that they could manage popular opinion and use it as a political weapon against the crown and the ministry. However, in "playing the popular engines", as Burke had termed it, they underestimated the power of political opinion outside the House and, unable to maintain control over it, they unwittingly aided the call for parliamentary reform. Furthermore, the general election of 1784 had hardened Burke's distrust of the peoples' political judgement and the Gordon riots had offered a shocking example of how susceptible the people were to the advances of populist demagogues and how quickly they could be transformed into a violent mob. These experiences were paralleled in 1790 by the Dissenters' clamour for equality and the events of October 1789 in France. Consequently, by this time, Burke was not only acutely attuned to the risks involved in encouraging or courting extra-parliamentary opinion but he also believed that it was in the best interests of the country to actively diminish the political role of those outside the narrow governing elite.

Burke's prior ordeals certainly informed his assessment of the political landscape in England in 1790. Nevertheless, he drew a crucial distinction between the challenges facing the political establishment in the earlier and later periods. To Burke's mind, by 1790, the nature

of the problem had changed as a result of the ideological threat occasioned by the prevalence of theories championing the rights of man. The notion of inherent equality presumed by these theories was fundamentally at odds with the aristocratic principle and, as such, appealing to or supporting a natural rights argument could not be reconciled with a defence of the existing constitution. It was therefore impossible, he believed, to accommodate either the Dissenters' arguments or the French Revolutionary principles or to regard the problem caused by either as being one of participation. Rather, both supposed the illegitimacy of the existing political system and therefore had to be viewed as prompting a challenge to the constitution. Burke's belief in, first, the pervasiveness of their democratic ideas, and, second, the ease with which public opinion would follow any impulse it received, ultimately added to the severity of the situation and thus exacerbated the perceived threat. His aim, in addition to countering this threat, was to convince his contemporaries of the urgency of the situation. Hence his increasingly shrill speeches to the Commons reiterating the message that would underpin *Reflections*; one cannot hold to an aristocratic conception of politics whilst simultaneously supporting or even tolerating the propagation of natural rights theories. That he struggled, in 1790, to convince Fox *et al* of this point owed to the fact that they did not subscribe to his interpretation of the political problem and therefore did not share his fears concerning the immediacy of the threat to the constitution.

To conclude, this chapter has set out Burke's aristocratic conception of politics and evidenced his perception, first, as to the nature of the ideological threat *circa* 1790, and, second, as to the inadequacy of his contemporaries' response to this threat. Reconstructing Burke's beliefs in this way furnishes us with a means of explaining the vehemence and sheer intensity of the argument in *Reflections*, qualities which are arguably derived from Burke's exasperation at his peers' failure to share his stark assessment of the political situation. Further to this, the

approach adopted here also enables us to grasp the significance of certain arguments and concepts employed by Burke in *Reflections*. In short, some of Burke's key aims in writing this text entailed reasserting the legitimacy of aristocratic Whiggism, which had been questioned by radical authors, and highlighting to his moderate contemporaries the ideological gulf between what he regarded as the English and French variants of Whiggism. Consequently his argument concerning the English Revolution, for instance, is significant precisely because it forms a key element of the ideological bond shared by Burke and his audience. However, since Burke believed that support for, and thus the threat from, French Whiggism was increasing "daily", it can be argued that he wanted to do more than simply remind his contemporaries of their ideological commitments; he also wanted to completely remove any possibility of associating Whiggism with strong notions of popular sovereignty (Corr 6: 273). He thus sought to manipulate the arguments which he was presenting and shift the ideological conventions of Whiggism by emphasising and exaggerating its conservatism, thereby nullifying his opponents' claims and closing off other, less guarded, avenues of discourse. The ensuing chapters of this thesis will focus on Burke's strategies of argument to demonstrate this point, thus explaining his illocutionary intentions in issuing arguments on the English Revolution of 1688, representation, and the French army.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN ENGLAND: EDMUND BURKE'S USES OF 1688

The previous chapter sought to reconstruct Edmund Burke's perception of the key political problems facing Britain in the months leading up to the publication of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. It established that Burke believed that the British constitution faced a serious threat from radicals inspired by the democratic principles underpinning the French Revolution. His party's failure to share his assessment of the situation heightened Burke's alarm and provided him with a motive to engage in a course of action which would meet the radical challenge by mobilising the Whig elite and, where necessary, recalling them to a more conservative position. The plan in both this and the ensuing chapter is to illustrate *how* Burke tailored his arguments in *Reflections* to perform these crucial linguistic acts. The present chapter focuses on Burke's discussion of the meaning and significance of the English Revolution of 1688. This is by no means an arbitrary choice. Many of the major debates in the following century turned upon disputes over the political implications of the Revolution settlement and being able to demonstrate that one's arguments flowed from 'Revolution principles' offered a means of legitimating both conservative and radical projects alike. Considering, more specifically, the immediate context in which *Reflections* was issued: those involved in the early years of the French Revolution held the English event up as a universal revolutionary model, using it to justify their actions; politicians in Britain drew similar comparisons to register their support for the French quest for liberty; and British radicals used

both the centenary celebrations of 1688 and the legitimacy which the French Revolution gained from equating it with 1688 to bolster their demands for reform. Recognising the extent to which interpretations of the English Revolution structured ideological debates one hundred years on forces us to reconsider the role that Burke's treatment of 1688 occupies in *Reflections*. Indeed, given the currency of appeals to 'Revolution principles', it is argued here that this aspect of his work represents one of the most important means by which he sought to affect the contemporary context of British politics. Alternatively put, any attempt to understand Burke's intentions in writing must involve an attempt to understand his uses of 1688.

With this in mind, the first section of the chapter emphasises the centrality of 1688 to eighteenth-century political argument. In particular, it outlines reformist representations of the meaning of the event and situates Richard Price's sermon of 1789 in this prevailing linguistic context. Too often, the Price-Burke debate over the English Revolution is represented as an isolated contest between two individuals; a contest which a plethora of Whig histories have overwhelmingly awarded to Burke. However, by showing that Price was drawing upon an interpretative tradition, I hope to demonstrate the potency of his challenge and to draw out the precise nature of the dilemma which this challenge posed for Burke. The second section of the chapter sets out Burke's response and the third section evaluates this response as an intervention in an existing context of debate. In doing so it eschews assessment of the accuracy of Burke's arguments, a concern which has preoccupied many other commentators. Instead, it seeks to understand what Burke meant by framing his interpretation of 1688 in the way that he did in his *Reflections*. Focusing, first, on Burke's description of James II's demise and the uses to which he puts the right of resistance and, second, on the status which he ascribes to 1688, the chapter highlights a number of key

points. In short, Burke largely adopts an existing conservative discourse on 1688; this discourse renders the Revolution as passive rather than active history, thereby denying its use to those who seek to employ it to transform contemporary politics. Nonetheless, Burke manipulates this conservative discourse by framing it in such a way as to further limit both the accountability of government and the subjects' ability to resist constituted authority. Moreover, although the conservative interpretation of 1688 is designed to divest the Revolution of any significance for future politics, Burke actually invests it with the authority to fix the constitution, thereby ruling out any populist concessions and locking society into its existing arrangements.

## **Section One: The ideological importance of the English Revolution**

### **1.1 The English Revolution and its uses in political argument**

Appealing to evidence from history was one of the most common modes of political argument in the eighteenth-century for Whigs of all ideological shades.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, before Thomas Paine's intervention in the French Revolution debate, a novel argument was invariably regarded as a weak argument and 'innovation' was a pejorative term employed by conservatives to dismiss reformist arguments. Some were hopeful that the early promise shown by events in France would inspire a change in English attitudes, believing that the Revolution might "diminish some of that horror at innovation, which seems so generally to prevail amongst us" (Romilly 1790: 13). However, most seemed keen to uphold the

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<sup>51</sup> Perhaps the best example of this point is the ancient constitution, which was employed by both reformist and conservative authors to buttress their respective arguments. For a discussion of the evolution and uses of theories of the ancient constitution see Hill (1958) and Pocock (1987a).

distinction between reform (understood as an act undertaken with reference to the past) and innovation.<sup>52</sup> The most influential appeal to evidence from history involved justifying one's ideological position by demonstrating that it was somehow founded in 'Revolution principles'. Indeed, the importance of 1688 to the politics of the following century is obvious. Viscount Bolingbroke described the Revolution settlement as a "second magna carta" and almost every major political cleavage in eighteenth-century England turned upon a dispute over its connotations (Bolingbroke cited in Straka 1971: 145).<sup>53</sup> The fact, therefore, that Burke discussed the English Revolution in a book seemingly concerned with a Revolution occurring over one hundred years later in a different country was "neither novel nor antiquated" since "all English Whigs ... were obliged to take a position on just what had been implied by the exile of James and the accession of William and Mary" (Clark 2001: 39). In sum, a variety of studies have shown that the Revolution formed the "basis for the whole political settlement of the eighteenth century" (Dickinson 1976a: 28; cf. Goldie 2006; Pincus 2010; Straka 1971; Wilson 1989).

Although it was commonly agreed that 'Revolution principles' were the means by which the English Revolution of 1688 had been enacted, and most acknowledged the importance of this precedent, there was much debate over what the precedent signified, i.e. what type of political action 'Revolution principles' actually legitimated. The source of this contestation

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<sup>52</sup> During his sermon to the Revolution Society, Richard Price, in aligning the French Revolution to the English example, exclaimed that conservatives might now "call no more (absurdly and wickedly) reformation, innovation" (Price 1991: 196). Ignoring this pronouncement, Edmund Burke made political capital by dissociating the English method of gradual reformation, which proceeds "upon the principle of reference to antiquity", from the radicals' "spirit of innovation", which displays little respect for precedent and "is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views" (Burke 2001: 181, 184; cf. 299-300, 340-1).

<sup>53</sup> The most significant examples in this bracket are the Sacheverell trial, the Bangorian controversy, the Bolingbroke-Walpole divide, the American Revolution, the Regency crisis and the French Revolution debate. In the latter, one combatant noted that "the Revolution of 1688 is regarded by almost every Englishman as a measure conducted with so much courage, temper, and wisdom, and fraught with such infinite utility, in ascertaining and securing the boundaries of our rights, that whatever political tenets can boast the countenance of such an authority will be received with a respect little short of enthusiasm" (Anon. 1791b: 54).

undoubtedly lay in the confusion created by the official explanation for James II's demise. In January 1689, the House of Commons passed a resolution, eventually agreed by the Lords, which stated

That King James the Second, having endeavour'd to subvert the Constitution of the Kingdom, by breaking the Original Contract between King and People; and by the Advice of Jesuits, and other wicked Persons, having violated the Fundamental Laws, and withdrawn himself out of the Kingdom, hath Abdicated the Government, and that the Throne is thereby become Vacant (HPHOC 2: 203).

The syntactical ambiguity seemed equally able to support the idea that James II had been deposed for misrule and the idea that his demise had been voluntarily brought about by his flight to France. Likewise, the notion that the throne had 'become Vacant' could imply that replacing James II with William of Orange constituted electing a king and therefore altering the hereditary status of the monarchy. The significance of this uncertainty is that it enabled conflicting rival interpretations to claim the event. In the ensuing Allegiance controversy, pamphleteers could argue that the Revolution had been effected according to the Whiggish right of resistance and that 'Revolution principles' indicated the popular basis of political power. Alternatively, by focusing on James II's flight, opponents could offer a far more conservative interpretation of events, and, if necessary, could even render the Revolution consistent with Tory doctrines of non-resistance. The specifics of this ideological posturing are discussed below. However, further to its importance as a precedent, it is, at this point, crucial to note the flexibility of the precedent and the notion that future generations could call upon 'Revolution principles' to legitimate both conservative and radical forms of political action.



## 1.2 Radical interpretations of the English Revolution: the dilemma confronting Burke

Having indicated the widespread importance attached to ‘Revolution principles’, the aim in the remainder of this first section is to highlight radical representations of the English Revolution and the uses to which opposition authors put their interpretations of that event. In doing so, the point is not to document the entire history of radical thinking on 1688. Rather, the intention is to move beyond the idea that, in his discussion of the English Revolution, Edmund Burke was simply arguing against Richard Price. In truth, Price was drawing upon a tradition of argument which was widely known and which, to certain minds, offered an acceptable understanding of ‘Revolution principles’ and a convincing assessment of the need to reform existing socio-political arrangements in England. Moreover, Price’s utterances on 1688 carried greater significance in 1789 because it tapped into the authority of the reformist precedent set by the French Revolution, which was at this time similarly interpreted as the reassertion of popular liberties by a suppressed people. By conceiving the Price-Burke debate solely in terms of the immediate combatants, as Frederick Dreyer seems to, we fail to grasp the nature and immediacy of the challenge posed by issuing a radical reading of 1688 in 1789, and we likewise fail to understand why Burke considered it so important to issue a response (see Dreyer 1978).

It is argued that interpretations of ‘Revolution principles’ served as a “crucial building block in the ‘invention’ of a revolutionary tradition of English radicalism” (Wilson 1989: 353). Surveying representations of 1688 in extra-parliamentary political discourse, Kathleen Wilson uncovers a history of readings throughout the eighteenth-century which used the Revolution as a vehicle for asserting popular liberties. Though continually reassessed and mobilised against a variety of different targets, such readings are ultimately aimed at

legitimizing demands for greater popular control over Parliament (Wilson 1989: 351-3). In the early Hanoverian period opposition groups aligned themselves on a Country platform to challenge the regime, or Court, Whigs who were accused of betraying ‘Revolution principles’ by overseeing an increase in executive power which threatened the independence of Parliament.<sup>54</sup> Outlined most notably in Bolingbroke’s *A Dissertation upon Parties*, the English Revolution was reinterpreted as one of many examples of the historic struggle Englishmen have engaged in to protect and maintain their liberties against encroachments from the crown. Conceived in this way, the Revolution served to legitimate Country opposition and likewise justified their call to remove the abuses which now corrupted the political system. Moreover, by arguing that the event secured the role of the popular will in the political process, and thus a more accountable House of Commons, the opposition were able to further critique the perceived retrenchment from these ‘Revolution principles’ (Dickinson 1976a: 36-9; Wilson 1989: 366, 370; cf. Bolingbroke 1735). Although they employed such populist rhetoric, politicians directing the Country platform were often vague about the precise role of ‘the people’ in the political process. Furthermore, the appeal to ‘Revolution principles’ was designed only to validate their critique of their immediate political opponents; consequently any reformist aims were restricted to returning the political situation to the position established by the Revolution settlement (Dickinson 1976a: 40).

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<sup>54</sup> During this period, the pre-Revolution fear of tyranny by a king ruling without Parliament was transformed into a new fear of tyrannical rule being exercised *through* Parliament. The Court Whigs sought to entrench the supreme sovereignty of Parliament through the Septennial Act 1716. In overturning aspects of the Triennial Act 1694, a cherished piece of Revolution legislation, this measure lengthened the potential life of a Parliament from three to seven years thus creating the “effective dictatorship of a single if minimally organized party using as its instrument a parliament so far sovereign that it had prolonged its own duration without reference to the electorate” (Pocock 1985: 239-40). In reality, the Act cemented the power of the executive; the lack of any separation between the executive and legislative branches of government (the king’s ministers sat in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords) enabled the sitting monarch to exercise control of Parliament by inducing Members through the offer of offices in state. Country opposition politicians argued that this use of ‘placemen’ undermined the independence of Parliament and increased Parliamentary corruption (Goldie 2006: 64-78; cf. Dickinson 1976b: 200-1, 206-7; Pocock 1975: 407).

This ambiguity largely disappeared during George III's reign, when a genuinely radical extra-parliamentary discourse flowered. From the 1760s, parliamentary groups such as the Rockingham Whigs continued to assail establishment corruption; however dissident groups out-of-doors often diverged from the mainstream opposition by offering an increasingly critical line, combining their assault on corruption with arguments challenging the sufficiency of the system of representation. Allied to the attack on virtual representation, Wilson notes a revival of contract theory and, crucially for the present purposes, a "proliferation" of radical readings of the English Revolution (Wilson 1989: 377). There were two primary strands to radical thinking on the Revolution in the latter half of the eighteenth-century. Despite still being celebrated for bringing about the expulsion of an arbitrary monarch, many authors began to lament the "flaws in the Revolution system", arguing that "true reformation was never by the ruling party either effected or intended" (Macaulay 1770: 9). To this end the Revolution was considered a missed opportunity, since it had failed to curb the power of executive patronage and, by neglecting to alter the system of representation or to rescind the Test and Corporation Acts, it was thought to have secured only incomplete forms of liberty and toleration (see, for example, Anon. 1788: 13-14; Cartwright 1776: xxiv-v; Laelius 1793: 7-8; Williams 1782: 8-9, 21-2).<sup>55</sup> Rather than seeking a return to the position established by the settlement, dissidents during this later period regarded the Revolution as an unfinished event; nevertheless it is crucial to recognise that, although it ultimately fell short of expectations, the Revolution was an important ideological weapon as, to radicals, it still demonstrated that 'the people' had the power to effect change. Consequently, authors sought to use a populist understanding of 'Revolution principles' as the inspiration for remedying

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<sup>55</sup> One discontented author even went so far as to suggest that it would have been "better to have had no revolution, and to have continued our old race of tyrants, than to see a septennial parliament established under any family whatever" (Sawbridge cited in Reid 1991: 412 n32).

those contemporary grievances left in place by the defective settlement (see, for example, Anon. 1791c: 59; Mackintosh 1791: 335-345; PH 30: 804; Reeves 1795: 23-4).

The idea that 1688 had bestowed the wider nation with political rights was emphasised across the land in the centenary celebrations of 1788. One London based newspaper hailed the Revolution as the “grandest precedent” for “having legalized the natural right of resistance” and, more broadly, the event was commonly revered as an example of the whole nation rising together to resist an oppressive ruler and re-establish the notion that political power essentially resided in ‘the people’ (Wilson 1989: 349, 356).<sup>56</sup> The centenary celebrations conducted by the Revolution Society (the group which bore the brunt of Burke’s wrath in *Reflections*) echoed such sentiments, the abstract of their proceedings of 1788 indicating that the Revolution was to be interpreted as a time when “a tyrant was expelled, and the rights of the people [were] asserted, vindicated and confirmed” (Revolution Society 1789: 14). One year before Richard Price’s effort, the annual sermon celebrating 1688 was delivered by Price’s fellow dissenting minister, Andrew Kippis. Historians are largely correct to suggest that Kippis struck more moderate chords than Price would one year later. However, although mainly concerned with celebrating the Revolution as an expression of liberty, Kippis maintained that the advantages of 1688 had been gained in the interests of the “natural rights of mankind”. Moreover, he pointed to the limited nature of the gains, echoing the suggestions of more radical figures that there was “room and cause for farther improvements in the constitution” and offered a highly critical assessment of the Septennial Act 1716, stating that it was a “manifest breach of the constitution” (Kippis 1788: 28, 37, 30). In reconstructing a context of prevailing argument, we must, in addition to Kippis’ sermon, also

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<sup>56</sup> It is argued that the timing of such national celebrations of liberty provided a significant fillip for both the parliamentary reform movement (support for which had dwindled after Pitt’s motion of 1785 was defeated) and the Dissenters’ attempts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts in 1789 and 1790 (Goodwin 1979: 19, 22).

take note of Joseph Towers' oration, which accompanied the Revolution Society's centenary celebrations, since the latter sought to employ 1688 to far more radical ends.

Whereas Kippis quoted David Hume's unthreatening interpretation of the English Revolution, Towers cited with approval the ideas of radical Revolution era authors such as Algernon Sidney and John Locke, and credited the latter with having established "the rights of men" (Kippis 1788: 39; Towers 1788: 16 n, 27). Rather than focusing on the "mere event", Towers stressed the importance of the political meanings which future generations attached to 1688: thus conceived, the Revolution asserted the "rights of the community"; it demonstrated that political power is delegated from the people and that the king "is accountable to [the people] for the execution of the trust which they have reposed in him". The Revolution had removed a king for defaulting on this trust and English history therefore showed that "opposition to tyranny is not only defensible, but meritorious; and that the welfare and dignity of a nation depend upon their firm and intrepid adherence to the great principles of public freedom, of just and equal liberty" (Towers 1788: 30, 26, 23-4). This version of 'Revolution principles', which would be repeated by Price a year later, stressed ideas of popular sovereignty but, more importantly, it used the Revolution as a vehicle for driving such ideas on into the eighteenth-century and for effecting change to what had been, and remained, an "extremely imperfect" settlement, containing many "DEFECTS". Hence in an explicit critique of the existing constitution, Towers defiantly argued that true attachment to the principles of the Revolution dictated that "we shall be solicitous to REMEDY THOSE DEFECTS, and to engage in every measure that may tend still more to enlarge, to establish, and to confirm, the freedom, and the felicity of our country" (Towers 1788: 22, 24, 24-5).

This critique was echoed in Richard Price's sermon during the Revolution Society's celebrations in 1789, which dwelt on the need to implement a "fair and equal" system of representation so that Englishmen might begin to possess "true liberty". Hammering his point home, Price further argued that "this defect in our constitution [is] so gross and so palpable, as to make it excellent chiefly in form and theory" (Price 1991: 192). Price offered a radical, populist interpretation of 1688, arguing that, at that period, "the rights of the people were asserted, a tyrant expelled, and a sovereign of our own choice appointed in his room". Moreover, in the same way in which Towers had done, he wove his belief in natural rights into an assessment of the future significance of the events of the English Revolution. Thus, the principles on which the Revolution was founded (namely "the right to liberty of conscience in religious matters ... the right to resist power when abused. And ... the right to chuse our own governors, to cashier them for misconduct, and to frame a government for ourselves") bestowed legitimacy upon the monarchy, since the King now owed his crown "to the choice of the people"; this outcome accorded with his fundamental belief in the sovereignty of 'the people' (Price 1991: 189, 189-90, 186).<sup>57</sup> Likewise, Price determined that 'Revolution principles' could serve as "an instruction to the public". The right of resistance, for example, possessed by 'the people' and exercised in 1688, was a means by which the populace had, and thus could again, seek to improve their lot, and, warning of the corruption inherent to government, Price promoted accordingly the need for the public to be "vigilant, ready to take arms, and determined to resist abuses as soon as they begin" (Price 1991: 189, 189-90, 187).

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<sup>57</sup> Price believed that "[a king's] authority is the authority of the community, and the term *Majesty*, which it is usual to apply to him, is by no means his own majesty, but the majesty of the people" (Price 1991: 185-6).

Understood in this sense, Price, like Towers and many others before him, sought to appropriate the English Revolution, and the weight of precedent which it bore and mobilise it one hundred years on to serve his reformist aims. In this dissident discourse the Revolution generated a powerful mode of argument which offered a critique of the existing political arrangements, whilst simultaneously providing prescriptive principles by which one could alter those arrangements. By associating 1688 with ideas of choice and political accountability, radicals could equally infuse the British constitution with such ideas and could therefore point, with increased authority, to the centrality of popular sovereignty. The section below will set out Edmund Burke's response to this discourse. However, before doing so, it is important to note that, further to appealing to the principles of the English Revolution, Richard Price effected a transformation in this radical discourse by attempting to use the French Revolution as an additional catalyst for change in Britain; interpreting its achievements and causes in the same vein as 1688, he reminded his audience of the "favourableness of the present times to all exertions in the cause of public liberty" (Price 1991: 195, cf. 195-6).<sup>58</sup> In his magisterial essay, *The Varieties of Whiggism*, J. G. A. Pocock asks "exactly why", with a plethora of pre-existing idioms, "radicals in England found it necessary to interpret French events as expressing their demands" and moves to highlight the "problem of translation" inherent to those situations when "one asserts that the parameters of a neighboring politics are relevant to, and more significant than, those of his own, yet does not leave his politics to inhabit those to which he refers" (Pocock 1985: 282, 283). This is a fine point, but one which perhaps obscures rather than illuminates attempts to answer the question posed. It is surely of greater importance to emphasise the fact that radicals *did* use the French Revolution to further their domestic ambitions. When we focus on this point and

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<sup>58</sup> Towers, delivering his oration in 1788 had, only in passing, wished "success to all the efforts of the French nation for the recovery of their liberties" (Towers 1788: 34 n).

combine it with the essential fact that they equated events in France with the English example from 1688, then the usefulness of (and, to Burke's mind, the threat inherent in) appealing to the French Revolution becomes clear. Rather than providing different parameters, which are "more significant" than the parameters of English political discourse and political action, the French Revolution, as a supposed copy of the English Revolution, could serve as another, more recent, precedent, thereby affirming the legitimacy of the radicals' lobbying for reform.

## **Section Two: Edmund Burke and the English Revolution**

Price's sermon interpreted 1688 as having provided a set of universal of 'Revolution principles' which could be employed by any nation seeking to reassert their liberties. He argued that this was precisely the action taken by the French and sought to use their example to encourage domestic reformers to make use of the same principles in remedying the perceived defects in the British constitution. This, in itself, was problematic for Burke. However, Burke's difficulties were amplified by the fact that members of the governing elite viewed events in France through an English lens and were thus apt to follow Price's assertion that the French, like the English of 1688, were simply reclaiming their liberties against an arbitrary monarch.<sup>59</sup> Popularising the idea that the French struggle for liberty was being effected according to English Revolution principles involved emphasising the populist strands in Whig ideology, thereby running the risk of both invigorating and legitimating a reformist agenda in domestic politics. Consequently, in *Reflections* it was crucial for Burke to manoeuvre the political elite (his target audience) away from such a position by first

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<sup>59</sup> This idea was elaborated upon in Chapter Two. For a discussion of the impact on the parliamentary opposition of their association with the French Revolution see Derry (1989).



denying Price's interpretation of 'Revolution principles' and dissociating the English from the French Revolution. Burke's second main task was to convince his readers to accept a version of 'Revolution principles' which could be used to counter the reformist discourse; one which deemphasised the populist strands in Whig ideology and legitimated conservative, rather than radical, political action.

### 2.1 Burke's denial of the radical discourse

The particular arrangement of *Reflections* provided a source of great debate amongst Burke's contemporaries.<sup>60</sup> However, it is unquestionably significant that Burke opted to open his text with an extended discussion of both Richard Price's sermon and the principles arising from the English Revolution.<sup>61</sup> Within a few paragraphs, Burke indicated the importance with which he viewed these issues, moving immediately to establish his own attachment to 'Revolution principles' by revealing his membership of a number of clubs "in which the constitution of this kingdom, and the principles of the glorious Revolution, are held in high reverence" and his belief that he was "among the most forward in my zeal in maintaining that constitution and those principles in their utmost purity and vigour" (Burke 2001: 145). Likewise, he shortly emphasised his commitment to the precedent set by the events of 1688, declaring that, in considering constitutional change, we must "take the measure of our rights

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<sup>60</sup> In a short introductory section, Burke apologised for the epistolary format of *Reflections*, which he revealed had originated "in a correspondence between the Author and a very young gentleman at Paris". Having begun in this manner Burke indicated that, upon expanding his text, he "found it difficult to change the form of address" though admitted that "a different plan ... might be more favourable to a commodious division and distribution of his matter" (Burke 2001: 143-4). Thomas Paine famously included a "Miscellaneous Chapter" in his response to *Reflections*, justifying the section by stating that "Mr. Burke's Book is all Miscellany. His intention was to make an attack on the French Revolution; but instead of proceeding with an orderly arrangement, he has stormed it with a mob of ideas tumbling over and destroying one another" (Paine 1791: 124). The importance of the epistolary format to Burke's literary and rhetorical strategies is discussed by F. P. Lock (1985) and Christopher Reid (1985).

<sup>61</sup> Contemporary readers noted how integral the Revolution of 1688 was to Burke's overall argument in *Reflections*, indicating, for example, that Burke "ascertains his premises and draws his conclusions from that period" (Bousfield 1791: 11).

by our exercise of them at the Revolution” (Burke 2001: 169-70, cf. 215). These early moves can be regarded as an attempt to create a rhetorical platform from which Burke could question Price’s arguments and ultimately deny his opponent’s version of ‘Revolution principles’. Indeed, having established his position as an adherent to 1688, and having implicitly suggested himself to be an authority on its political implications, Burke subsequently sought to develop an antithesis between ‘true’ and ‘false’ versions of ‘Revolution principles’, denouncing Price’s assertions as a “gross error of *fact*” which arose from “delusive, gypsy predictions” and containing “fictitious rights” (Burke 2001: 162, 164, 162).

However, since elements of the Whig elite were prepared to accept a reasonably dynamic interpretation of 1688, convincing his audience to deny Price’s principles required further effort than simply labelling the Dissenter’s arguments fabrications.<sup>62</sup> To this end, a second aspect of his attempt to deny Price’s ‘Revolution principles’ involved highlighting the inherent danger of admitting such ideas. “There should be no mistake”, Burke argued in a stark warning to his Parliamentary peers,

those who cultivate the memory of our revolution, and those who are attached to the constitution of this kingdom, will take good care how they are involved with persons who, under the pretext of zeal towards the Revolution and constitution, too frequently wander from their true principles; and are ready on every occasion to depart from the firm but cautious and deliberate spirit which

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<sup>62</sup> During a Parliamentary debate in February 1793, Charles James Fox argued “that the people are sovereign in every state; that they have a right to cashier their governors for misconduct, as the people of this country cashiered James II, not by a parliament, or any regular form known to the constitution, but by a convention speaking the sense of the people; that convention produced a parliament and a king. They elected William to a vacant throne, not only setting aside James whom they had just cashiered for misconduct, but his innocent son. Again, they elected the House of Brunswick, not individually but by dynasty; and that dynasty to continue while the terms and conditions on which it was elected were fulfilled, and no longer. [I] could not admit the right to do all this but by acknowledging the sovereignty of the people as paramount to all other laws” (Fox cited in Cobban 1950: 197).

produced the one, and which presides in the other (Burke 2001: 145-6).

Both the force and target of this instruction were clear; during the centenary celebrations of 1788 the Foxite Whig Club, of which Burke was, at that time, a member, had formed a close association with the Revolution Society – a fact recorded in the latter’s *Abstract* by the Chairman of the Whig Club (and Burke’s political ally), the Duke of Portland (Revolution Society 1789: 17, cf. 9).<sup>63</sup> In developing this point, Burke sought to stress to his audience that there were clear differences between the principles of the English and French Revolutions, that the principles of the latter were ruinous to the British constitution, and that domestic radicals regarded their constitution as “illegitimate and usurped” whilst looking to France “with an eager and passionate enthusiasm” (Burke 2001: 217, cf. 252-3, 175). Portraying the English radicals, who had sought to argue the similarity of the two Revolutions, as “smugglers of adulterated metaphysics”, Burke reiterated his appeal, first made during his *Speech on Army Estimates*, for vigilance, urging that it is “better to be despised for too anxious apprehensions, than ruined by too confident a security” (Burke 2001: 154).

It is undoubtedly the case that Burke interpreted Price’s ‘Revolution principles’ as amounting to a manifesto for overturning the existing constitution and replacing it with arrangements inspired by strong notions of popular sovereignty. Introducing his opponent’s points, Burke focused in particular on Price’s suggestion that King George III “‘is almost the *only* lawful king in the world, because the *only* one who owes his crown to the *choice of his people*’”. Though they may, Burke argued, seek to explain away this claim, the proceedings of the

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<sup>63</sup> Burke would resign from the Whig Club in early 1793, protesting at their position on the French Revolution (Corr 7: 353-5)

Revolution Society amount to a “full explicit declaration, concerning the principle of a right in the people to choose [their monarch]”. Such “doctrines affect our constitution in its vital parts” and, in espousing these ideas, Burke maintained that Price “affirms a most unfounded, dangerous, illegal, and unconstitutional position”, causing a “domestic interest of some moment” in which one must consider “the solidity of the only principle upon which these gentlemen acknowledge a king of Great Britain to be entitled to their allegiance” (Burke 2001: 159, 162, 159, 160). This overarching belief in popular sovereignty (a “full explicit declaration, concerning the principle of a right in the people to choose”) was, to Burke’s mind, grounded in Price’s understanding of ‘Revolution principles’, which, as previously mentioned, emphasised notions of accountability and choice. Spelling this out for his audience, Burke repeated Price’s suggestion that the events of 1688 had cemented the people’s rights,

1. ‘To choose our own governors.’
2. ‘To cashier them for misconduct.’
3. ‘To frame a government for ourselves.’ (Burke 2001: 162).

It has thus far been argued that Burke’s attempt to deny Richard Price’s version of ‘Revolution principles’ included labelling them false and stating that such principles were absolutely incompatible with the British constitution. A third aspect of this strategy involved attempting to mobilise his audience by indicating to them that the specific threat from Price’s interpretation arose from their own inertia.<sup>64</sup> As one commentator correctly notes, Burke regarded Price’s account of 1688 as a “Trojan horse” (Hampsher-Monk 2006: 673-4). By avowing, accepting, or even failing to challenge the radicals’ ‘Revolution principles’, Burke

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<sup>64</sup> This tactic seems to be a direct result of the frustration Burke experienced with his peers’ inability to accept his own interpretation of the present dangers, as outlined in Chapter Two.

maintained that the principle underlying their claim, namely “that a popular choice is necessary to the legal existence of the sovereign magistracy”, would be “overlooked” while George III was seemingly unaffected by it.

In the mean time the ears of their congregations would be gradually habituated to it, as if it were a first principle admitted without dispute. For the present it would only operate as a theory, pickled in the preserving juices of pulpit eloquence, and laid by for future use ... By this policy, whilst our government is soothed with a reservation in its favour, to which it has no claim, the security, which it has in common with all governments, so far as opinion is security, is taken away (Burke 2001: 160).

Failing to act would have grim repercussions. Price’s argument entailed “obvious consequences”, in that it “leaves positive authority in very few of the positive institutions of this country”; it would strike at the legitimacy of every previous king whose title was not held by this means and would therefore question the validity of every Act of Parliament passed during this period (Burke 2001: 172, 172-3). Although, as indicated above, Price had primarily argued for a “fair and equal” system of representation, Burke imputed far more sinister designs to his opponent stating,

if popular representation, or choice is necessary to the *legitimacy* of all government, the house of lords is, at one stroke, bastardized and corrupted in blood ... The case of the crown is altogether as bad. In vain the crown may endeavour to screen itself against these gentlemen by the authority of the establishment made on the Revolution. The Revolution which is resorted to for a title, on their system, wants a title itself. The Revolution is built, according to their theory, upon a basis not more solid than our present formalities, as it was made by an house of lords not representing any one but themselves; and by an house of commons exactly such as the present, that is, as they term it, by a mere ‘shadow and mockery’ of representation (Burke 2001: 215)

Inaction was no longer an option. An urgent response was imperative; “if men are not shamed out of their present course, in commemorating the fact, [they] will cheat many out of the principles, and deprive them of the benefits of the Revolution they commemorate” (Burke 2001: 222). To engender the desired response from his audience Burke had to persuade them to accept his own version of ‘Revolution principles’, which could be used to counter the radical discourse.

## 2.2 Burke’s ‘Revolution principles’

Importantly, as with his denial of Price’s arguments, Burke built his interpretation of ‘Revolution principles’ upon a rhetorical platform, emphasising both the obviousness and the conventionality of his treatment of the meaning and significance of 1688. To this end, he prefaced his remarks with the suggestion that one would have to be “completely ignorant of our history” so as not to agree with what would follow, and later declared that he would previously have been “ashamed to overload a matter, so capable of supporting itself, by the then unnecessary support of any argument”.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore he openly proclaimed that his arguments carried widespread acceptance, assuring the reader that “I do not aim at singularity. I give you opinions which have been accepted amongst us, from very early times to this moment, with a continued and general approbation” (Burke 2001: 165, 263). The debate can therefore *already* be regarded as an intellectual tussle over ‘Whiggism’.<sup>66</sup> Price and Joseph Towers considered 1688 as an expression of popular political power and

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<sup>65</sup> Burke also used this rhetorical device to avoid enquiring too closely into the events of 1688, defensively stating that it would be “to repeat a very trite story, to recall to [his audience’s] memory all those circumstances which demonstrated that their accepting King William was not properly a *choice*” (Burke 2001: 165).

<sup>66</sup> Burke continued the debate over Whiggism by developing a contrast between “new” and “old” forms of the ideology in his *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791). For information on the various differences between the key protagonists during this period see Gregory Claeys’ *The French Revolution Debate in Britain* (2007: 25-32, 99-117).

bestowed their ‘Revolution principles’ with the authority of John Locke. By contrast, Burke denied any popular involvement; it was the “great men who influenced the conduct of affairs” in 1688 and “the wisdom of the nation” who procured the settlement. Moreover, Burke leant on the authority of establishment Whigs such as William Blackstone and, in a dismissive retort, declared that, although his opponents “may value themselves as much as they please upon their whig principles”, he himself “never desire[d] to be thought a better whig than Lord Somers: or to understand the principles of the Revolution better than those by whom it was brought about” (Burke 2001: 177, 164, 182, 168). Burke’s appeal to Whig grandees is connected with the aforementioned antithesis he drew between “true” and “false” ‘Revolution principles’. By contrast to the “gross error of fact” described by Price (and also to Towers’ neglecting the “mere event”) Burke located his understanding of the significance of 1688 in contemporary behaviour and records; “we must recall their erring fancies to the *acts* of the Revolution which we revere, for the discovery of its true *principles*”.<sup>67</sup> In this regard, the Declaration of Right and the Act of Settlement were held to evidence the “unerring, unambiguous oracles of Revolution policy”, which, in short, meant securing and maintaining “both an hereditary crown and an hereditary allegiance” (Burke 2001: 163, 164, 174, cf. 166).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Surveying the rhetorical power of *Reflections*, F. P. Lock notes Burke’s use of such documentary evidence, which, following Aristotle, he terms “‘inartificial’ proofs”. Lock argues that Burke’s use of contemporary French documents is of greater significance than his use of documents relating to the English Revolution, dismissing the latter as being of “less importance”. This point seems debatable. Whereas the French documents are used to portray Burke as an authority on France and to indicate the validity of his views on the French Revolution (Lock is impressed by the “considerable study and research” displayed in the “range and variety of primary sources that Burke actually cites”), his use of English “‘inartificial’ proofs” is surely designed to achieve similar aims (regarding 1688) and yet *also* to convince his audience to follow a particular course of political action against domestic radicals (Lock 1985: 101-3). In this vein, Burke portrays documents dating across centuries of English history as coherent narrative evidencing his ideological conception of Englishness and its fundamental incompatibility with the democratic ideas pushed by his opponents. On Burke’s attempt to create a linguistic representation of Englishness see Steven Blakemore (1984: 287-8).

<sup>68</sup> The Declaration of Right asserted the subjects’ constitutional rights and declared William and Mary as joint monarchs. It was restated in statutory form in December 1689 through the Bill of Rights. The Act of Settlement 1701 secured the inheritance to the throne of Queen Anne and her descendants.

Burke thus countered Price's assertion that the Hanoverian throne derived its legitimacy from popular choice by suggesting that contemporary MPs and Peers had been acutely aware of the dangers of introducing such a principle. Consequently, the English Revolution had simply witnessed a continuation of the hereditary principle which had prevailed throughout history (Burke 2001: 167, 174-5). Nevertheless, in associating 1688 with maintaining the hereditary principle, it was impossible for Burke to ignore the bare facts: the Revolution of 1688 had involved replacing King James II with his son-in-law, William of Orange, whose only claim to the throne was through his wife, James II's daughter, Mary. Hence he had to admit this atypical transfer of the throne; "unquestionably there was at the Revolution, in the person of King William, a small and a temporary deviation from the strict order of a regular hereditary succession". This "temporary solution of continuity" had been allowed because of the exceptional circumstances in which the nation found itself. James II had been a "bad king". Upon his demise, Burke reasoned that the nation wished neither to recall him, nor to expose the country's religion, laws and liberties to the "peril" of another Civil War. This being the case, "their accepting King William", he continued, "was not properly a *choice* ... it was an act of *necessity*, in the strictest moral sense in which necessity can be taken" (Burke 2001: 164, 165, 173, 165).<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> William's succession, Burke acknowledged, had carried the crown "somewhat out of the line in which it had before moved". However, although the *legislature* had "altered the direction", Burke sought to place this statute law succession on a similar footing to the traditional common law succession, arguing that it operated "on the principles of the common law" and likewise claiming that both descriptions of law were "of the same force", being derived "from the common agreement and original compact of the state". In sum, both forms were, for Burke, "equally binding on the king, and people too, as long as the terms are observed, and they continue in the same body politic" (Burke 2001: 170, 169). By framing his interpretation so, Burke sought to explain away those aspects of 1688 which seemed contrary to the operation of a hereditary monarch, whilst simultaneously preserving the idea that the legitimacy of the monarchy derived from the hereditary principle, rather than the principle of popular choice. In a Whiggish concession he therefore admitted the contractual beginnings of the state. Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise that Burke's use of the social contract is descriptive, rather than authoritative; it bows to the antiquity of the common law and merely serves to show that, while society continues "in the same body politic" (which Burke maintained it had post 1688), the people are bound to obey the monarch; in short, allegiance is due on the same terms as were first established.



In describing the substitution of William for James, Price had argued that “the rights of the people were asserted” and “a tyrant expelled”. This action had, according to Price’s version of ‘Revolution principles’, secured the popular right to cashier monarchs for “misconduct” (Price 1991: 189). By interpreting James II’s demise as an expulsion and claiming that this action had established a precedent, or right in the people, Price used 1688 to introduce notions of government accountability and popular sovereignty, furnishing the people with a highly useable right of resistance. Wise to these implications of Price’s reading of the Revolution, Burke sought to counter his opponent by diminishing ideas of deposition. He admitted that James II had been an arbitrary monarch and used the Commons’ resolution (see above) to demonstrate that the Convention Parliament had charged him accordingly with “a multitude of illegal overt acts” which resulted in the monarch having “broken the *original contract* between king and people”. However, in explaining James II’s departure, Burke relied not upon the potency of the contract, but upon the aforementioned ambiguity of the Commons’ resolution, suggesting that it “implied the abdication of king James”. Subsequently referring to the “vacant crown”, Burke suggested an unintentional outcome, comparing the Revolution of 1688 with the Restoration since, at both periods, “England found itself without a king” (Burke 2001: 177, 176, 165, 170, cf. 173, 177).

Having corrected his interpretation of the events surrounding James’ exit, Burke then moved to question Price’s understanding of the significance of this aspect of the English Revolution. Attacking his antagonist’s use of the term ‘misconduct’, Burke argued that the Revolution had been grounded upon “no such light and uncertain a principle”; indeed, “no government”, he maintained, “could stand a moment, if it could be blown down with any thing so loose and indefinite as an opinion of *misconduct*”. Rather James II’s conduct had occasioned an “extreme emergency” and the Revolution had been “an act of necessity”, a “grave and over-

ruling necessity” undertaken “with infinite reluctance” (Burke 2001: 177, 169, 165, 177). According to Burke, this “act of necessity” held limited practical significance for future generations. Invoking again the authority of those involved in the event, Burke outlined how, by passing the Triennial Act 1694 and by extending the applicability of impeachment, Whig grandees had sought to “lighten” the powers of the crown, rendering it “almost impracticable” for another monarch to act as James II had. They had thereby intended 1688 as “a parent of settlement, and not a nursery of future revolutions” (Burke 2001: 177-8). This being the case, Price’s idea that one could now “cashier” governments for their “misconduct” was wide of the mark as, for Burke, the Revolution had not altered the fact that government was fundamentally unaccountable.

Our constitution knows nothing of a magistrate like the *Justicia* of Arragon; nor any court legally appointed, nor of any process legally settled for submitting the king to the responsibility belonging to all servants. In this he is not distinguished from the commons and the lords; who, in their several public capacities, can never be called to an account for their conduct (Burke 2001: 180).

Carrying this notion further, Burke argued that the very idea of “cashiering kings” was a concept which stood outside the remit of the constitution. Although he admitted that “the punishment of real tyrants is a noble and awful act of justice”, Burke soberly reminded his audience that this action invariably involved the use of force and, consequently, must be considered “a case of war, and not of constitution”. To this end, he described the English Revolution as having been obtained “by a just war, in which the only case in which any war, and much more a civil war, can be just. ‘*Justa bella quibus necessaria*’” (Burke 2001: 245, 180). Since the Revolution had witnessed almost unimaginably extreme circumstances, the

events during this period could not, Burke implored, be fashioned into principles or considered as rights which could be called upon to remedy one's dissatisfaction with, for example, the system of representation. Rather, the notion of cashiering those in power

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 portion to a distempered state (Burke 2001: 180-1).

Burke therefore argued, by contrast to Price, that 1688 implied no fundamental changes to the British constitution; it had been effected "without a decomposition of the whole civil and political mass". Those changes which had been undertaken were targeted at the "peccant" part of the constitution and had merely "regenerated the deficient" element. The Revolution had thus been enacted according to the two principles of "conservation and correction". Rather than having extended or established popular political rights, Burke portrayed the event as a rearguard action which had simply protected that which was already possessed; it was, he noted, undertaken "to preserve our *antient* indisputable laws and liberties, and that *antient* constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty" (Burke 2001: 170, 181). Conceived in this way 1688 lost much of the potency ascribed to it by the radical interpretation. Instead it became subsumed under the prescriptive auspices of the ancient

constitution. “Their whole care”, at that period, “was to secure the religion, laws, and liberties, that had been long possessed”. Evidencing this point by quoting from the Bill of Rights, Burke further hailed the nation’s liberties which he dated, not to 1688, but beyond even those ancient statutes such as the Magna Charta and back to “the still more antient standing law of the kingdom”. Demonstrating England’s “powerful prepossession towards antiquity”, Burke explicitly argued that

we wished at the period of the Revolution, and do wish now, to derive all we possess as *an inheritance from our forefathers*. Upon that body and stock of inheritance we have taken care not to inoculate any cyon alien to the nature of the original plant (Burke 2001: 183, 182, 181).

In sum, Burke sought to convince his Whig audience by stressing his own attachment to the principles of the English Revolution. However, he offered a very different reading of the meaning and significance of the event to that given by Richard Price and other radicals. Highlighting the supposed falsity and sinister motives underlying Price’s version of ‘Revolution principles’, Burke represented the Revolution as a continuation of England’s ancient constitution; in doing so, he emphatically argued that it had been an “act of *necessity*”, undertaken in an “extreme emergency”. It had occasioned no changes to the essential rights of the populace and had likewise done nothing to alter the prescriptive, hereditary basis upon which the legitimacy of the monarchy was founded. Consequently, Burke maintained, 1688 could not serve as an authoritative example to legitimate domestic political reform, nor could it serve as a revolutionary model to justify the French Revolution. He argued that no such precedent had been envisaged or created, stating that the Parliament of 1688 had thrown a “politic, well wrought veil over every circumstance ... which might

furnish a precedent for any future departure from what they had then settled for ever”. Indeed, the Declaration of Right and Act of Settlement equally illustrated “how totally adverse the wisdom of the nation was from turning a case of necessity into a rule of law” (Burke 2001: 166-7, 164). Further to not having created a reformist precedent, Burke suggested that the few changes, designed to “lighten” the powers of the crown, had in fact perfected the constitution. As a result, rather than clamouring for additional change, the people of England “look upon the frame of their commonwealth, *such as it stands*, to be of inestimable value”. Although limited reformation “possibly may be made”, the form of the constitution had effectively been settled; the Declaration of Right, Burke stated, “is the cornerstone of our constitution, as reinforced, explained, improved, and in its fundamental principles for ever settled” (Burke 2001: 175, 181, 163). To a large extent then, Burke treated 1688 as providing a constitutional full stop; by replacing James II with William and Mary, the actors of 1688 thus preserved an “unbroken unity” in the hereditary legitimacy of the monarchy and thereby “preclude[d] a choice of the people for ever”. More than this though, he imputed a binding quality to the Revolution of 1688: “if ever there was a time favourable for establishing the principle, that a king of popular choice was the only legal king, without all doubt it was at the Revolution. Its not being done at that time is a proof that the nation was of opinion it ought not to be done at any time”; ultimately, “so far is it from being true, that we acquired a right by the Revolution to elect our kings, that if we had possessed it before, the nation did at that time most solemnly renounce and abdicate it, for themselves and for all their posterity for ever” (Burke 2001: 174, 165, 167-8).

Having set out Burke’s answer to the questions posed by the radical interpretation of 1688, the remainder of the chapter will attempt to grasp the character of his response by situating Burke’s arguments in the prevailing linguistic contexts of the late seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries. In particular, it will focus, first, on Burke's description of James II's demise and the uses to which he puts the right of resistance, and, second, on the status which he ascribes to the Revolution; i.e. his depiction of it as a continuation of the ancient constitution, his denying that it can operate as a political precedent, and his accrediting it with a binding quality.

### **Section Three: Determining the status of Edmund Burke's uses of the English Revolution**

#### **3.1 Scholars' representations of Burke's reading of the English Revolution**

Before delving into the wider context, it is important to review modern assessments of Burke's discussion of the English Revolution. Such scholarship arguably falls into two categories, each of which is influenced by Burke's representation of his own arguments. As indicated above, Burke contrasted his understanding of the "true principles" of the English Revolution with Richard Price's 'false' interpretation, which he portrayed as amounting to a "gross error of *fact*" (Burke 2001: 175, 162). He presented his version of the event as though he were merely reiterating hitherto uncontested assumptions, even suggesting that Price's 'Revolution principles' were unfamiliar ("wholly alien to our soil") and stating that he would previously have been "ashamed to overload a matter, so capable of supporting itself, by the then unnecessary support of any argument" (Burke 2001: 175). The first identifiable category of scholarship therefore seeks to argue either the accuracy or inaccuracy of Burke's treatment of the Revolution. In this vein, one group of commentators has (unsurprisingly, given their political leanings) followed and confirmed Burke's take. For Peter J. Stanlis, the

interpretative task is to flesh out Burke's reading of 1688 and "to analyze whether it is valid, in the light of modern scholarship". Upon doing so, Stanlis asserts that it was the "standard" Whig interpretation, concluding that it was Burke's, not Price's, understanding of 1688 that was "correct". In short, Burke's treatment of the Revolution was "far more accurate and valid" than many historians have acknowledged (Stanlis 1991: 216, 243, 248, 249; cf. Kirk 1990a; Watson 1990). The flipside of this approach is to attempt to prove that Burke's account is in fact strewn with errors. Thus Frank O'Gorman has denounced Burke's "unrealistic" chronicling of the continuities in British history, further stating that "Burke believed – quite wrongly – that the nature of the British constitution had been unchangeably settled at the time of the Glorious Revolution" (O'Gorman 1973: 140, 129). In a revisionist study characterising the English Revolution as the "first modern revolution", Steven Pincus blames Burke for laying the foundations of the modern view of the event, which incorrectly regards it as an act "of recovery and conservation rather than one of innovation". Burke is accordingly chastised for attempting "to account for the resistance against James II's tyranny, rather than [seeking] to explain and detail the revolutionary consequences of 1688-89" (Pincus 2010: 27, 26, 25).

When introducing Richard Price's text in *Reflections*, Burke commented that few sermons "have ever breathed less the spirit of moderation" and likewise depicted the Revolution Society as fanatics, professing "principles of extremes". By comparison, he presented himself as being in the "middle", "between the despotism of the monarch and the despotism of the multitude" and as advancing views which had "been accepted amongst us, from the very early times to this moment" (Burke 2001: 157, 223, 328, 291, 263). The second category of scholarship investigating Burke's arguments on the English Revolution has, to a large extent, accepted this self-penned description of the status of Burke's beliefs. Indeed, J.

C. D. Clark echoes Burke's own words by defining *Reflections* as Burke's "agonised attempt to hold together a middle ground". Although his "Whig orthodoxy" was obscured by the sharply divided debate of the 1790s, Clark maintains that Burke offered a "mainstream Whig reading of 1688", distinct both from Tory assertions of indefeasible hereditary right and the radical idea that James II had been deposed (Clark 2001: 97, 41). To this end, J. G. A. Pocock similarly contends that the "the reading of the Revolution which Burke gives in the *Reflections* was orthodox, not reactionary" (Pocock 1987: xiii).

The problems with such scholarship derive from commentators' readiness to assess Burke's arguments on terms set by Burke himself. This should perhaps not come as a surprise: *Reflections* was intended to persuade; it was an "overtly rhetorical" text which "purport[ed] ... to describe and interpret the real world" (Lock 2000: 19). However, by following Burke's rhetoric and limiting our investigation to confirming the accuracy (or otherwise) of his treatment of the English Revolution, we are bound to overlook the ideological import of his arguments.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, without studying how other authors characterised the meaning and significance of 1688 and without understanding the precise forms of political action that could be performed by employing certain terms in one's discussion of the event, it is unlikely that we will be able to deduce the proper status of Burke's use of the argument or the linguistic acts he performs in presenting it in such a way. As Quentin Skinner neatly surmises, we must instead ask "what range of speech-acts can standardly be performed by a given writer when he makes use of a given set of concepts or terms" (Skinner 1988b: 107). With this in mind, the ensuing sections proceed by surveying the uses of particular components of Burke's interpretation of 1688 in order to grasp how contemporaries would

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<sup>70</sup> O'Gorman evidences this very point when he suggests that Burke "lacked the detachment" to be a reliable critic of the French Revolution (O'Gorman 1973: 141).



have understood his arguments and to uncover the types of political action that he was performing in framing his arguments in the manner that he did.

### 3.2 *Burke's uses of the right of resistance*

To recover what acts could be performed by the use of certain terms it is necessary, first, to return to the conference between the managers for the mainly Whig Commons' and their Tory counterparts from the Lords', and, second, to consider the subsequent pamphlet debate so that we might uncover how those terms were initially employed in explaining and justifying the English Revolution.

#### 3.2.1 *Seventeenth-century readings of the English Revolution*

Studying the conference debates of February 1689, it is apparent that neither the Lords nor the Commons wanted James II to return to the throne. However, the debates reveal key interpretative differences over how to account for James II's demise, differences which were born from the Lords' concerns about the political implications of the Commons' cryptic resolution.<sup>71</sup> Central to the Lords' fears was the idea that the resolution would introduce principles of choice and accountability into the monarchy. This notion underpinned their dissatisfaction with the Commons' conceiving the throne to be "vacant" upon James II's departure. Enquiring "how far the Vacancy is to extend", the Lords were convinced that installing William as King would set a precedent for rendering the monarchy elective; "Our breaking through the Line now, by a Choice out of the lineal Course, is an Alteration and a

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<sup>71</sup> It will be recalled that the resolution stated "That King James the Second, having endeavour'd to subvert the Constitution of the Kingdom, by breaking the Original Contract between King and People; and by the Advice of Jesuits, and other wicked Persons, having violated the Fundamental Laws, and withdrawn himself out of the Kingdom, hath Abdicated the Government, and that the Throne is thereby become Vacant" (HPHOC 2: 203).

Precedent: And why may not others take the same Liberty we do? And will not that make [the throne] perpetually elective?” (HPHOC 2: 232; 219). Moreover, they questioned “how comes the Vacancy and the Supply to be devolved upon the People”, further querying “by what Authority” Parliament was able to divert the course of succession. In explaining James II’s demise, the Lords stressed his withdrawing from the kingdom, rather than his misrule. Clearly uncomfortable with contractual language employed in the resolution, the Earl of Clarendon testified that, “this breaking the Original Contract is a Language that hath not been long used in this Place: nor known in any of our Law-books, or public Records. It is sprung up, but as taken from some late Authors, and those none of the best received” (HPHOC 2: 219, 237, 218).

In reply the Commons’ managers were steadfast in their commitment to contractual language. Thomas Lee, for example, put it to the Lords, whether “upon the *Original Contract* there were not a Power preserved in the Nation, to provide for itself in such Exigencies” (HPHOC 2: 246). It is plain that the Commons’ representatives had no wish to alter the fundamental nature of the constitution. Nevertheless, their loose language, which hinted that they believed William’s succession to be an election, sat uneasily with the Lords.<sup>72</sup> By contrast to the managers from the Upper Chamber, the Commons’ managers explained the termination of James II’s reign by emphasising his maladministration (HPHOC 2: 213). This point is reflected in the final resolution, which reads like a charge sheet outlining the crimes committed by the monarch. Crucially, after recounting a litany of offences, the resolution declares that James II “hath Abdicated the Government” (HPHOC 2: 203). In an important

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<sup>72</sup> Upon expressing a desire not to make the throne “perpetually elective”, Sergeant Maynard caused much consternation amongst the Lords (HPHOC 2: 214; for the Lords’ concerns see 219, 233). Another of the Commons’ managers declared election to be “the only way left us to provide for our Settlement” and rebuked the dithering of the Lords thus; “use what words you will, *fill up*, *nominate*, or *elect*, it is the thing we are to take care of, and it is high time it were done” (HPHOC 2: 244, 242-3).

discovery, Thomas P. Slaughter has indicated the “profound tensions and ambiguities” surrounding seventeenth-century meanings of the word ‘abdicate’ (Slaughter 1981: 329).<sup>73</sup> Further to conveying an act undertaken by a departing monarch, the term could also be used in a transitive sense to express something that was *done to the king*; in short Slaughter usefully highlights the concept of a “forced abdication”, which was commensurate with a deposition from sovereignty (Slaughter 1981: 325-9). It would seem that, in their resolution, the Commons had intended to use the term in this particular sense to denote the forfeiture of office. As the future Lord Somers (serving in 1689 as a manager for the Commons) explained,

the Word abdicate doth naturally and properly signify entirely to renounce, throw off, disown, relinquish any thing or Person, so as to have no farther to do with it; and that whether it be done by express Words or in Writing ... or, by doing such Acts as are inconsistent with the holding or retaining of the thing; which the Commons take to be the present case, and therefore made choice of the Word abdicate, as that which they thought did, above all others, most properly express that Meaning” (HPHOC 2: 209, cf. 214).<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Slaughter surmises that abdication, “was an act understood by Englishmen to be either expressed or implied, the result of force or voluntary renunciation, and either permanent by its very nature or subject always to the capriciousness of power and war” (Slaughter 1981: 329).

<sup>74</sup> The quest to define the nature of the official explanation of James II’s demise has preoccupied historians. In the eighteenth-century, both David Hume and Catherine Macaulay were agreed that the Whigs had engaged in a conservative compromise (Hume 1757: 439-443; Macaulay 1763-83: 292-334). T. P. Slaughter’s reassessment of the Parliamentary debates was provoked by J. P. Kenyon’s suggestion that ‘abdicated’ was the “key word” which revealed the conservative nature of the resolution, for “if James had abdicated, then his previous conduct, though historically suggestive, was not directly relevant, and the reference to the original contract was merely descriptive” (Kenyon 1974: 47). Slaughter’s evidence highlighting the advantages occasioned by the Whigs’ selection of the term abdicate (which had a dual meaning) draws similar conclusions to those reached in the present study; namely that many Whig MPs wished to “renounce” (to adopt Lord Somers’ phrase) King James II for his maladministration, but were conscious of the need to carry their more conservative and Tory colleagues with them for the sake of reaching a settlement (for Somers’ use of this term see HPHOC 2: 209). To this end, it was integral to the political compromise that ‘abdicate’ could also be understood as an act undertaken by James II which led to his renouncing the throne of his own volition. Slaughter, however, pushes his analysis too far and misreads the debates when he attempts to portray the Lords as objecting to the term abdication “because it did not *strongly enough* portray resistance and the relationship between despotism and James’s breaking of the original contract”. John Miller’s critical response to this aspect of Slaughter’s article thus seems correct (Slaughter 1981: 332-3; Miller 1982).

Confirming this point, and likewise their difference of opinion, the Lords' managers indicated that they were aware of the sense in which the Commons employed the term, Bishop Turner of Ely acknowledging that "it seems the Commons do not draw the word abdicated from [James II's] withdrawing himself out of the Kingdom" (HPHOC 2: 215).

Although the conference eventually resulted in compromise from both sides (this is best evidenced in the ambiguity of the resolution and in the use of an ambiguous term such as abdicate, which could potentially satisfy all parties) it is important to note that the Whiggish Commons' managers were keen to highlight James II's misrule and subsequent forfeiture of the crown, whereas the mainly Tory Lords stressed his withdrawal, thus minimising ideas of resistance and accountability. Upon the crowning of William and Mary, the Convention Parliament passed an Act requiring all civil and ecclesiastical office holders to take a new oath of allegiance, swearing themselves to the present monarchs. Although the majority acquiesced, this period initiated the Allegiance controversy, a vast debate in which authors across the nation "ceased to exhort, speculate, and offer constitutional projects, and began to justify, condemn, or explain" for, notwithstanding the practical reasons for adhering to the Revolution "the legal, moral and philosophical grounds had also to be established" (Goldie 1980: 476, 477). Many of the themes which had occupied the Parliamentarians now spilled over into what was hitherto one of the most involving debates the country had ever witnessed.<sup>75</sup> To this end, a key question underpinning the pamphlet war turned upon

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<sup>75</sup> In a valuable bibliographic study of the Allegiance controversy, Mark Goldie documents a "self-contained genre" of publications produced between 6<sup>th</sup> February 1689 and the end of 1694 and constituting 192 works. However, Goldie lists only those which were "*substantially* concerned to vindicate or attack the constitutional, philosophical, or moral legitimacy of allegiance to the Revolution", i.e. those which dealt specifically with doctrines of obligation. Further to this figure, he estimates that, for example, of the two-thousand titles published in 1689, "roughly two-thirds was literature connected with the Revolution". Dividing the titles according to ideological affiliation, Goldie labels eighty-nine as being Whig contributions, fifty as Tory and fifty-three as jacobite (Goldie 1980: 477, 478, 484). Lois G. Schwoerer has added to Goldie's overall total by identifying approximately ten further pamphlets on resistance; these appeared during the autumn and winter of 1688-9 (Schwoerer 1993: 233 n4).

accounting for James II's demise; essentially, combatants were keen to determine whether the English revolution "had been an act of resistance to constituted authority, and if so, was such resistance in special cases justified, notwithstanding the non-resistance oath of 1661, and its subsequent endorsement by the leaders of Church and State right up to 1688" (Kenyon 1974: 43-4; cf. Schwoerer 1993: 232). To legitimate their positions, authors appealed to one or more of six broad arguments: a contractual right of resistance; a *de facto* possession argument; James II's abdication (in the sense of his withdrawing); William's right of conquest; Providence; and resistance *in extremis*, occasioned by necessity (Goldie 1980: 488-90). Authors commonly invoked multiple arguments, employing a "blunderbuss technique" to increase the effectiveness of their case (Kenyon 1977: 22). However, since the Revolution raised such complex constitutional issues, the use of certain arguments signified much about the terms upon which one was prepared to accept what had happened.

It will be remembered that, in describing the English Revolution, Edmund Burke recalled the Commons' resolution which stated that James II had broken the contract between king and people. However, he tapered the potency of this theoretical device by likewise stressing that, in 1688, "England found itself without a king", just as it had at the Restoration. Deemphasising ideas of resistance and government accountability, he characterised the period as an "extreme emergency", further suggesting that the Revolution had been obtained "by a just war" and had therefore been "an act of *necessity*, in the strictest moral sense in which necessity can be taken". To Burke's mind, the event held limited significance for future generations. Resistance to a sovereign power was a matter which remained "wholly out of the law; a question ... of probable consequences, rather than positive rights" and one could barely imagine the extreme circumstances in which such issues became relevant (Burke 2001: 170, 177, 165, 180).

In the Allegiance crisis of 1689-94 Whig authors were, in the main, concerned to develop contractual theories of resistance which could justify and explain recent happenings (Schwoerer 1993: 233).<sup>76</sup> Within the broad spectrum of Whig ideology, the more radical authors emphasised the popular basis of political power and argued that James II had been forcibly deposed (see, for example, Blount 1689: 10, 11).<sup>77</sup> They appealed almost exclusively to contractual resistance, conceiving the contract either in philosophical or constitutional terms (Höpfel and Thompson 1979: 940-3). Some used this device to indicate a subject's natural right to resist, the most famous example of which is John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* (Locke 1980). However it was more common to support one's case by evidencing historical examples of contractual resistance.<sup>78</sup> Any appeal to contractual arguments had radical potential, since it involved making 'the people' (variously defined) the ultimate repository of political power. Consequently, many of the more cautious Whig authors were reluctant to rely solely upon such arguments and instead also justified James II's departure by citing, for instance, his flight from the throne; the notion of Providential delivery; the idea that William had conquered James II; and a Hobbesian type argument suggesting that William's ability to offer protection legitimated his rule (see for example, Allix 1689: 16; Anon. 1689a: 2; Anon. 1689e: 11; Harrison 1689: 2). Nonetheless, it is

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<sup>76</sup> It should not be assumed that such theories were precise or unproblematic. Indeed, Schwoerer indicates that they were "richer and more complex" than is often acknowledged and that contract theories differed according to "intellectual and ideological tensions" (Schwoerer 1993: 233).

<sup>77</sup> One of the most apparent examples of an author hailing notions of popular sovereignty is to be found in John Milton's *Pro Populo Adversus Tyrannum*, which was originally issued (under an alternative title) in 1650 to justify the uprising against Charles I. In its now updated form, the text exclaimed that "the People as oft as they shall judge it for the best, either chuse him, or reject him, retain him, or depose him, though no *Tyrant*, merely by the Liberty and Right of free-born Men, to be Govern'd as seems to them best. This, though it cannot but stand with plain reason, shall be made good also by Scripture" (Milton 1689: 10-11).

<sup>78</sup> Thus, for one author, Richard II and Edward II had suffered "formal Deposals" for their breach of contract (Anon. 1691a: 13). After reviewing the cases of previous monarchs, another surmised that "according to the *English* constitution, a person may *forfeit* his *Regal Rights*, and cease *de jure* to be *King*; and that according to the *antient Statutes* and *irreprovable Usages* of this Country, the *Nobles* and *Commons* of England may *remove* such a person from the *Government* when *necessary* to prevent a *general ruine* otherwise *inevitable*" (Masters 1689: 18).

important to note that these arguments were used *alongside* more populist arguments and appeals to contractual resistance. Whilst, in one breath, employing the fiction that James II had abdicated, moderate Whigs simultaneously wrote that MPs “chose and proclaimed [William of Orange] King” or that “common Consent” legitimated William’s possession of the throne (Anon. 1689e: 11; Anon. 1690: 6). Equally, the rights of the monarch and the people were held to consist in a “mutual Covenant, tacit or express”; for those arguing the latter, James II’s violation of his coronation oath had meant “nulling the contract between King and People” (Anon. 1690: 6; Anon. 1689d: 8).<sup>79</sup> Entering the fray shortly after the conclusion of the Parliamentary conference Lord Somers, invoked by Burke in his *Reflections*, echoed this view, arguing that the crown is “an inheritance accompanying an Office of Trust ... if a Mans defects render him incapable of the Trust, he has also forfeited the inheritance” (Somers 1689: 18). Indeed, another work published “by Authority” likewise stressed the idea of government accountability which underpinned many Whig pamphlets. “A king”, argued the author, “may do ill separately, exclusive of all others, or with his Ministers jointly ... But this neither can, nor has any weight in it, to keep either from being called to account” (Anon. 1689c: 24). In such circumstances moderate authors, distinguishing themselves from “king-deposing Doctrines”, maintained that subjects retained a right of resistance (Anon. 1689d: 20). In practice, this right was to be employed against a king who had become a tyrant; not to resist such “pretended Authority” would render one “unworthy of God” (Anon. 1690: 8, 7; cf. Schwoerer 1993: 243-5). This had most decidedly been the case in 1688, when James II had assumed an “Arbitrary Despotick Power” (Anon. 1689a: 1). The English Revolution had subsequently illustrated that the “whole Community” may defend themselves “by force” against a tyrant; indeed “every man”, it was stated, “has

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<sup>79</sup> Hedging his bets, one anonymous author held that the “mutual Compact and Covenant tacit or express between Prince and People” was demonstrated through “Scripture, Natural Reason, the Custom of Nations, and approved general Usage” (Anon. 1690: 8).

the right of Self-Preservation as intire under Civil Government, as he had in a State of Nature” (Harrison 1689: 1, 2; cf. Anon. 1689d: 10).

The above evidence shows that both radical and moderate Whig authors resorted to some form of contractual language to justify James II’s demise. Further to the presence of such arguments in Whig pamphlets, it has been demonstrated that the traditional languages of *both* Whigs and Tories were prevalent in the debate which followed the English Revolution (Goldie 1980: 490). For the present purposes, it is the latter set which arguably constitutes the most interesting group. Established Tory thinking stated that the king derived his authority directly from God and that the monarch possessed an indefeasible hereditary right to the throne. As a result, resistance to the king was not an option; rather the subject must uphold the doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance in the face of the sovereign power (Clark 2000: 83-4). This being the case, Tories made up the majority of Non-jurors and Jacobites, whose deep-seated ideological beliefs meant they were unwilling to accept the new monarchs.<sup>80</sup> For those Tories that did recognise the Revolution, the task was to account for their accepting the removal of King James II and the installation of William and Mary in a way that would not compromise their aforementioned “first Principles” (Long 1689c: 3; cf. Eyre 1689: 8; Sherlock 1691: 2). Certainly, many were concerned that by sanctifying Whig theories of resistance they would be in danger of legitimising “the People’s Power to pull down and set up Princes” (Grascome 1689: 2). Given this fear, it is unsurprising that none appealed to contractual arguments; however many Tory authors were keen to emphasise that the Revolution could be defended on grounds other than contract. To this end historians have suggested that Tory contributions to the debate appeared as a “hurried and circumstantial, if

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<sup>80</sup> Non-jurors refused to swear a new oath of allegiance to William and Mary. Jacobites remained loyal to James, the departed former king.



monumental, exercise in casuistry” as authors desperately tried to bend the doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance (Goldie 1991: 104).

In manipulating their existing creed, Tory authors made great use of the syntactically ambiguous resolution passed by the Convention Parliament. Citing the “withdrawing of the King”, they were able to claim that James II’s flight had justified the events of the Revolution; “I neither can nor ever will renounce the Doctrine of Passive Obedience or Non-resistance rightly understood, nor can I yield that King *James* did forfeit his Crown, or that I was absolved from my Allegiance before he wilfully threw it up and deserted the Nation” (Anon. 1689b: 13; Sherlock 1691: 7). Ultimately, they suggested that, “though his Subjects used some force to hinder his Flight ... they used none to compel him to it” (Long 1689c: 13). A second key means by which Tories sought to stretch their ideology was by characterising the English Revolution as a ‘just war’. The just war argument was one form of conquest argument which, as an umbrella theory, served as “a means by which the tories could rescue the doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance and pre-empt the radical suggestion that William was elected king by the people”. However appeals to just war theory differed from other uses as the notion of a conquest was conventionally employed to legitimate William as the *de facto* ruler, either on the grounds that he was in possession of the throne or on the Hobbesian grounds that he could provide protection to subjects in James II’s absence (Goldie 1977: 570; cf. Kenyon 1977: 32-34; Thompson 1977). By making use of Grotius’ notion of *jus gentium*, Edmund Bohun was able to develop a just war theory to fit the circumstances of the English Revolution and to offer an explanation of events which validated William’s title whilst simultaneously maintaining the doctrine of non-resistance. Crucially for the present purposes, Bohun’s argument held that a just war was undertaken by a sovereign prince rather than the people and that the prince’s actions and subsequent title

were legitimated by the extremities suffered by the subjects and the punishment of a tyrant (Goldie 1977: 577-81).

This appeal to the extremity of the times was likewise significant for a third argument employed by Tories. To reconcile the Revolution to their existing principles many claimed the validity of resistance *in extremis*, a notion which was carefully distinguished from contractual resistance (see, for example, Eyre 1689: 8). It was argued that, in times of the “utmost Extremity”, there would be “*Limitations and Exceptions*” to the doctrines of non-resistance and passive obedience (Bohun 1689: 8; Payne 1690: 3; cf. Long 1689b: 12; Maurice 1689: 14-5). “There may be some extraordinary Cases”, reasoned one author,

which no positive Laws can provide against, or ought indeed to suppose, but when they do happen the plain Reason and Necessity of things will provide against them, and there cannot be standing Rules made for them, but they fall under the *Equity and Reason* though not the *Letter* of the Constitution (Payne 1690: 5; cf. Long 1689a: 69).

The “tacite Exception” to non-resistance was thus applicable “when the Reason of the Exception is not foreseen, and very unlikely to happen (as ‘tis in the Case of a King’s endeavouring to ruine his Subjects)” (Wynne 1689: 7, cf. 10-11). The exception would be relevant in “Cases of Necessity” and one’s actions during these grave periods would be driven by the “greater Law of Necessity” (Wynne 1689: 7; Payne 1690: 10). In making this argument, it was important to stress that, “for the security of Government, such extraordinary instances must not be reduced into common practice” (Wynne 1689: 18). Nonetheless, even admitting a severely limited right of resistance was acknowledged to be potentially hazardous. The dangers, should resistance *in extremis* be abused by the populace, were very apparent to those Tories who made use of the argument;

some men urge the Inconveniency of a Liberty in the People, to oppose the Will of a Prince, even in a case of the greatest Necessity, because others will pretend Necessity where there is none; and so all Government will hang as loose as a Weathercock. I must confess, if the Dispute were only, which was most Natural, That the People should have an Arbitrary Power of resisting their Prince, or, that the Prince should be in all Cases irresistible, and so govern at Discretion I should be apt to side with the latter part of the Question; because I had rather trust my self to the Fury of my Prince, than to the Madness of the People (Wynne 1689: 8).

Keeping Edmund Burke's *Reflections* in mind, there are a number of important points to draw from this analysis of the contemporary debates concerning the English Revolution. First, since many arguments were used across the board, it is crucial to avoid caricaturing combatants' positions. That said, prior ideological commitments were often upheld and it is certainly possible to map out the fundamental attitudes adopted by Whig and Tory authors. Whig politicians and authors emphasised James II's misrule, his breaking contractual obligations and his subsequent forfeiture of the crown. Moderate Whigs, keen to avoid the more radical implications of contract theory, softened their arguments by embracing the fiction of James II's abdication or deploying other arguments which similarly lessened the political role of the people in enacting the Revolution. Nevertheless, their works and speeches are identifiably Whig; they bottom in the use of theories of contractual resistance, in a belief in the right of resistance, and often in a willingness to admit that William had been chosen to be king (though crucially, they did not claim that this had made the throne elective). One hundred years on, Burke's interpretation of the Revolution had similarities with these moderate Whig arguments. This should come as no surprise for, as J. C. D. Clark is at pains to demonstrate, Burke was a "lifelong" Whig and "had never been a Tory" (Clark 2001: 100, 24). Moreover, in *Reflections*, Burke was attempting to influence the Whig elite

by convincing them that he was countering Richard Price's extremism by offering a traditional and moderate Whig version of the meaning and significance of 1688. In doing so, he cited the authority of the Whig grandee, Lord Somers, and claimed to be merely recounting the 'Revolution principles' as established by Somers during the conference debates of 1689.<sup>81</sup> However, as illustrated above, Burke's argument is often at variance with Somers'. The latter clarified that, in the infamous resolution, he and the Commons employed 'abdicate' in a sense which signified that the nation desired to "renounce" or "throw off" King James II. Moreover, Somers also defined the crown as an "Office of Trust", which could be "forfeited" along with the inheritance, should the ruler display "defects" (HPHOC 2: 209; Somers 1689: 18). It is telling that, in the same text, Somers asserted that Parliament possessed an "unquestionable power to limit, restrain and qualify the Succession as they pleased" and presented this as a commonplace which had been "the constant opinion of all Ages" (Somers 1689: 13). Although Burke acknowledged that the new monarchs ruled according to statute law, he departed from Somers by suggesting that the Revolution had been "a special case ... regarding an individual" and misleadingly implied that Somers had conceived William's succession by statute law as "a single case" offering a "temporary solution of continuity" (Burke 2001: 164, 165).

The plot thickens when one considers the Tory response to the events of 1688, as Burke seems to echo many of their arguments. At this juncture, however, party labels become unhelpful, for, as Clark reminds us, Burke was no Tory. Instead, it is of greater benefit to contemplate the uses of various arguments and the corresponding forms of political action which these arguments performed. James II's abdication, when spoken of in an intransitive

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<sup>81</sup> Burke stated that he "never desire[d] to be thought a better whig than Lord Somers: or to understand the principles of the Revolution better than those by whom it was brought about" (Burke 2001: 168).

sense, and the notion of a just war (undertaken between two sovereigns) removed from the people any political culpability for James II's departure. Additionally, neither argument conceived an interpretation of the Revolution which would empower the people with more extensive political rights. To this end, these arguments were used by Whigs attempting to extinguish the radicalism of contract theories and by Tories unwilling to admit that any resistance had been offered to James II.<sup>82</sup> It is significant that Burke adapted the Tory appeal to the just war argument. He did not, for example, use the argument to legitimate the succession and relied instead upon the continuance of the hereditary principle, interrupted only by a "small and temporary deviation". Moreover, as a Whig, Burke was able to admit that "the states of the kingdom" had engaged in "violent remedies" in 1688 (Burke 2001: 164, 177). However, the argument proved useful because it served to counter and curtail Price's more extravagant idea of cashiering monarchs for misconduct by emphasising the extremity of the situation in which resistance to constituted authority could justifiably be offered.

Burke's emphasis on this extremity is perhaps the most interesting aspect of his interpretation of the English Revolution. His treatment of the issue of resistance was entirely consonant with those Tory authors who aimed to stretch the boundaries of their theories of non-resistance by developing a notion of resistance *in extremis*. Again, party affiliation is of little importance here, since Burke clearly did not subscribe to the doctrine of non-resistance. However, it *is* of note that the concept of resistance *in extremis*, with its caveats of extremity and absolute necessity, was developed to enable one to accept the removal of James II

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<sup>82</sup> These were points noted by contemporaries engaged in the debate. Criticising the fiction of James II's flight, the Whig, Samuel Johnson, wryly remarked that "if he Deserted he was forced to Desert" (Johnson 1694: 38, cf. 35, 39-41; cf. Anon. 1691b: preface). Non-jurors were similarly wise to such ploys and recognised that the appeal to James II's 'abdication' by Tories was an attempt to stretch existing doctrines of non-resistance. As George Hickes indicated, many had taken the oath of allegiance "upon such Principles, as leave the doctrine of *Passive Obedience*, and all its concomitant doctrines secure. Those principles are chiefly three, *Possession*, *Abdication* and *Conquest*". Adopting such an approach will "reconcile the taking of the new Oath with the old doctrines, and so they are secure from the scandal of Apostacy" (Hickes 1689: 5; cf. Grascombe 1689: 4).

without also accepting any notion of government accountability in more regular circumstances. It was, therefore, a means by which one could hail the events of 1688 without suggesting that it had any implications for wider political rights or popular political power. It is undoubtedly the case that Burke shared Tory fears that, by admitting these ideas, government would “hang as loose as a Weathercock”, at the mercy of “the Madness of the People” (Wynne 1689: 8). In this sense, resistance *in extremis* differed from moderate Whig assertions that the “whole Community” possessed a right of self defence. By contrast, for Burke, as for seventeenth-century adherents to resistance *in extremis*, the actions undertaken in 1688 involved questions “of probable consequences, rather than of positive rights”. Furthermore, such actions “were not made for common abuses” and were therefore “not to be agitated by common minds” (Burke 2001: 180-1).

This investigation of seventeenth-century contributions to the Revolution debate is undoubtedly important for establishing the foundation of the argument in this chapter. By indicating how different groups employed certain arguments and terms to explain the events of 1688 one is able to get a clearer idea of the character of Burke’s description of the English Revolution. Rather than simply (or even inevitably) evidencing his membership of, say, the reason of state tradition, as David Armitage has suggested, Burke’s description of the Revolution as an “an act of *necessity*” might properly be regarded as part of his overarching depiction of the Revolution as involving resistance *in extremis*; as an attempt, that is, to limit the value of 1688 as a precedent for future political action and to therefore diminish the acceptability and potency of a radical reading of the event (Armitage 2000: 626-7). Nonetheless, in order to be able to corroborate such claims it is first necessary to supplement the analysis of seventeenth-century debates by outlining how the English Revolution was interpreted and understood by Burke’s eighteenth-century contemporaries.

### 3.2.2 Eighteenth-century readings of the English Revolution

Politics and the constitution remained “in a state of flux” some twenty years after the Revolution settlement (Kenyon 1974: 43). Although they had initially sought to claim the event, by the early eighteenth-century Whig politicians began to notice potential problems with hailing a version of ‘Revolution principles’ which turned upon ideas of resistance; such a precedent, it was believed, could be used to legitimate the right of future groups to vent their dissatisfaction at the Whig regime (Straka 1971: 151). Allied to this concern, there existed a parallel worry that by retrenching, and denying that resistance had been offered, they might unwittingly engender a reversal of the settlement thus putting James’ exiled son on the throne (Dickinson 1976a: 34). Through their apprehension at the implications of a ‘genuine’ Whig version of ‘Revolution principles’, Whig politicians matched the fears of contemporary Tories who, regardless of their willingness to accept the legitimacy of the new monarchs, highlighted the inherent dangers in the Whig interpretation of events which they considered as having located political power in the people, thereby “setting 10000 tyrants over us instead of one” (Leslie cited in Monod 1989: 19). Consequently, the aforementioned Tory mode of explanation, focusing on the extreme necessity of the circumstances of 1688, was taken up by a Whig establishment keen both to dissociate ‘Revolution principles’ from a readily applicable right of resistance and to limit the circumstances under which popular resistance to constituted authority could be undertaken.

The most pertinent example of this discursive shift was evidenced in the impeachment of Dr Henry Sacheverell. The Anglican divine was subjected to a Whig show trial for his sermon, delivered at St. Pauls on the twenty-first anniversary of William’s landing at Torbay, which

reconciled the English Revolution with ideas of “absolute and unconditional obedience to the supreme power” and argued “the utter illegality of resistance upon any pretence whatsoever” (Sacheverell 1709: 19). In an attempt to defeat the Tory threat and remove the possibility of a Jacobite restoration, Whig prosecutors sought to prove that such principles were anathema to the Revolution and that 1688 had in fact involved resistance. However, wary of the dangers of creating a precedent for resisting political authority, the trial managers turned to the hitherto Tory idea of resistance *in extremis*. Nicholas Lechmere, presenting for the prosecution, defined the resistance employed in 1688 as “The *Necessary Means*” and founded the “Power, and Right of Resistance ... upon the Necessity of the Case”. Others followed his example but were careful to insert a variety of caveats. Thus, Sir Joseph Jekyll neglected to state “any Case of a justifiable Resistance, but that of the Revolution only” and Sir John Holland, upon limiting resistance to the “Absolute Necessity of Preserving our Laws, Liberties and Religion”, stressed that he hoped the Commons “would not be understood, as if they were pleading for a Licentious Resistance; as if Subjects were left to their good Will and Pleasure, when they are to *Obey*, and when to *Resist*”. Robert Walpole likewise spoke of the “Necessary and Commendable Resistance” employed at the Revolution, but expressed fears that, in doing so, his “Arguments may be misconstrued, and misrepresented, as maintaining Antimonarchical Schemes”; “Resistance is no where Enacted to be Legal”, Walpole maintained, “‘tis what is not, cannot, nor ought ever to be described, or affirm’d, in any positive Law, to be excusable” (Sacheverell 1710: 33, 73-4, 88-9, 91, 92).

The impeachment was, in a legal sense, successful. Nevertheless, on account of their keenness to avoid supporting a popular right of resistance, the Whigs’ trial victory was gained “at the expense of modifying the general right of resistance out of existence” (Kenyon 1977: 141-2). In the aftermath of the trial “there was no orthodox interpretation of



Revolution principles". Whig pamphleteers continued to associate the Revolution with theories of contractual resistance and, when citing its authority, stressed notions of popular rights and government accountability. By contrast, establishment Whigs remained content to render 'Revolution principles' "virtually meaningless as a guide to future action" (Dickinson 1976a: 36; cf. Dickinson 1976b: 196-7). This dichotomy was illustrated by the tussle between the opposition Country platform and the regime, or Court, Whigs during the early Hanoverian period. As indicated above, the Parliamentary opposition invoked 'Revolution principles' to afford representative institutions with a "populist gloss", legitimating them in terms of their potential attentiveness to public opinion (Wilson 1989: 373). Conversely, establishment Whigs downplayed the significance of the resistance offered at the Revolution and instead emphasised a discourse founded in the need to maintain order and subordination. Such ideas were notably expressed by Robert Walpole's most prominent apparatchik, Lord Hervey. In an influential text, which characterised those "who say *our Government is founded on Resistance*" as "Enemies ... to this Constitution", Hervey admitted the possibility of resistance *in extremis*, but crucially warned against popularising a "general Doctrine of *Resistance*" which would "keep the People for ever on the Brink of Insurrection and Rebellion" (Hervey 1734: 45, 46; cf. Hare 1731: 9-11, 17).

A steady stream of similar sentiments issued by the regime's propaganda machine marked a definite retreat during this period from the idea that the people retained a sovereign authority and instead served to consolidate the conservative strands of Whig ideology (Dickinson 1977: 125).<sup>83</sup> The adoption, by the Whig establishment, of a Tory themed interpretation of the English Revolution, i.e. an interpretation designed to curb notions of popular political power,

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<sup>83</sup> Dickinson accurately notes that this view was reinforced in the histories written during this period (Dickinson 1976a: 37 n31).

was enshrined in William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*.<sup>84</sup> Immensely influential, and cited in Burke's *Reflections*, Blackstone determined that 'Revolution principles' were founded upon "*ex necessitate rei*" (the necessity of the case). This necessity, he suggested, was occasioned by the throne being left "vacant by the king's abdication". Indeed, Blackstone was keen to remove any culpability from the political actors of the time and stressed that "the vacancy of the throne was precedent to [the Convention Parliament] meeting ... not a consequence of it" (Blackstone 1765-9a: 148). In a revealing passage, the thrust of which would be repeated by Burke, he likewise advised his readers not to enquire too deeply into the events of the Revolution;

care must be taken not to carry this enquiry farther, than merely for instruction or amusement ... I therefore rather chuse to consider this great political measure, upon the solid footing of authority, than to reason in it's favour from it's justice, moderation, and expedience: because that might imply a right of dissenting or revolting from it, in case we should think it unjust, oppressive, or inexpedient (Blackstone 1765-9a: 205).

Certainly, for Blackstone, as for other establishment Whigs, the Revolution existed as a dangerous rather than a glorious precedent; accepting that 1688 had legitimated notions of government accountability, or reading it as an expression of popular political power would be liable to invite anarchy (Blackstone 1765-9a: 243-4). Consequently, it was important to suppress, deny or disavow such interpretations. Alongside labelling the substitution of William for James II as a necessity triggered by the latter's flight, Blackstone specifically

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<sup>84</sup> In reviewing eighteenth-century attitudes towards the English Revolution, Steven Pincus dresses Blackstone in the rather ill-fitting garbs of an "Opposition Whig" (Pincus 2010: 18). For a more appropriate assessment, namely that much of Blackstone's *Commentaries* "echoed early eighteenth-century Toryism", see J. C. D. Clark's *English Society 1660-1832* (2000: 241-9).

targeted the somewhat more radical version of events given in John Locke's *Two Treatises*.

"We cannot adopt ... nor argue from" a Lockean position, warned Blackstone,

for this devolution of power, to the people at large, includes in it a dissolution of the whole form of government established by that people, reduces all the members to their original state of equality, and by annihilating the sovereign power repeals all positive laws whatsoever before enacted ... So long therefore as the English constitution lasts ... the power of parliament is absolute and without control (Blackstone 1765-9a: 157).

This theme was reiterated by Josiah Tucker, whose *Treatise Concerning Civil Government* drew from the Revolution a "Right of resisting in certain Cases of *extreme Necessity*". This right was carefully distinguished from the "Liberty and Licentiousness" which Tucker associated with "Lockians" (Tucker 1781: 409). Encapsulating the fears of conservative and establishment Whigs, one author admitted that Locke and other Revolution era Whigs had written "to vindicate the rights of the people", but simultaneously maintained that "some of their arguments were calculated for the moment, and have, perhaps, been carried to too great a length by their followers". Although the notion that political power resides in the people may be "a just maxim in theory" the author questioned whether it was not, in practice, "subversive of all subordination to recur to it" (Nugent 1780: 43-4).

There is then an identifiably conservative Whig discourse on the Revolution of 1688. Whilst radicals associated 'Revolution principles' with ideas of government accountability and popular rights, conservatives admired "the prudence, the wisdom, and the caution" that actors displayed in 1688/9. Rather than having cemented a general right of resistance, conservative Whig thinking followed the line taken by moderate seventeenth-century Tories in restricting any resistance to "such an extreme case as that of the Revolution itself". To establishment

Whigs, anxious to prioritise principles of order and subordination over other, potentially troubling, Whig ideas, it was necessary to deemphasise, and even deny, the relevancy of the Revolution for eighteenth-century politics. It was frequently treated as an event in history; an event which had been completed, which had created “no precedent for future ages” and which had certainly not “la[id] a foundation for dangerous speculative improvements” to the constitution (PH 35: 112). It has been suggested that discussions of 1688 mark “the point from which regime and radical Whiggism divided” (Pocock 1985: 297). The above analysis confirms as much; however, further to this it is also possible to flesh out a distinct moderate, or opposition, discourse on the meaning and significance of 1688 which existed between the conservative and radical strands of Whiggism.<sup>85</sup> Adherents to this ideological strain claimed only “a theoretical popular sovereignty”, which therefore differed greatly from the practical notions asserted by authors such as Richard Price (Gunn 1983: 82).<sup>86</sup>

It was common for opposition authors to associate the Revolution with notions of contractual resistance and the removal of a tyrant and to regard it as having ratified the general applicability of such ideas. In this vein, Jonathan Wilkes declared to the House of Commons that 1688 had witnessed “a Resistance authorized by all the Laws of God and Man” and “the Expulsion of a Tyrant” (Wilkes 1775: 4). Likewise, Jean-Louis de Lolme emphasised that the Revolution had proved that “Nations are not the property of Kings” since it had involved “the expulsion of a King who had violated his oath”. Moreover, at this period, “the doctrine of Resistance, the ultimate resource of an oppressed people, was confirmed beyond a doubt”

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<sup>85</sup> These groupings are accurate in so far as they represent distinct ways of discussing and deploying the English Revolution in argument. It should be unnecessary to have to state that eighteenth-century Whiggism was obviously a more complex and fluid creed than is here suggested by my portioning it into three classes. Divvying the ideology up into these analytical categories is intended as a means of delineating and describing the ideology for a contemporary audience; as such it is a necessary concession to anachronism. For an impressive survey of the “varieties of Whiggism” see Pocock (1985: 215-310).

<sup>86</sup> A distinction which causes J. A. W. Gunn to brand the more moderate opposition discourse “inoffensive Whiggism” (Gunn 1983: 82).

(de Lolme 1775: 37).<sup>87</sup> A fundamental difference between this and the conservative view was that the former conceived the Revolution as active, as opposed to passive, history; i.e. history which could be mobilised and deployed in political argument. For example, in *The Political Contest*, the author writing under the pseudonym ‘Junius’ pronounced his loyalty to the house of Hanover, yet, in the same breath, counselled King George III that “the Prince, who imitates [the Stuart’s] conduct, should be warned by their example; and while he plumes himself upon the security of his title to the crown, should remember, that as it was acquired by one revolution, it may be lost by another” (Junius 1770: 13).

These were not isolated sentiments. In the early part of his reign, George III’s behaviour brought much criticism both from opposition and more radical Whig groupings. Noting this point, J. G. A. Pocock states that “some of these – but not Burke or his associates – were prepared to use rhetoric ... which reminded George III that he owed his throne to the Glorious Revolution and the Hanoverian Succession, and threatened him with the fate of James II”. “It is important”, Pocock stresses, “that Rockingham, Fox and Burke had never talked in this way” (Pocock 1987b: xiii). However, Pocock’s assertion concerning Fox and Burke is inaccurate. The Rockingham Whigs were the most prominent element of the Parliamentary opposition and, from the mid 1760s until the passing of their leader in 1782, they were almost obsessive in condemning the undue political influence supposedly exercised by the court. Part of this strategy involved employing (at least in rhetorical terms) a dynamic interpretation of the English Revolution to remind George III that the nation would not suffer another monarch’s attempts to aggrandize his power. In Parliament, Charles James Fox announced

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<sup>87</sup> Authors expressing such views were often critical of the establishment suggestion that the Revolution had been occasioned by James II’s flight. Evidencing this point, John Millar, a keen supporter of Charles James Fox, chastised the Convention Parliament for their unwillingness “to avow, in express terms, that power which they were determined to exercise; they had to recourse to childish evasions, and fictitious suppositions; and the absurd pretext of an abdication was employed to cover the real deposition of the sovereign” (Millar 1787: 360).

that the King owed his throne only to “the delinquency of the Stuart family – a circumstance which should never be one moment out of his majesty’s recollection” (Fox cited in Straka 1971: 158). Similarly, in the *Address to the King*, composed by Edmund Burke at the behest of the party elite, Burke interpreted the Revolution as a “memorable and instructive period”. Openly describing it as “a departure from the ancient course of the descent of this Monarchy” (without inserting the caveats of “small and temporary” as he would in *Reflections*), Burke offered a more populist understanding of the Revolution and contended that “the People at that time reentered into their original rights”. Interestingly, since it was intended as a proclamation of Rockinghamite principles, the document also indicated that the Revolution had been motivated, not by necessity, but by the “great principle of Liberty”; indeed “to the free choice”, Burke maintained, “of the People, without either King or Parliament, we owe that happy establishment out of which both King and Parliament were regenerated”. In short, Burke used this more potent treatment of 1688 to caution George III that his throne “cannot stand secure ... on powers exercised without the concurrence of the People to be governed” (W&S 3: 273-4). It is worth noting that a similar tactic was repeated during the Regency crisis of 1788-9, when the same Parliamentary grouping, now led by Fox, sought to usher the Prince of Wales onto the throne in place of his father who they deemed mentally unstable.<sup>88</sup> The English Revolution was then invoked, by Burke, as an authoritative example for the removal of sovereigns; it was “a precedent of a delinquent monarch”. In such circumstances, “the compact is dissolved, and all right and power reverts to the people; and the people, by plots, conspiracies, or any other secret or violent means, may hurl such a king from the throne” (PH 27: 823; cf. PH 18: 1230; Anon. 1789: 27).

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<sup>88</sup> This crisis is given full length treatment in Derry (1963). Burke’s role in the episode is outlined in Lock (2006: 205-222).

As previously mentioned, the English Revolution served as an important mode of political argument in the debates of the 1790s. Radical authors, associating 1688 with notions of choice and accountability, sought to employ their version of ‘Revolution principles’ to effect domestic political reform. The French Revolution, initially perceived as a replica of the English event, provided further justification for their arguments. The two basic discourses enabling conservative or moderate oppositionary uses of the English Revolution were evident in the 1790s (see, for example, Hervey 1791: 31-2; St John 1791: 102-9). Conservative Whigs were acutely aware of the radical implications of ‘Revolution principles’ and, as during the Sacheverell trial, were conscious of the dangers involved in allowing 1688 to be understood as active history (Reeves 1795: 23-4, 45; Tatham 1791a: 98, 102; Tatham 1791b: 28). The positions adopted by authors in the 1790s defy easy categorisation. For instance, those offering a more populist reading of ‘Revolution principles’ did not necessarily support the French Revolution, they did not reject *Reflections* out of hand, and they did not automatically side with their more radical counterparts (Boothby 1791: 3; Charnock 1792: xv, 120-1; Plowden 1794: 4, 6-7, 39). Nevertheless, Burke would presumably have thought it unwise for those who declared themselves “in favour of the Portland party” (the formal name for Burke’s own nomenclature), to tout the view that 1688 evidenced “the idea that the power of kings was a delegation from the people” or that it demonstrated that this power could be “reassumed” if abused (Bousfield 1791: 12). Similar descriptions of the English Revolution prevailed in Burke’s parliamentary party and, although they subscribed to aristocratic Whiggism, the leaders of his party not only hailed the events in France but also regarded those events as being in line with their populist understanding of 1688 (see Chapter Two). Burke recognised that this opposition discourse on 1688, with its theoretical acceptance of popular sovereignty, created a space in which a more radical interpretation, and thus a more potent idea of popular sovereignty, could grow. In *Reflections*, he consequently jettisoned

elements of the discourse which he had previously employed and instead emphasised a more conservative strain. He sought to pass this revised interpretation off as moderate and commonplace and, to carry his audience along with him, maintained standard Whig assumptions, claiming that James II had “broken the *original contract* between king and people” and that “the punishment of real tyrants is a noble and awful act of justice” (Burke 2001: 165, 177, 245). Some modern commentators have accordingly been convinced that Burke gave a “mainstream Whig reading of 1688” (Clark 2001: 41; cf. Pocock 1987b: xiii). However, as has been illustrated, his discussion of 1688 weaved more conservative arguments in amongst the concessions to moderate Whiggism. By stressing a concept of resistance *in extremis* he rendered the Revolution as passive rather than active history and denied its significance for future politics in all but the most “extreme emergency” (Burke 2001: 169). Likewise, although he acknowledged James II’s crimes, Burke highlighted the King’s flight and rejected the idea that the wider nation had been involved in the Revolution. In *Reflections*, the Revolution had certainly not installed a monarch of popular choice; by contrast, it had been an entirely elite affair.

It remains to make two further points before moving on to study the status which Burke ascribes to the English Revolution. First, by understanding what Burke was doing in describing 1688 as “an act of *necessity*”, we can overturn prevailing assessments of this section of *Reflections*. Gerald Straka has contended that Burke’s appeal to necessity portrayed a “revolutionary imperative” which would “fit well in the mouth of Maximilien Robespierre” (Straka 1971: 161). Reiterating this view, David Musselwhite has likewise argued that Burke engaged in a “catastrophic logic warp” by employing a term which provides “the philosophical space ... for the very thing he anathematizes: ‘a resort to anarchy’” (Musselwhite 1990: 152). A contextual study of this particular line of argument



demonstrates that ‘necessity’ was developed in the immediate aftermath of the event and was redeployed throughout the eighteenth-century by authors who aimed to prevent incursions into the existing regime by limiting the practical political value of the Revolution and by stressing the unique nature of the circumstances in 1688. Burke’s use of this concept thus contradicts Straka’s claim that the former “is certainly less the unqualified defender of the old order [in his statements on 1688] than in most traditional representations” (Straka 1971: 161-2).

Second, it can be argued that, in *Reflections*, Burke offers a more reactionary reading of the English Revolution than is evidenced by other authors articulating the aforementioned establishment discourse. In his text, Burke described the Revolution as a “parent of settlement, and not a nursery of future revolutions” and further suggested that those who had negotiated the settlement had rendered a repeat “almost impracticable”. In the unlikely event that the nation should again find itself in a comparable position, Burke denied that those involved would have recourse to an automatic right of resistance. Employing the notion of a just war as a yardstick for the future, he contended that such measures would involve questions of “probable consequences, rather than of positive rights” (Burke 2001: 177, 180). Conservative Whigs attempted to portray the Revolution as passive history as they were keen to prevent it from becoming a precedent which could be used to address the everyday grievances of discontented groups. Nevertheless, even those committed to maintaining the status quo admitted that the people (variously defined) were possessed of a right of resistance which could be exercised should the need arise. It is important to recognise that, despite their adoption of the ‘necessity’ caveat, at the trial of Dr Sacheverell, the Whigs were aiming to prove that resistance *had* taken place in 1688. Thus when delivering the case for the prosecution, Robert Walpole exclaimed that “it cannot be now necessary to prove Resistance

in the Revolution, I should as well expect that your Lordships would desire me, for Form's sake, to prove the Sun shines at Noon-Day". Likewise, Nicholas Lechmere spoke of "that Power and Right of Resistance which was exercised by the People" and referred to the "Original Contract, between the Crown and the People, by which that Supreme Power was (by mutual Consent and not by Accident) limited and lodg'd in more Hands than one". The latter assertion was an "eternal Truth, essential to the Government it self, and not to be defaced, or destroy'd, by any Force or Device" (Sacheverell 1710: 94, 33, 34). Echoing this assumption, William Blackstone viewed the right as one of "those inherent (though latent) powers of society, which no climate, no time, no constitution, no contract can ever destroy or diminish". To the great legal theorist the "doctrine of resistance" was applicable "when the executive magistrate endeavours to subvert the constitution" (Blackstone 1765-9a: 238, Blackstone 1765-9b: 433). It should be clear that these sentiments were intended to legitimate a right of resistance only in similar circumstances as had occurred in 1688. However, it is of note that Blackstone writes in terms of a "doctrine of resistance". Wary of the democratic threat posed to the British constitution and highly concerned about the failure of his parliamentary peers to perceive this threat, such a doctrine, or right, is greatly diminished in Burke's *Reflections*; indeed, Burke informs his readers that the right of resistance is "not to be agitated by common minds". Instead, this Whig standard is entrusted only to the governing elite – i.e. those "whom nature has qualified to administer in extremities this critical, ambiguous, bitter portion to a distempered state" (Burke 2001: 181).

### 3.3 Burke's uses of the idea of continuity in British history

As indicated above, in an important second dimension to his discussion of the English Revolution Burke framed the event as having witnessed the continuation of Britain's ancient

constitution. Although he admitted that changes had occurred as a result of the events of 1688, these alterations had, through a process of “conservation and correction”, merely righted the “peccant” element of the constitution rather than enacting any fundamental transformations (Burke 2001: 170). Indeed, those involved in negotiating the settlement had, Burke argued, been solely concerned with protecting and upholding the existing laws and liberties and had no intention of departing from this course to establish either an alternative form of liberty or furnish the populace with hitherto unheard of rights. Furthermore, Burke portrayed the Revolution’s actors as having provided a constitutional full stop which had settled the essential principles of the constitution, “for all their posterity for ever” (Burke 2001: 168). In order to ascertain the character of these aspects of Burke’s description of the English Revolution, it is first necessary to grasp what was meant by the ancient constitution, i.e. understand how it was used in political argument.

Ideas of the ancient constitution have a complex history, dating back to the sixteenth-century; consequently undertaking a full-scale investigation into the concept could threaten to pervert the focus of the task at hand. Fortunately, a number of excellent works have documented the development of the ancient constitution in its formative years. In a seminal study, J. G. A. Pocock identified a mode of thought, evident across a variety of European nations, which moved beyond mere constitutionalism and which, he argued, could fruitfully be conceived as

the attempt to settle fundamental political questions, notably those involving law, right and sovereignty, by appeal not directly to abstract political concepts, but to the existing ‘municipal’ laws of the country concerned and to the concepts of custom, prescription and authority that underlay them, as well as to the reverence

which they enjoyed by reason of their antiquity (Pocock 1987a: 17).<sup>89</sup>

In countries with strong Calvinist strains such as Scotland, France and the Netherlands, the ancient constitution was developed as a means of justifying resistance to constituted authority. Authors in these nations aimed to oppose ideas of absolute or hereditary monarchy without succumbing to sectarianism or equally damaging charges of innovation. In France, for example, François Hotman's *Francogallia* turned the ancient constitution into a "revolutionary ideology" by illustrating that the constitution had a populist past which legitimated the power of the Estates General as a check on government. In Scotland, a similarly humanist investigation undertaken by George Buchanan fostered a "radical thesis of popular sovereignty" to justify the deposition of the Catholic ruler, Mary Queen of Scots (Skinner 1978b: 310-14, 339-45). When employed in such ways, the ancient constitution "was fundamentally *normative* in character, setting up a model of the way a particular political community ought to be organized and criticizing the present in terms of that model" (Burgess 1992: 17). By contrast, in England, authors derived conceptions of the ancient constitution from the common law. This description of law "*constituted* the English polity" and regulated the relationship between governors and governed, as Parliament, responsible for statute law, was simultaneously the highest common law court in the country. Common law was law derived from custom and was invariably considered immemorial, in the sense that its origins were unrecoverable and that it had existed for as long as could be remembered. As a result, the ancient constitution was likewise held to be both customary and continuous (Burgess 1992: 4-5; cf. Pocock 1987a: 261). Associating the ancient constitution with immemorial custom and continuity bestowed it with a "legally binding force" which

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<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, in the retrospective section of this reissue of his classic text, Pocock reveals his belief that "the history of the ancient constitution and the feudal law could have been written as a history of debate about property and sovereignty, rather than about common law and immemorial custom" (Pocock 1987a: 379).

served to legitimate the existing socio-political arrangements (Pocock 1987a: 21). Conceived in this way, it offered a conservative argument ensuring that the nation adhered to certain fundamental and unalterable modes of practice which were derived from long-established custom rather than the consent of the governed. Indeed, “English ancient constitutionalism explained why the current shape of the English polity was automatically the best that could be achieved” and was thus “an antidote to Calvinist resistance theory” (Burgess 1992: 18).

In the aftermath of the English Revolution the more radical Whigs (for example John Locke through his suggestion of an “appeal to heaven”) implied that the event had led to the dissolution of government (Locke 1980: 87-8). More moderate Whigs eschewed such accounts and instead sought to explain that the Revolution had been undertaken within the remit of the existing constitutional arrangements and that it had been effected to safeguard, not surrender, the ancient constitution. Illustrating this point, one Whig manager, during the conference of 1689, responded to the Earl of Nottingham’s plea to uphold the ancient constitution by claiming that “the throne may be vacant as to the Possession, without the Exclusion of one that has a right to the Succession or a Dissolution of the Government in the Constitution” (HPHOC 2: 254). Their reluctance to admit the dissolution of government was possibly born from experiences during the civil war and Protectorate; periods which many Members would have lived through. Certainly, the House of Commons’ debate on the state of the nation reveals the heightened concern MPs had over declaring a dissolution of government; as one MP warned, “if we were in a state of nature, we should have little title to any of our estates” (PH 5: 45, cf. 48).<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Gilbert Burnet’s *An Enquiry in to the Measures of Submission to the Supream Authority* is an interesting outlier in this respect. Burnet was William of Orange’s chief propagandist in England and his text, apparently printed “by Authority”, surprisingly stated that James II’s crimes constituted a “dissolution of the government” and, therefore, a “breaking of the whole constitution” (Burnet 1689: 6-7).

Associating the Revolution with the ancient constitution remained popular throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. At Sacheverell's trial, for instance, the prosecution heralded the "uniform Preservation" of the constitution "for so many Ages, without fundamental Change". Indeed, the nature of the original contract between the crown and people, as mentioned in the Commons' resolution of 1689, did not, they argued, merely confer freedoms, but also bound the people "in Duty to transmit the same Constitution to their Posterity" (Sacheverell 1710: 34). This was undoubtedly a useful argument for establishment and conservative Whigs to turn to: emphasising the fact that the Revolution settlement marked an essential continuity, rather than a break, with previous political arrangements saved the governing elite from having to admit that 1688 had established any new popular political powers; moreover, demonstrating that Parliament had rescued the nation from James II's misrule served to cement the notion of a sovereign Parliament (Dickinson 1977: 132). Nonetheless, this idea was dropped by regime Whigs in the early Hanoverian period when the Walpolean propaganda machine dissociated the Revolution from the ancient constitution and redescribed it to fit their partisan aims. The Country platform opposed Robert Walpole's government by appealing to the ancient constitution, contrasting the present period of corruption and subjection with an almost continuous history of liberty. The Revolution settlement, which had cast off Stuart absolutism and restored the ancient constitution, was now, they argued, threatened by the despotic practices of Walpole's regime. Faced with this onslaught, the government drew upon Robert Brady's seventeenth-century reading of English history, which had previously been intended for use by royalist Tories against Parliamentary Whigs (Kramnick 1968: 128-130). In short, Brady had dismissed ancient constitutionalism by arguing that Anglo-Saxon laws and liberties had been completely obliterated by the triumph of William the Conqueror in 1066 (Pocock 1987a: 217-21). With no history of customary freedoms to hark back to, the Walpoleans declared that it

was the Revolution of 1688 which had actually established and secured English liberty. “From King James the Second’s banishment, abdication, deposition, or whatever people please to call it”, Lord Hervey wrote, “I date the birth of real liberty in this kingdom, or at least the establishment, if not the commencement, of every valuable privilege we now enjoy” (Hervey 1734; 40). Conceiving the Revolution as a renewal or continuation of anything that had gone before was ridiculed in Walpole-friendly newspapers; “a renewal of what?”, the *Daily Gazetteer* scoffed, “a renewal of a non-entity. We never before had a constitution as was settled at the Revolution. That sure can’t be renewed which never existed”. In a similar vein, the *London Journal* announced that its aim was “to shew, that our Modern Constitution is infinitely better than the Ancient Constitution; and that New England, or England since the Revolution, is vastly preferable to old England, take it in any point of time, from the Saxons down to that glorious period” (Kramnick 1968: 130; Dickinson 1977: 140-1).

The immediate benefit of exposing the ancient constitution as a political myth was that the Walpoleans could thereafter lay claim to having enlarged, rather than compromised, subjects’ general freedoms. A longer term effect of the polemic was that it created a modernist interpretation of the significance of the Revolution, which, after the Court-Country debate had passed, became incorporated into the mainstream political consciousness. To this end, the idea of the Revolution as a starting point or precedent competed with the more traditional reading of it as a continuation of the ancient constitution. This can be demonstrated by considering the uncertainty surrounding the legal status of the Revolution. In 1765, the King’s Bench considered a case which turned upon the legality of general warrants issued by the Secretary of State to sanction seizing the property of any subject accused of libel. Counsel for the crown defended the right of such warrants by founding their argument on opinion and practice “ever since the revolution”. Chief Justice Camden, however, rejected

this point, decreeing that, if their use had begun at the Revolution, such warrants would be “too modern to be law”. “The common law” it was held “did not begin with the revolution [since] the ancient constitution which had been almost overthrown and destroyed, was then repaired and revived, the revolution added a new buttress to the ancient venerable edifice” (Wilson 1770: 287, 292). By 1784, the reverse was true and Chief Justice Mansfield exonerated the Dean of St Asaph, accused of seditious libel, by basing his judgement on “the uniform judicial practice since the Revolution” (Mansfield cited in Straka 1971: 148).

Although the precise legal status of the Revolution remained unclear, it can be argued that the modernist interpretation of the significance of 1688 gained increasing prominence in political argument. A key means by which this process occurred was through its reproduction in a number of popular histories. In a widely read text, reissued into the nineteenth-century, Oliver Goldsmith told how Parliament’s actions against Charles I had “levelled” the ancient constitution; consequently, upon William’s accession to the throne in 1689, the constitution “took a different form from what it had before” (Goldsmith 1771a: 256; Goldsmith 1771b: 50). Histories reiterating the ideology of the Scottish Enlightenment also perpetuated this discourse by associating modern commerce with modern liberty. David Hume’s, *History of England*, for example, informed its readers that “the Revolution forms a new epoch in the constitution”. The event decided “many important questions in favour of liberty” thus now, Hume argued, “it may safely be affirmed, without any danger of exaggeration, that we in this island have ever since enjoyed, if not the best system of government, at least the most entire system of liberty, that was ever known amongst mankind” (Hume 1763: 310). Complimenting this belief in his *An Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce*, Adam Anderson stated that, by virtue of the Revolution settlement, the constitution had been settled “on more secure and firm Foundations than ... in any former



Period whatever". Accordingly, the "Establishment of this *free* Constitution did most certainly contribute greatly in its Consequences (as it was natural to suppose and expect) to the Increase and Advancement of our Commerce" (Anderson 1764: 189). For another author, "the vast Increase and flourishing Condition of our Manufactures" had been a key benefit derived from the Revolution. Since "Industry is a Characteristic of Liberty", the author reasoned that "no Country in *Europe* can at this Day produce such glorious Proof of being in Possession of this valuable Blessing as Great Britain" (B 1753: 17)

J. G. A. Pocock has suggested there was a revival in ancient constitutionalism around the time of Hume's *History of England* as, by this time, "Walpolean modernism had lost much of its value as polemic" (Pocock 1987a: 376). It is certainly true that the reworking of history was not acceptable to everyone. Evidencing this point, one author professed he was "for no novelties" in matters of law or history, before proceeding to launch a stinging rebuttal of Hume's notion that "there was no idea of liberty in this country until the accession of his countryman James I<sup>st</sup>" (Anon. 1771: 82).<sup>91</sup> Moreover, by the 1760s, the Bolingbroke-Walpole contest had been replaced by more contemporary party struggles revolving, for many, around the actions of King George III. Nevertheless, although it may have become less important as polemic, the modernist understanding of the Revolution undoubtedly pervaded political argument in the latter half of the eighteenth-century. In this sense it had been transformed from a partisan reading, issued by an identifiable party machine, into a political rhetoric which was widely appealed to and perhaps even conventional. The accuracy of this view is confirmed upon consulting the most influential statement of

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<sup>91</sup> By contrast, tracing English liberties from the Magna Carta, the author announced that one should "let the modern Scottish doctors and professors of morality, one after the other, like the old school; subtilizers of divinity, spin what theories they please", further stating that (s)he would not "willingly quit my ancient constitution and law, nor easily be persuaded that till within these last ten years we ever understood the true principles of either" (Anon. 1771: 82)

establishment Whiggism from the period, Blackstone's *Commentaries*. These four volumes are rightly read as having reasserted the idea of the ancient constitution. However, closer inspection of his discussion of the English Revolution reveals that Blackstone was less emphatic in this belief than is often assumed. Of course, he denied that 1688 had amounted to a "total dissolution of the government". In the first volume though, he admitted that the Revolution did "in some respects go beyond the letter of our ancient laws" and continued to assert that "from thence a new æra commenced, in which the bounds of prerogative and liberty have been better defined ... than in any other period of the English history" (Blackstone 1765-9a: 206). By the fourth volume, Blackstone was arguing that English liberties had not been properly safeguarded until 1688. After having delineated the history of such laws and liberties, he moved to discuss the period from 1688 to the time of his writing, stating that "in this period many laws have passed ... which have asserted our liberties in more clear and emphatical terms" (Blackstone 1765-9b: 433). Underscoring his point in the concluding passages of his work, Blackstone wrote of the "total eclipse" of liberties at the Norman conquest, and further argued that English liberties had only "gradually emerged" since that period; in sum, liberty had not been "fully and explicitly acknowledged and defined, till the æra of the happy revolution" (Blackstone 1765-9b: 435).

There are differences of emphasis in this and the Walpolean version of the discourse. Most notably, the earlier authors were more decisive in claiming that the Revolution had marked a break with the past. They were likewise more eager to portray the past as a history of slavery and subjection. The forcefulness of the thesis that emerged in the early Hanoverian period is surely to be explained by the fact that it was deployed in the heat of battle against the contrasting arguments of Bolingbroke's Country platform. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that a weaker account of the Walpolean description of the significance of 1688 is present in

Blackstone's classic work. Shorn of its obviously polemical nature, this reading was marketable to a far wider audience and therefore seeped into the conscious of the political class. During a debate in the House of Lords, one year prior to the publication of Blackstone's *Commentaries*, Lord Northington exclaimed, "my Lords, I seek for the liberty and constitution of this kingdom no farther back than the Revolution: there I make my stand" (PH 16: 171). Similarly, pamphleteers were apt to describe the Revolution as "the æra from whence we date our liberties", or comment that it marked "the first æra of BRITAIN'S Freedom" (Junius 1770: 17; Brown 1765: 82). In 1781, Josiah Tucker devoted a third of his *Treatise* to exposing the "Slavery and Oppression" suffered by England under its former "Gothic Constitution" (Tucker 1781: 62). His opinion was echoed in 1789, in a detailed essay on the Revolution, presumably issued to coincide with the centenary of William and Mary's accession to the throne. Writing just one year before the publication of Burke's *Reflections*, George Berkeley alleged that, prior to 1688, English liberties "were not ascertained with any precision". Critical of those who "pretend to have discovered our present well-balanced constitution among our rude forefathers in the woods of Germany", Berkeley also rejected the notion that "that liberty was maintained by the *Conqueror*; that it continued unviolated under the PLANTAGENISTS, and even under the TUDORS". Rather, he contended, at the Revolution settlement "the Constitution was new modelled and very greatly improved ... the liberty and property of individuals were secured" (Berkeley 1789: 4, 6). The examples cited here include authors of a conservative disposition as well as those of a more moderate Whig mind, thus highlighting the common acceptance of the idea that the Revolution of 1688 marked a break with the past. The event was conceived as having established a new chapter in the nation's history; a chapter distinguishable for its enhanced and improved liberties. Given the conventionality of this viewpoint, it is unsurprising that Burke's parliamentary associates also subscribed to it. In the Commons' debate on army

estimates, held on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1790, Burke clashed with the leaders of his party over their differing interpretations of the French Revolution. Subsequently drawn into a discussion of the English Revolution, Charles James Fox indicated that it was from 1688 that “we had, undoubtedly, to date the definition and confirmation of our liberties”. Equally distant from Burke, Richard Brinsley Sheridan heralded the English event as having involved more than a substitution of monarchs; instead, Sheridan argued, 1688 was “the glorious æra that gave real and efficient freedom to this country” (PH 27: 96, 100).

Surveying legal, historical and political opinion on the status of the English Revolution demonstrates that, in the mid to late eighteenth-century, it was commonplace to assume that 1688 had witnessed a constitutional transformation. This transformation, it was agreed, had better secured and increased the nation’s liberties. Although forged by Walpole’s propaganda machine to counter the opposition’s arguments, this modernist interpretation of the Revolution eventually evolved into a mainstream discourse, seemingly overpowering the idea that 1688 represented the fundamental continuity of the ancient constitution. In fact in the latter half of the century appeals to historical concepts, such as the ancient constitution, were, to a greater extent, the preserve of reformist and radical Whigs. During George III’s reign an alternative version of the argument was explored, combining ancient constitutionalism with Norman yoke theory to suggest that ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties had been suppressed by William the Conqueror and that the nation had since lived in tyranny (Hill 1958: 94-109). Authors associated the ancient constitution with the original principles of the free Anglo-Saxon constitution and with ideas such as “*a more equal representation of the Commons in annual Parliaments*”; they sought, therefore, a return to first principles, believing that subsequent deviation had corrupted the constitution (Sharp 1780: iii-iv). Similarly, in the context of the American Revolution, James Wilson employed the notion of

customary law (a basic component of the ancient constitution) to defend popular sovereignty. Arguing that custom was initiated and perpetuated through consent, Wilson concluded that customary law and, by extension, English common law, was founded upon the consent of the sovereign people (Jezierski 1971: 99).

Highlighting the widespread acceptance of a modernist reading of the English Revolution illustrates that Burke's discussion of 1688 in *Reflections* is somewhat old fashioned. Burke framed the event as having preserved "our *antient* indisputable laws and liberties, and that *antient* constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty" (Burke 2001: 181). By contrast, figures from a variety of fields, including his own Parliamentary attachment, dissented from this view; instead, when talking of the constitution and of liberties, they looked "no farther back than the Revolution". Given that Burke's text was intended to persuade and given that his target audience of Parliamentary peers were liable to be at variance with the opinion he was to express, it seems more than likely that Burke's aim in assimilating the Revolution to the ancient constitution was to recall his readers to the position iterated during the Sacheverell trial; a position which he regarded as being more appropriate for the present times. It takes no contortions of thought to realise the benefits of his adopting this approach. As indicated above, the classic English version of ancient constitutionalism was a conservative doctrine; it enshrined fundamental, unalterable laws and decreed that future legislation must follow past custom. It is clear, through his suggestion that reformation should adhere to "the principle of reference to antiquity", that Burke subscribed to this particular strand of ancient constitutionalism (Burke 2001: 181). By stressing that the Revolution had been in line with the ancient constitution Burke was able to uphold the prescriptive authority of the ancient constitution and the restrictions that this

placed on political practice.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, he was simultaneously able to downplay the significance of the Revolution as a transformative event. This latter point is crucial. The difficulty with the modernist reading of the Revolution was that it naturally heralded 1688 as a critical juncture; a time when modern liberty had been established. In doing so, this interpretation conceded ground to the radical interpretation in two respects. First, it rendered 1688 as active, rather than passive history; if the nation had freed itself from the confines of antiquity in 1688, what was to stop people from behaving in the same way again? Second, although it jettisoned the ancient conception of liberty, the modernist argument failed to replace the ancient constitution and provide an alternative basis for liberty. Consequently, it enabled radicals to portray Revolution era (or modern) liberty as a rationalist construct; as one Unitarian minister exclaimed, “the liberties which we now happily enjoy, are to be defended on the grounds of their reasonableness, and not their antiquity. For however it may appear to the plodding slave of long prevailing forms, precedent is not reason; prescription is no bar to the sacred claims of universal justice” (Wood 1788: 16). Once the “politic, well wrought veil” is discarded who knows what one may see (Burke 2001: 166). Burke’s appeal to the Revolution was thus designed to hold this veil in place by emphasising historical continuities and divesting 1688 of any transformative or practical political significance.

A final, and remarkable, feature of Burke’s discussion of the status of the English Revolution is his subtle attempt to manipulate this aspect of the conservative discourse on the event. As previously mentioned, conservative Whigs concerned about setting a precedent for resisting constituted authority were keen to depict the Revolution as passive history. Burke, as has been demonstrated, sought to convince his readers of the validity of this interpretation whilst

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<sup>92</sup> As William Paley indicated in his *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy*, prescription was commonly used to secure such obedience (Paley 1785: 407-8).

simultaneously framing it as a widely accepted, “middle” opinion. However, interestingly, Burke also portrayed the Revolution as having provided a constitutional full stop. Implying that such matters had been up for debate prior to 1688, Burke argued that the Declaration of Right thereafter supplied “the cornerstone of our constitution, as reinforced, explained, improved, and in its fundamental principles for ever settled” (Burke 2001: 163). Further to this, in a point which runs against the grain of his overall interpretation of the significance of the Revolution, Burke declared that the event had affected future politics by striking certain forms of action from the political agenda. The Revolution was, according to Burke, the one moment at which Parliament could have imbued the political system with popular sovereignty by opting to have an elective monarchy. Their failure to take this path “is a proof that the nation was of opinion it ought not to be done at any time”; ultimately, “so far is it from being true, that we acquired a right by the Revolution to elect our kings, that if we had possessed it before, the nation did at that time most solemnly renounce and abdicate it, for themselves and for all their posterity for ever” (Burke 2001: 165, 167-8). In these statements Burke was transforming the English Revolution from passive into active history by investing it with enough authority to influence political behaviour one hundred years on. He was, here, quite obviously at odds with the existing establishment discourse on 1688. Moreover, even those of a conservative disposition did not proffer such a limited view of constitutional change; as William Paley indicated, “the habit of reflection to be encouraged, is a sober comparison of the present constitution, not with models of speculative perfection, but with the actual chance of obtaining a better” (Paley 1785: 467; cf. Jenyns 1782: 129). Burke’s unusual pronouncement was questioned, not only by radical readers such as Thomas Paine, but also by contemporaries who otherwise agreed with much of his *Reflections*. One such author, perhaps unaware of the force of Burke’s remarks, accused Paine of attempting to incite that “*disenfranchised posterity* to insurrection” for even mentioning such “imaginary

despotism” (Elliot 1791: 12; cf. Boothby 1791; Smith 1995). Burke’s worry during this period was that the democratic ideas of revolutionary France would reverberate in the context of British debate and would thus affect the makeup of domestic politics. The Revolution of 1688 provided a potential vehicle for these ideas and, once admitted, they knew no bounds; as Burke stated of his opponents, “they have the rights of men. Against these there can be no prescription; against these no agreement is binding” (Burke 2001: 217). This dilemma explains Burke’s unconventional description of the status of the English Revolution. Although keen to prevent 1688 from being used to further radical aims, at the same time Burke was also anxious to find an authoritative political argument through which he could fix the country’s constitutional arrangements. The Revolution offered such an opportunity. Therefore, on the one hand, Burke divests it of any authority as a precedent, whilst simultaneously conceiving it as a landmark event, investing it with the authority to constrain future political action.

To conclude, this chapter has undertaken a comprehensive study of Burke’s uses of the English Revolution of 1688. It set out by highlighting radicals’ efforts to legitimate their arguments for political reform by employing dynamic readings of 1688 which used the event as a vehicle for infusing the British constitution with notions of popular sovereignty. The threat posed by such interpretations was heightened in 1790 because radicals were able to further justify their claims by appealing to the more recent precedent of the French Revolution. Conceiving Burke’s *Reflections* as an intervention in this domestic problem complex, the chapter situated his arguments in the prevailing contexts of seventeenth and eighteenth-century representations of the English Revolution. Adopting this approach has enabled the chapter to move beyond assessments in the existing literature and illustrate the originality and conservatism of Burke’s arguments. In short, it is apparent that Burke



nullified radicals' assertions by dissociating 1688 from ideas of popular choice and government accountability, and redescribing the event as passive history in order to limit its significance as a political precedent. In undertaking these actions, Burke was reiterating a largely outmoded conservative discourse on the event. However, it is clear that he also manipulated this discourse to strengthen his case. For example, in arguing that 1688 had "for ever settled" the "fundamental principles" of the constitution, Burke was depicting the English Revolution as active history and investing it with enough authority to limit the possibility of any wholesale political reform (Burke 2001: 163). Understood in this way, these passages of *Reflections* indicate some of the key ways in which Burke was shifting Whiggism onto a more conservative footing in his response to the perceived democratic threat. The following chapter sheds yet more light on this dimension of the text by undertaking a contextual investigation of Burke's arguments on representation and his discussion of the French army.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **CONFRONTING THE “NEW FANATICS OF POPULAR ARBITRARY POWER”: EDMUND BURKE ON REPRESENTATION AND THE FRENCH ARMY**

The overarching aim in the thesis is to explain Burke’s response to the perceived democratic threat occasioned by British radicals’ uses of the principles and the authority of the French Revolution. To this end, the previous chapter illustrated that dissidents used the later event as an additional, and more recent, precedent to imbue their existing interpretation of 1688 with increased potency to legitimate their reformist demands. The present chapter focuses on the dilemma occasioned by radicals employing a parallel strategy when critiquing the British system of parliamentary representation. In short radicals held the new-modelled French system, which promised a genuinely accountable and participatory government, up as an example in order to strengthen their case for domestic reform. Since they equated liberty with political participation, this form of argument simultaneously served to denounce the lack of liberty in Britain. The challenge posed by radicals’ direct appropriation of the French example was compounded by the actions of moderate Whigs (including those from Burke’s party), who also used the French Revolution to further their own opposition to the British

system of virtual representation. In this instance, however, the Revolution served as an example of the kind of wholesale change that could occur in the absence of moderately democratic reform. These uses of the French Revolution proved equally problematic for Burke; whereas radicals presented an explicit challenge to the existing constitution, his moderate peers, through their eagerness to reform and their willingness to acquiesce to natural rights arguments, acted as potential, if unwitting, gatekeepers for more extreme doctrines.

Section one sets out the prevailing context of radical and reformist argument. Beginning in the decades prior to the French Revolution, it highlights the increasing prominence of concepts of equity and natural rights in reformers' arguments. It then broaches the more immediate context to indicate how the idea of the French Revolution refracted in the context of British political debate. Section two outlines Burke's interventions in this prevailing intellectual and political context, focusing on his redescription of the French Revolution, which highlighted its dangerously democratic character; his contrast between the French and British systems of representation; and his discussion of the French army. Finally, section three evaluates the character of Burke's interventions. By contrast to other interpretations which dismiss or downplay the significance of his anti-democratic arguments, the chapter demonstrates that such arguments were actually integral to his basic purposes in writing *Reflections*. In presenting arguments on representation, Burke often reiterated a conventional conservative discourse which suppressed notions of popular political participation. It is notable, however that he occasionally manipulates this discourse to strengthen it and render it increasingly reactionary, thus further restricting the possibility of democratic encroachment. Similarly, when discussing the French army, Burke puts contemporary anti standing army arguments to novel uses in countering the prevailing belief that democratic ideas increase

liberty. Essentially, by indicating that the propagation of such ideas enables the development of tyrannical, martial government, Burke is able to dissociate democratic ideas from liberty, and portray them as being anathema to freedom.

## **Section One: Dangerous minds: an overview of radical and reformist thought in late eighteenth-century Britain**

### **1.1 Radical and reformist thought in the decades prior to the French Revolution**

A broadly stated but well established consensus of opinion suggests that the latter half of the eighteenth-century witnessed a “qualitative leap” in reformist attitudes (Brewer 1976: 20; cf. Clark 2000: 378; Dickinson 1995: 223; Kramnick 1982: 635; Plumb 1968: 10). Prior to 1760, criticism of the establishment was predominantly expressed in a ‘Country’ ideology, which was concerned with purifying the political system by rooting out the corrupt influence of the court.<sup>93</sup> From the 1760s, dissidents increasingly asserted that “one of the most striking and important” abuses in the political system arose from the “partial and unequal” system of representation. The proposed solution to this problem was to instigate political reform which would secure “a just and equal representation of the people of England in Parliament” (PH 18: 1287, 1297). These two modes of thought were never mutually exclusive. After the 1760s, Country-based arguments still formed part of the intellectual milieu, and it is incorrect

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<sup>93</sup> Blending civic humanist and classical republican themes, Country thinking viewed the British constitution as a “classical balance of independent yet coordinate elements or powers, to maintain which was to maintain virtue but which only the assertion of personal virtue could in the last analysis maintain” (Pocock 1975: 486). This balance was perceived to be threatened by corruption, which, conceptualised in the wider, republican sense, was associated with attempts by the court to exercise undue political influence through its extensive powers of patronage. The problem with the exercise of such patronage was that it encouraged “the substitution of private for public authority, of dependence for independence”. Frequently championed solutions aimed at purifying the system and involved shorter (sometimes annual, sometimes triennial) parliaments and excluding those holding offices of state (‘placemen’) from the House of Commons (Pocock 1975: 407; cf. Goldie 2006: 64-78).

to suggest, as Isaac Kramnick does, that Country ideology was replaced, or that traditional Country remedies were “shunted aside” – a case in point being the parliamentary motion cited above, during which Jonathan Wilkes claimed that obtaining a more equal system of representation would also mean “laying the axe to the root of corruption and treating influence” (Kramnick 1982: 635; PH 18: 1295). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that a decisive shift occurred which involved questioning the ability of the House of Commons to represent the people. This shift in the tone and content of political argument was ultimately brought about by a combination of developments in the political, socio-economic and ideological spheres (Dickinson 1977: 205-6; Wilson 1989: 375-7). Although some factors exerted a long-term influence, the American question and, more specifically, a process of “ideological contamination” with the colonists arguably provided the most important immediate catalyst for the shift (Brewer 1976: 207). The dispute with America was initially manifest in the mid 1760s in the clamour against the Stamp Act 1765 which popularised the phrase ‘no taxation without representation’.<sup>94</sup> Thrust into the spotlight, the issue of representation was thus adopted by British reformers who began to recognise and challenge similar grievances and the anonymous text, *Reflexions on Representation in Parliament* (1766), is commonly regarded as the “opening salvo” in a longstanding campaign to make Parliament more representative of wider public opinion; a campaign which led to seven key motions being brought before the House of Commons between Wilkes’ effort in 1776 and the publication of Burke’s *Reflections* in November 1790 (Kramnick 1982: 638).<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> The Stamp Act 1765 was the first direct tax to be imposed upon the American colonists and required printed materials (ranging from legal documents to newspapers to playing cards) to carry an embossed revenue stamp. The dispute over the Stamp Act is given full length treatment in Thomas (1975). Edmund Burke’s role in the repeal effort is outlined in Volume One of F. P. Lock’s recent biography (1998: 216-221).

<sup>95</sup> This figure does not include John Sawbridge’s annual attempts to introduce shorter parliaments, nor does it include motions (such as the Duke of Richmond’s in 1780) which were introduced in the House of Lords.

As in America, British grievances over representation occasioned significant challenges to the existing notion of virtual representation. Pilloried in radical extra-parliamentary thought, the concept was likewise attacked by moderate opposition Whigs such as Charles James Fox, who declared that “a virtual representation was only a mere succedaneum for an equal representation” (PH 22: 1432; cf. Cartwright 1776: 48 n; Price 1776: 41). In attacking virtual representation, the new reforming ethos was driven by at least two avowed aims. First, proponents sought to disenfranchise the rotten boroughs and give “the rich and populous manufacturing towns of Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, [and] Sheffield ... an equitable share in the formation of those laws by which they are governed” (PH 18: 1292). This argument was underpinned by the idea that representation should be wedded to interests. It was believed that increasing the diversity of interests (in this example the manufacturing interest) represented in the House of Commons would engender a proportionate increase in the quality of representation; “in order to make that House perfect”, argued one MP, “it should contain the landed, the navy, the army, the monied, and in short every interest; but it did not at present” (PH 22: 1433).<sup>96</sup> A second identifiable aim was to reform the system of representation according to the principle of “equity” (Anon. 1766: 5). This notion was popular with dissidents out-of-doors, but was also championed by a large number of MPs. Upon declaring his support for Pitt’s reform motion in 1783, Fox boldly proclaimed that the constitution “required innovation and renovation”. Rather than merely increasing the representation of counties and of the city of London, he indicated that he was, instead, for

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<sup>96</sup> This line of argument was echoed out-of-doors. In his widely read *Political Disquisitions*, James Burgh stated that the consequence of having instituted parliament at a time when land constituted the only form of property was that “the landed interest was too well represented, to the detriment (in our times) of the mercantile and monied”. This situation occasioned “various evils” as “many of our country-gentlemen are but bad judges of the importance of the mercantile interest, and do not wisely consult it in their bills and acts”. Further to this, the over representation of land tempted ministers to “burden commerce with taxes for the sake of easing the landed interest” (Burgh 1774-5a: 51; cf. Hulme 1771: 76).

“giving some [representation] to the large towns of Birmingham and Manchester, &c. in order to make the representation more equal” (PH 23: 862, 863).<sup>97</sup>

It is this second strand evidenced in the reform debates which is of greater relevance in fleshing out the prevailing context of argument into which Burke issued his *Reflections*. This is because the desire to sculpt a system of representation which accounted for principles of equity was often underpinned by a practical adherence to ideas of popular sovereignty. Thus when supporting John Sawbridge’s motion for reform in 1784, the MP James Martin admonished his fellow Members for having “forgotten the relation they bore to the people, of whom they were the creatures, and by whom they ought to be chosen in such manner, and for such space of time as the people might think best” (PH 24: 998). Further to this underpinning, within the principle of equity a strain of thought developed which conceived representation in terms of individuals and which unabashedly equated liberty with political participation. This association was drawn in 1776 by Richard Price, the dissenting minister who, in 1790, would be converted by Burke into the spokesman for British radicalism. In his *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty*, Price delineated four different types of liberty (“physical”, “moral”, “religious”, and “civil”) and argued that “there is one general idea that runs through them all ... the idea of *Self-direction*, or *Self-government*”; “as far as, in any instance, the operation of any cause comes in to restrain the power of Self-government, so far Slavery is introduced” (Price 1776: 3, 5). Liberty could be perfectly realised only in small states which allowed every member “immediate participation in the powers of legislation and government”. In larger states, where such a direct form of democracy was impossible, Price maintained that self-government, and thus liberty, was achieved through proxy, stating that

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<sup>97</sup> This concern for equity did not automatically equate to a desire to see universal male suffrage implemented (see, for example, PH 23: 864).

men could “participate in these powers by a delegation of them to a body of representatives” (Price 1776: 9-10).<sup>98</sup> Price offered a not so subtle hint that he considered Britain to be lacking in liberty and his thinking on this point was frequently reiterated by reformist MPs during the aforementioned Commons debates (Price 1776: 12; cf. PH 22: 1438; PH 24: 980, 993-4,).<sup>99</sup>

An additional development in political debate involved claiming liberty as “a natural and unalienable right” (Price 1776: 1). This belief often served as the foundation for nonconformist calls for religious tolerance and religious liberty, but it also carried much political import as it implied an “equal, impartial liberty” (Fownes 1772: 15; cf. Toulmin 1774: 10). Consequently, civil liberty, or political participation, could be demanded as a natural right. Granville Sharp, a reformist Anglican, pursued this line of argument, stating that it was “*Treason against the Constitution* to attempt to deprive any free British Subjects of their *natural Right* to a Share in the *Legislature*”. Specifically addressing the American dispute, Sharp informed his readers that “making laws for the subjects of any part of the British Empire, *without their participation and assent*, is INIQUITOUS, and therefore *unlawful*” as it contravened “the necessary *legal Formalities of Representation and Assent*” (Sharp 1774: 28, 11-2). Commentators have noted that such arguments became “increasingly prevalent” in radical discourse over the course of the latter half of the eighteenth-century (Hampsher-Monk 2006: 667). However, it is also significant that, by 1790, members of

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<sup>98</sup> Upon setting out his conception of liberty, Price also outlined the conditions under which such liberty could, and could not, exist. “If the persons to whom the trust of government is committed hold their places for short terms; if they are chosen by the unbiased voices of a majority of the state, and subject to their instructions; Liberty will be enjoyed in its highest degree. But if they are chosen for long terms by a part only of the state; and if during that term they are subject to no control from their constituents; the very idea of Liberty will be lost, and the power of chusing representatives becomes nothing but a power, lodged in a *few*, to chuse at certain periods, a body of *Masters* for themselves and for the rest of the Community” (Price 1776: 9-10).

<sup>99</sup> During the debate on Pitt’s first attempted parliamentary reform in 1782, Sir Watkin Lewes replicated Price’s sentiments almost exactly by arguing that civil liberty “was more or less perfect in proportion to the share the people had in the government” and further stating that “civil liberty could not exist without political liberty” (PH 22: 1438).



Burke's parliamentary party were also willing to employ natural rights language (see Chapter Two). This trend had been initiated when the Duke of Richmond, previously a loyal member of the Rockingham party, moved a startlingly radical motion in the House of Lords which aimed to equalise electoral districts and implement universal male suffrage (PH 21: 686-8). Revealing himself to be diametrically opposed to the "partial and unequal Representation" suffered under the name of virtual representation, he argued that "every Commoner of this Realm ... hath a natural unalienable and equal Right to vote in the Election of his Representative in Parliament" and sought, through his reform, to establish "a free, true, and equal Representation of all the People" (Richmond 1783: 8-9, 11).<sup>100</sup>

## 1.2 Radical and reformist thought circa 1790

It has thus far been argued that dissatisfaction with the system of representation formed a key strand in reformist thought in Britain in the two decades prior to the publication of Burke's *Reflections*. Within this broad point it has been demonstrated that arguments for reform were often couched in terms of equity, that liberty could be defined in terms of political participation, and that some reformers believed that individuals had a natural right to experience this form of liberty. After the failure of William Pitt's motion in 1785, there was a brief lull in the call for parliamentary reform and in extra-parliamentary radicalism more broadly. However, it is important to note that the ideas, grievances and vocabulary of the reformers did not disappear. Despite their relative stasis during this period, the Society for Constitutional Information (SCI), for example, continued to sponsor a mammoth investigation into the state of parliamentary representation (Black 1963: 204-5). Moreover,

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<sup>100</sup> It was the Duke's misfortune that his effort should coincide with the commencement of the Gordon Riots and, after being stopped mid-flow on account of the dangerous scenes outside Parliament, he was forced to abandon his motion. His plan for reforming the system of representation was outlined in a publication, three years later.

the final years of the decade witnessed renewed interest in parliamentary reform as the cause benefited from the boost to radical activity provided by the Dissenters' attempts to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts and the centenary celebrations of the Revolution of 1688. Here, it is important to note two points: first, both the repeal movement and the celebrations of the English Revolution drew upon the aforementioned language of natural rights and equality; second, there was a "striking" affinity between those who supported repealing the Test and Corporation Acts and those who sought to reform the system of parliamentary representation (Ditchfield 1974: 558).<sup>101</sup> These facts are significant because they demonstrate that Britain, *circa* 1790, contained an assortment of reformers who were committed to employing natural rights arguments with a view to amending domestic socio-political arrangements.<sup>102</sup> It is within this context of bubbling domestic radicalism which we must consider the influence of the French Revolution upon British political argument.

Twenty-first-century commentators are largely agreed upon the status, if not the meaning, of the French Revolution. It is "incontrovertibly the defining act of modern politics" (Claeys 2007: 1). Moreover, it embodied "drastically different constitutional principles" to the American and English Revolutions since, unlike previous revolutions, the French example involved a society "*seeking to reconstitute itself* on the basis of new norms and principles"

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<sup>101</sup> The repeal movement regarded religious toleration as "the exercise of a natural and inalienable right" and strove for civic equality on the same grounds (Barbault 1790: 16). In a similar vein the English Revolution, an event represented as a having set a reformist precedent which could legitimate later arguments for change, was increasingly viewed as having been effected according to the "natural rights of mankind" (Kippis 1788: 27). These events are described in greater detail in Chapters Two and Three respectively. It is an interesting aside to note that Ditchfield found no equivalent link between those voting to repeal the Test and Corporation Acts and those voting to abolish the slave trade (Ditchfield 1974: 558).

<sup>102</sup> I have kept this phrasing ("amending domestic socio-political arrangements") deliberately vague. In his insightful essay on "the fragmented ideology of reform", Mark Philp rightly cautions against assuming "that there is a sufficiently discrete entity, 'the reform movement', with objectives of which success or failure can be predicated". Rather, radicalism in the 1790s "resists a simple definitive classification of its nature and objectives, and it demands a more complex understanding of its ideology and political objectives". Philp does, however, acknowledge that principles of natural rights and popular sovereignty were "firmly lodged at the centre of radical politics throughout the decade" (Philp 1991: 55, 56, 59).

(Hampsher-Monk 2005: 5). However, passing judgement without the benefits of hindsight, their counterparts from 1790 largely failed to grasp the significance of the events across the channel. Consequently, as one would expect, the vast majority of British commentators emphasised parallels with the English and American revolutions and frequently described the French Revolution by using points of reference that were drawn from British politics: Earl Stanhope, for example, wrote that the French Revolution had given “a wholesome lesson to *Tories*”, and Charles James Fox thought it had struck “a good stout blow against the influence of the crown” (Stanhope 1790: 25; Fox cited in Derry 1989: 40; cf. Price 1991: 195, 196). The fact that the French Revolution was interpreted through a British lens explains how it could be considered to be instructive to, or in some way influential for, British politics.

In this vein, many radical authors appropriated the French Revolution and held it up as an example in order to strengthen their case for domestic reform. In doing so, they lauded the “great principle [the French] have held forth, the natural equality of men”, they contrasted France (“a mighty empire breaking from bondage, and exerting the energies of recovered freedom”) with England (“which used to glory in being the assertor of liberty”), and they implored their neighbours to “be our model, as we have been yours” (Barbauld 1790: 39, 34 36). This notion of adopting French principles is particularly evident in arguments critiquing the existing system of representation in Britain. France’s new-modelled system of representation promised a genuinely accountable government and thus tapped into the prevailing dissatisfaction that radicals felt for the British system which offered only a “shadow of representation” (Wollstonecraft 1790: 148; cf. Macaulay 1790: 48-52). This was certainly the case with regards to those societies highlighted by Burke in his *Reflections*: the revitalised SCI announced that it cherished the “Hope and Expectation from the present Enlightened State of Mankind” and likewise encouraged “the rapid progress of the Principles

and Spirit of Freedom, [so] that a pure and equal Representation will progressively take place in the several Communities of Europe, and gradually extend over the Globe”; following these sentiments, the Revolution Society declared that Britain should be “provoked by the example of France to correct abuses that are every day growing more palpable; and, in particular to substitute for its present partial and imperfect Representation such an equal and pure Representation as our brethren in France are likely to enjoy” (SCI cited in Black 1963: 209; Revolution Society 1789: 77-8). Such a concern also featured heavily in the sermon delivered at the Old Jewry by Burke’s *bête noir*, Richard Price. The dissenting minister reiterated his earlier arguments, equating “true liberty” with a “fair and equal” system of representation. However, observing that inequalities in the system of representation rendered the British constitution “excellent chiefly in form and theory”, Price offered a more explicit criticism of the political situation, further stating that the inadequate state of representation provided the “fundamental grievance” of the times. Remembering the zeal with which the issue had been taken up by radicals in the 1770s and by William Pitt in the 1780s, Price mourned Parliament’s present “inattention” to the problem and lamented that “this inattention will continue ... till the acquisition of a pure and equal representation by other countries (while we are mocked with the shadow) kindles our shame” (Price 1991: 192).

Further to impacting upon radical arguments, the French Revolution also influenced the strategy of argument employed by more moderate critics of the establishment. Whigs of this persuasion were largely sympathetic to the Revolution; moreover, they echoed the Revolution Society’s hopes that Britain would be “provoked” by the goings on in France. However, by contrast to the radicals’ direct appropriation of the French example, those of a more moderate stripe instead sought to imply that it was essential to undertake moderate reform of the system of representation in order to prevent the need for more wholesale changes in the

future. When moving his motion for parliamentary reform in 1790, Henry Flood suggested that the “disturbances” in France were born “from want of timely and temperate reform”. Rather than an example to be followed, France was, in fact, an example to be heeded; “timely reform”, Flood stressed, “renders revolutions unnecessary; whilst they who oppose such reform, may be enemies to revolution in their hearts, but they are friends to it by their folly” (PH 28: 455-6; cf. Anon. 1792: 32-3; PH 29: 1301; Smith 1995: 262).<sup>103</sup>

The existing system of virtual representation bore the brunt of moderate Whigs’ frustrations. For Charles James Fox, “no man could deny that the representation in parliament was inadequate”; likewise, Flood charged this system with causing the war against America. Claiming that the dispute “began with virtual representation and ended in dismemberment”, he urged reform, warning his fellow Members that “virtual parliaments, and an inadequate representation, have cost you enough abroad already; take care they do not cost you more at home, by costing you your constitution” (PH 28: 472, 458). Citing virtual representation as the cause of the colonial quarrel was common in reformist circles, and it was an argument that was regularly (and vehemently) rejected by defenders of the existing system. Indeed, Edmund Burke’s contribution to the debate on Flood’s motion towed such a line (PH 28: 477). Notwithstanding this point, the reformist argument offered in this debate is of particular significance because it was unusual to portray the threat from maintaining virtual representation in such immediate terms.

For moderate Whigs, a frequently cited difficulty with virtual representation was that it was “truly dangerous to the democratical part of our constitution” (Anon. 1995: 330). In

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<sup>103</sup> The idea that moderate reform should be pursued to prevent more drastic measures was a popular mode of argument and had previously been employed by Burke in his *Speech on Economical Reform* (WS 3: 481-551).

opposition, some put traditional Country measures to new uses by arguing that annual parliaments could secure equal representation, thus giving the Commons “the pleasure of hearing the VOICE of the PEOPLE” (Member of the House of Commons 1790: 41). Others, however, asserted that the constitution was founded in majoritarian principles and the rights of man – both of which were denied by virtual representation (Bousfield 1791: 10; Smith 1995: 261; cf. PH 28: 454-5; White 1792: 7, 21-3). Their willingness to employ these democratic ideas highlights the extent to which moderate Whiggism overlapped with the more critical strain of thought articulated by dissidents such as Richard Price.<sup>104</sup> The distinction, however, lay in their varying conceptions of politics: Price’s sermon hailed political representation as a marker for “legitimate government”, and decried anything less as “usurpation”; moreover, he exalted in the “diffusion of knowledge which has undermined superstition and error” and issued a stark warning to “all ye supporters of slavish governments and slavish hierarchies” (Price 1991: 192, 195, 196). Conversely, although Henry Flood denounced the House of Commons for being a “second rate aristocracy instead of a popular representation”, moderate Whigs were clearly more committed to the mixed constitution (PH 28: 463). They held to a patrician conception of politics and regarded the House of Commons as the democratic element of a constitution which benefited by actively incorporating aristocratic and monarchical elements (see, for instance, PR 27: 95). Viewed theoretically, the Commons was the “democratical part” of the arrangement and the proper functioning of government required that it should act as such, rather than existing as “another aristocratical power” (Anon. 1995: 320; cf. White 1792: 49). In short, moderate reformers

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<sup>104</sup> Even authors who were unwilling to admit democratic principles acknowledged that “the House of Commons has been arraigned and deservedly arraigned”. Rather than sanction majoritarian principles, the answer for such types lay in altering the composition of the House by introducing traditional Country remedies, for example shortening the duration of parliament, removing rotten boroughs, and “vesting the power of election in the hands of those who are most likely to exercise that power with freedom and independence”. Only by undertaking these reforms could the nation ascertain “a patriotic and virtuous assembly, solicitous for the public good, and sensibly alive to every encroachment of prerogative” (Green 1791: 33, 34, 35).

aimed to strengthen, not alter, the constitution by “root[ing] up every thing like an Aristocratic organization in the composition of the third branch of the Legislature, which ought to be a real Democracy, and a free, and fair, and unbiased representation of the People” (Anon. 1792: 34).

As avowed supporters of “peace and order and subordination and tranquillity”, moderate Whigs saw no harm in openly pushing for their desired reforms. They rejected (or were completely oblivious to) Burke’s concern that through their unguarded discourse they would serve as gatekeepers for more dangerously democratic ideas. This point is illustrated by a respondent to *Reflections* who, writing in December 1790, confessed that he could not “apprehend any such danger as you [Burke] seem to fear from allowing men to speculate on the commonwealth as much as they please”. “Speeches and pamphlets”, the author maintained, “will produce but little effect, except where they find the minds of men predisposed and ripe for the subject” (Boothby 1791: 114, 13-4). That a certain body of society was “predisposed and ripe for the subject” was precisely Burke’s fear and the following section of this chapter seeks to illustrate this point whilst also setting out his response to this dilemma.

## **Section Two: Burke on the French Revolution, representation, and the French army**

The previous section demonstrated that dissatisfaction with the unreformed system of parliamentary representation formed a key issue in British politics in the decades prior to the French Revolution. Reformers often grounded their arguments in principles of equity, and equated liberty with political participation. In the immediate context of Burke’s *Reflections*,

the existing system of virtual representation was increasingly assailed by radicals and by moderates from Burke's own party. The French Revolution was crucial to both groups' strategies. In short, radicals employed the new-modelled French system as an example to be imitated, while moderates used it to illustrate their claim that "timely reform" was necessary to shore up the democratic part of the British constitution and prevent similar events from occurring at home. Burke was acutely aware of the threat posed by these domestic uses of the French Revolution. In *Reflections* he urged his audience to desist from copying "the model held up to ourselves" and "to keep at a distance your [the French] panacea, or your plague" (Burke 2001: 217, 253). The present section demonstrates that Burke sought to affect the political context in Britain by redescribing the French Revolution to highlight the dangerousness of its perceived democratic character. Furthermore, it also sets out his practical critique of the event. This entailed comparing unfavourably the French system of representation with the British and discussing the role he foresaw for the French army in post-revolutionary France. As with his redescription of the French Revolution, each of these arguments served as interventions in the previously identified domestic debates by indicating that democratic ideas necessarily decreased, rather than increased, liberty.

### 2.1 Burke's redescription of the French Revolution

Referring to the French Revolution, Burke introduced his *Reflections* by announcing that "we are now in a condition to discern, with tolerable exactness, the true nature of the object held up to our imitation" (Burke 2001: 154). In discussing the view given in his *magnum opus*, commentators have overwhelmingly made use of a few choice quotes which justify their interpretation of Burke as a "gradualist", whose main point of order concerned "the question of the pace or speed of reform" in France (Conniff 1994: 233, 243). He was undoubtedly



perturbed by the pace of change in France. However, this was arguably not the overriding issue, for, as a Whig, Burke certainly regarded revolutionary change as an option, even if it would be “the very last resource of the thinking and the good” (Burke 2001: 181). Moreover, limiting one’s study of his analysis of the French Revolution to such “procedural objections” involves (as one commentator has helpfully suggested) neglecting the “substantive issues” in *Reflections* (Fasel 1976: 32). In other words, to properly grasp the point of Burke’s political argument it is necessary to move beyond a superficial level of analysis and examine his perception of the content of the ideas that irked him. Over and above the “speed of reform” in France, it is clear that Burke was interested in the *direction* of reform. To this end, he stated that revolutionary France had rejected a British style constitution and had instead “framed democratic governments”. “All the struggle, all the dissension arose afterwards upon the preference of a despotic democracy to a government of reciprocal controul”, Burke informed his readers. The government of France affected to be a “pure democracy” and, although he believed that it would degenerate, Burke explained that “for the present I admit it to be a contrivance of the nature and effect of what it pretends to” (Burke 2001: 210, 305, 291; cf. 244, 273). It seems likely that this characterisation of the French government as a “pure democracy” was, at least in part, designed to deter his contemporaries from hailing the French Revolution as a flowering of liberty. Indeed, during the Debate on Army Estimates, Burke had riled Sheridan who accused him of committing “libel [against] the whole French nation” for avowing a similar description of the new French government (PR 27: 99). Having thus defined the nature of the revolutionary government, *Reflections* contained a number of key sections designed to remind his readers of the problems posed by democracy and by democratic ideas generally.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> At this juncture it is important to remember that Burke was committed to the idea of a mixed constitution. This meant that he saw merit in democracy only when it was “compounded with other forms”. When he conceded that some states (“very few, and very particularly circumstanced”) would require a “purely democratic

Drawing upon Aristotle's classification of constitutions, Burke's basic point in this respect was that "a democracy has many striking points of resemblance with a tyranny". The potential for tyrannical rule by a democratic government arose from the fact that "the majority of the citizens is capable of exercising the most cruel oppressions upon the minority", and Burke deemed this "popular persecution" even more oppressive than that suffered under a despotic monarch, for being subjected to the tyranny of the multitude was akin to being "overpowered by a conspiracy of their species" (Burke 2001: 292, 293). Further to flagging up the potential for tyranny in democracies, Burke also highlighted the dangers of operating an unfettered participatory government. He again stressed that these dangers were greater than would be encountered under a single ruler, whose power is "by no means compleat" since it must be exercised through intermediaries, or "instruments". By contrast, in popular governments, the people possess a more complete form of power; "they are nearer to their objects" because they are, "in a great measure, their own instruments" and consequently meet fewer "impediments". The subsequent danger from "collective sovereignty" was twofold. First, Burke argued that it suffers from a lack of accountability as individuals are swallowed up by the wider concept of 'the people' and "are less under responsibility to one of the greatest controlling powers on earth, the sense of fame and estimation". Without the restraints provided by opinion, the people would act as they pleased, mistaking self-praise for the approbation of the entire nation. This being the case, "a perfect democracy is therefore the most shameless thing in the world". As a second point, Burke noted that, "as it is the most shameless, it is also the most fearless" since "the people at large" are too numerous to be subject to punishment (Burke 2001: 257-8).

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form", it is clear that he had ancient city states in mind as he unequivocally ruled that such a mode of government would be unsuitable in the case of France "or of any other great country". "Until now", he continued, "we have seen no examples of considerable democracies". It is of interest that Burke did compare revolutionary France to those "antient democracies" (Burke 2001: 293, 292, 377).

By appealing to the controlling power of opinion, Burke's argument at this stage evidences his conception of politics as outlined in Chapter Two. This is equally true for the alternative he proposed to genuinely participatory government. Although he admitted that it is the people's right to expect that government should be conducted in their interests, Burke reiterated his patrician model of governance, arguing that they "ought to be persuaded that they are full as little entitled, and far less qualified ... to use any arbitrary power whatsoever". "Abject submission to their occasional will" is, Burke maintained, akin to allowing the people "to exercise an unnatural inverted domination". In facilitating this socio-political inversion, governors lose "all moral principle, all sense of dignity, all use of judgement, and all consistency of character" and the people, whom Burke, it will be remembered, did not believe were capable of independent thought, "give themselves up a proper, a suitable, but a most contemptible prey to the servile ambition of popular sycophants or courtly flatterers" (Burke 2001: 258). Crucially, Burke advanced his argument from that outlined in Chapter Two by revealing that the consecration of the state, by exerting "an wholesome awe upon free citizens", was an essential accompaniment to representative government, where voting must be considered as a "holy function" and it must be impressed upon the citizenry that they exercise their elective powers only on trust (Burke 2001: 257, 258). As Daniel I. O'Neill has recognised, in this analysis the established church serves as the institutional embodiment of the aesthetic principle of the sublime. It defends the "ongoing civilization process" by bullying the people, "filling them with fearful reverence in the presence of the state's representatives, [who are] understood as extensions of God's will" (O'Neill 2007: 142). Far from acting "with zeal and alacrity for the maintenance of order" (as a member of his party had suggested), Burke argued that, by attacking this conduit of civilization and unshackling themselves from the constraints of an aristocratic model of governance, the French were

actually “destroying at their pleasure the whole original fabric of their society” (PR 27: 99; Burke 2001: 259). No longer regarding the state “with pious awe and trembling solicitude”, he believed that the “despotic democracy” would empower the French population, thereby encouraging the government to pursue “floating fancies or fashions”. Once adrift from the wisdom of their ancestors, France would become inherently unstable and would eventually “crumble away ... into the dust and powder of individuality” (Burke 2001: 260, 305, 259, 260; cf. O’Neill 2007: 142).

The rights of man were the undoubted catalyst in this process of unshackling and degradation. For Burke, France was now governed according to a “code of the rights of men”, which had stripped the country of “all natural sense of wrong and right”. He regarded the revolutionaries as “professors of the rights of men”, and dismissed the French National Assembly as an “assembly of the rights of men”. The events of October 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>, which provoked Burke’s infamous rapture over Marie Antoinette, had been sketched by the “hardy pencil of a great master, from the school of the rights of men” and such principles had since permeated deep into French society (Burke 2001: 390, 244, 272, 273, 235). The revolutionaries had “destroyed the principle of obedience” in the army by equipping individual soldiers with these ideas; similarly, buoyed by the rights of man, Burke predicted that France’s colonists would attempt to assert an independent constitution and free trade, and that the “negroes” would likewise rise against the colonists. Domestically, he forecast dissent from the peasants, whom, upon discovering the essential equality which the rights of man presumed, would refuse to pay rent to their aristocratic landlords, questioning whether it is “among the rights of man to pay tribute to his equals”.<sup>106</sup> To suppress each rebellion would require martial action;

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<sup>106</sup> As Burke noted, in July 1790 the citizens of Lyon had refused to pay their taxes on such grounds (Burke 2001: 394).

“massacre, torture, hanging!”, Burke concluded, “these are your rights of men” (Burke 2001: 390, 393, 390).

As indicated in Chapter Two and in the previous section of the present chapter, Whigs such as Charles James Fox and Richard Brinsley Sheridan thought that appeals to either natural rights or the rights of man could be reconciled with support for a patrician model of politics. This belief led them to employ this language when pushing for (moderate) reform and underpinned their favourable reaction to the French Revolution, which they viewed as an attempt to claim an English-style liberty. After having defined the “true nature” of the French Revolution, Burke sought to dissuade these Whigs from holding such views and to convince them of the despotic nature of the rights of man. In doing so, he drew upon familiar historical examples, arguing, for instance, that the revolution across the channel had witnessed even more tyrannical behaviour than that of Henry VIII of England, for the Tudor king had not known what an “effectual instrument of despotism was to be found in that grand magazine of offensive weapons, the rights of man” (Burke 2001: 281). Burke’s key difficulty with the rights of man lay in their democratic character as such rights were applicable to everyone, everywhere. “They have ‘the rights of men’”, Burke said of his foes. “Against these there can be no prescription; against these no agreement is binding: these admit no temperament, and no compromise: any thing withheld from their full demand is so much of fraud and injustice”. Indeed, “men, with them”, he warned, “are strictly equal, and are entitled to equal rights in their own government” (Burke 2001: 217, 346; cf. 218).

Here, we come to the crux of Burke’s redescription of the French Revolution and his wider fears about the propagation of democratic ideas. The “monstrous fiction” of social and political equality that the rights of man promoted was dangerous because it served “only to

aggravate and embitter that real inequality, which it can never remove". To Burke's mind, the existing hierarchical order was advantageous since it secured a "protected, satisfied, laborious, and obedient people". Moreover, he revealed that it benefited those at the bottom of the socio-political ladder (i.e. those "destined to travel in the obscure walk of laborious life") by enabling them to acquire "true moral equality" by recognising "the happiness that is to be found by virtue in all conditions". "Difficulty", Burke reminded his readers, "is good for a man" (Burke 2001: 189).<sup>107</sup> The trouble with spreading the rights of man was that such democratic ideas transformed the "inferior classes" and those in "servile employments" into citizens who could participate in public life by exercising political functions. As Don Herzog explains, merely naming the characters that he had in mind at this point (the "hair-dresser" and "tallow-chandler"), revealed to Burke's elite audience "the concrete realities of democracy", showing them "that citizenship is a noisome, even noxious, ideal" (Burke 2001: 307, 206, 205; Herzog 1998: 493). Emphasising this point, Burke graciously acknowledged that "such descriptions of men ought not to suffer oppression from the state"; yet, he stressed, "the state suffers oppression, if such as they, either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule" (Burke 2001: 206).

On account of their all-encompassing nature, Burke urged that natural rights could operate only in the state of nature, since they were completely incompatible with the dictates of civil society. Once man becomes a societal being, "all the advantages for which it is made become his right". To Burke, societal rights were the "*real* rights of men", and they did not include

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<sup>107</sup> Tom Furniss has written of Burke's "meritocratic politics", and it is true that the latter denied that he wished to "confine power, authority and distinction to blood, and names, and titles" (Furniss 1993: 223; Burke 2001: 206). Nevertheless, Burke clearly qualified this comment, stating that "every thing ought to be open; but not indifferently to every man. No rotation; no appointment by lot; no mode of election operating in the spirit of sortition or rotation, can be generally good in a government conversant in extensive objects". Ultimately, Burke did "not hesitate to say, that the road to eminence and power, from obscure condition, ought not to be made too easy, nor a thing too much of course" (Burke 2001: 206-7).

the right to participate in government; “as to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in the management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society” (Burke 2001: 217, 218). Positioning himself thus, Burke was arguing against radical British Whigs, for whom liberty, it has been demonstrated, was associated with political participation. Such democratic ideas were dangerous because they encouraged notions of “collective sovereignty”, and, as outlined above, carried the tyrannical threat of oppression by the majority and “popular persecution”. “By these theorists”, Burke stated, “the right of the people is almost always sophistically confounded with their power”. In a similar vein to his point concerning ‘the people’s’ lack of accountability, Burke acknowledged the potentially limitless power of the “body of the community”. Nevertheless, power did not equate with right, and, he stressed, “men have no right to what is not reasonable and to what is not for their benefit”. Again, clearly evidencing his underlying conception of politics, Burke insisted that society required that, “in the mass and body as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection” (Burke 2001: 221, 219).

## 2.2 Edmund Burke’s practical critique of the French Revolution

### 2.2.1. On “the constitution of the legislature”

To Burke’s mind, maintaining political control rested upon being able to persuade the people “that they are full as little entitled, and far less qualified ... to use any arbitrary power whatsoever” (Burke 2001: 258). This control was exerted on a practical political level by denying the wider population a political voice; that is, by denying them full political representation. Part of Burke’s practical critique of the French Revolution involved targeting

the “constitution of the legislature” in France and contrasting it unfavourably with that in Britain.<sup>108</sup> Burke recognised that the British model had been assaulted by “those democratists” who challenged the legitimacy of existing institutions; “our new fanatics of popular arbitrary power”, he complained, “maintain that a popular election is the sole lawful source of authority” (Burke 2001: 343, 214, 176). Quoting at length the dissatisfaction displayed by Richard Price in his sermon at the Old Jewry, Burke sardonically noted that “the Revolution Society has discovered that the English nation is not free” (Burke 2001: 213). Observing the contempt in which they held the political arrangements in Britain, Burke also noted that domestic radicals were “so much enamoured of your [the French] fair and equal representation” (Burke 2001: 215). With this in mind he undertook a detailed assessment of the system of representation in France, contrasting it unfavourably with that in Britain.

The first element of this assessment assailed the composition of the National Assembly, which he identified as being a significant trigger for the “dreadful things” that had occurred in France. Aghast at “the list of the persons and descriptions elected”, Burke decried the “inferior, unlearned” lawyers, the “country clowns”, the traders, who “had never known any thing beyond their counting-house”, and so on (Burke 2001: 192, 196, 197). The difficulty with employing these descriptions in such an eminent role was that they were “men formed to be instruments not controls”. “No name, no power, no function no artificial institution whatsoever, can make the men of whom any system of authority is composed, any other than God, and nature, and education, and their habits of life have made them”, Burke argued. By

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<sup>108</sup> Burke’s adoption of a more rational discourse in this section of *Reflections* serves as a cautionary point to one commentator who, after following the prejudices of eighteenth-century reviewers, has written of Burke’s “emotional response to the revolution” (Hodson 2007: 184). In characterising this aspect of the text, I would agree with F. P. Lock, who has emphasised the richness of Burke’s writing, arguing that “no selection of passages can adequately represent the style of the *Reflections*” (Lock 1985: 124).



elevating men “from the humblest rank of subordination”, men “who had no previous fortune in character at stake”, France would beget moderation; these men would, he predicated, “pursue their private interests” over and above the wider interests of the state, greedily chasing the remunerations of office and failing to attend to the stability of property (Burke 2001: 198, 193, 197).

That this would happen was “planted in the nature of things” and Burke drew equally inevitable conclusions upon assessing the mode of representation in France (Burke 2001: 197). His basic point in this respect was that popular choice could not serve as the sole marker for legitimate representation. He was highly critical of the prominent role occupied by the wider population in selecting the representatives of the National Assembly, arguing that “virtue and wisdom may be the objects of [the people’s] choice; but their choice confers neither the one nor the other on those upon whom they lay their ordaining hands” (Burke 2001: 193). Fleshing out his aforementioned abstract concerns about the tyrannical nature of democracy, Burke painted a picture of an assembly that was overrun by a sovereign people. The chamber suffered the “greatest humiliation” as it lacked any genuine authority and the members engaged in a “compelled appearance of deliberation”, whilst, in reality, being at the behest of “the polluted nonsense of their most licentious and giddy coffee-houses”. Despite being part of the problem, Burke reasoned that the representatives “must themselves groan under the tyranny of which they have all the shame, none of the direction, and little of the profit” (Burke 2001: 227, 228, 230). He continued this broad theme when assessing the majoritarian principles of the proposed electoral system, arguing that the notion that “twenty-four millions ought to prevail over two hundred thousand” was true, only “if the constitution of a kingdom be a problem of arithmetic”. To reasonable men, he scoffed, the idea “is ridiculous” since “the will of the many and their interest, must very often differ”. Similarly,

such an arrangement would have a negative effect upon the representative, for “when the leaders choose to make themselves bidders at an auction of popularity, their talents, in the construction of the state, will be of no service. They will become flatterers instead of legislators; the instruments, not the guides of the people” (Burke 2001: 209, 413). During a more prolonged and technical critique of their electoral system towards the end of his text (written perhaps after he had obtained more information), Burke developed two further criticisms of the mode of representation in France. Dashing the hopes of British radicals, he ultimately concluded that the new system operated to the “utter subversion of your [the French] equalising principle”. However, a more pressing concern to Burke’s mind was that the system actively encouraged faction by having “a direct and immediate tendency to sever France into a variety of republics, and to render them totally independent of each other, without any direct constitutional means of coherence”. In this state of affairs, the *National Assembly* would cease to become such; instead it would exist as a “general congress of the ambassadors from each independent republic”, and representatives would likewise serve as “an ambassador of a state, and not the representative of the people within a state” (Burke 2001: 347, 352-3, 356).

These perceived defects in the French system were contrasted with the supposed merits of the British system. Addressing the concept of a representative, Burke argued that a legislative assembly should be composed of figures who were possessed of a “predominant proportion of active virtue and wisdom”. These qualities were invariably to be found in the aristocracy, a group which Burke considered to be essential to the composition of any popular legislature. “Nothing”, he stated, “can secure a steady and moderate conduct in such assemblies, but that the body of them should be respectably composed, in point of condition of life, of permanent property, of education, and of such habits as enlarge and liberalize the understanding”. In the

National Assembly there “was scarcely to be perceived the slightest traces of what we call the natural landed interest of the country” (Burke 2001: 259, 194, 198). Seizing upon this lacuna, Burke highlighted the societal value wrought by the hereditary perpetuation of the great landed estates. The stable transmission of property was what “tend[ed] most to the perpetuation of society itself”, and the aristocratic families who facilitated it were “the ballast in the vessel of the commonwealth”. Accordingly, Burke revealed that the British House of Commons, “though not necessarily, yet in fact, is always so composed in the far greater part”. This did not mean excluding ability, or barring interests other than that of land; indeed, considered as a whole the House was “filled with every thing illustrious in rank, in descent, in hereditary and in acquired opulence, in cultivated talents, in military, civil, naval, and politic distinction, that the country can afford” (Burke 2001: 208, 198). However, ability was a “vigorous and active principle”, whereas property was, conversely, “sluggish, inert, and timid”. This meant that property, vital for the smooth running of the state, could not be safe from the “invasions of ability, unless it be, out of all proportion, predominant in the representation”. Further to ensuring the “perpetuation of society”, Burke believed that the green acres held and transmitted by aristocratic families served as a guarantor of liberty. Discussing the situation across the channel, he stated that “the property of France does not govern it. Of course property is destroyed, and rational liberty has no existence”. In order to lock in the socio-political advantages that landed wealth afforded it must be represented “in great masses of accumulation, or it is not rightly protected” and maintaining such a high level of landed representatives strengthened its “defensive power”. By ensuring the safety of these estates Burke foresaw a trickle down effect on the property, and thus the liberty, of other property-holders, for the great estates “form a natural rampart about the lesser properties in all their gradations” (Burke 2001: 207-9).

In addition to commenting on the composition of representative institutions, Burke likewise contrasted the mode of representation in France with that in Britain. Rather than evidencing a model which encouraged representatives to act as ambassadors for separate states, he argued that the idea of representation in Britain was “totally different” since “the representative, separated from the other parts, can have no action and no existence”. There, “the government is the point of reference of the several members and districts of our representation. This is the center of our unity. This government of reference is a trustee for the *whole*, and not for the parts”. Thus conceived, the British model ensured that the entire nation was represented, even if certain areas did not elect their own Members. “When did you hear”, Burke asked, “in Great Britain of any province suffering from the inequality of its representation; what district having no representation at all?” Acknowledging the uneven distribution of MPs, he claimed that

the very inequality of representation, which is so foolishly complained of, is perhaps the very thing which prevents us from thinking or acting as members of districts. Cornwall elects as many members as all Scotland. But is Cornwall better taken care of than Scotland? Few trouble their heads about any of your bases, out of some giddy clubs. Most of those, who wish for any change, upon any plausible grounds, desire it on different ideas (Burke 2001: 355).

Speaking on behalf of the nation, he further revealed that “the people of England ... look upon the frame of their commonwealth, *such as it stands*, to be of inestimable value”. This being the case, Burke expressly stated that he wished his peers “rather to recommend to our neighbours the example of the British constitution, than to take models from them for the improvement of our own”. The former served as an “invaluable treasure”, and should there be any grievances from his countrymen, these, he maintained, would be owed “not ... to their constitution, but to their own conduct” (Burke 2001: 175, 413).

### 2.2.2 On “the constitution of your army”

A second element of Burke’s practical critique of the French Revolution derived from his assessment of the “constitution of your [the French] army”. He presented this as an issue of the utmost importance, since coordinating an army (particularly a “very large one” as the French had voted) required “greater skill and attention, not only as a great concern in itself”, but also because the army served as “the third cementing principle in the new body of republics, which you call the French nation (Burke 2001: 379)”.<sup>109</sup> This extended section of *Reflections* turns upon the concept of control. Burke clearly regarded standing armies with suspicion; he viewed them as a potential threat to liberty, and recognised the risks associated with managing a large army, observing that “armies have hitherto yielded a very precarious and uncertain obedience to any senate or popular authority”. With regard to the situation in France, he stated that the revolutionaries had “got the wolf by the ears”, “but what”, he wondered, “is the principle of its discipline? or whom is it to obey?” (Burke 2001: 387, 379). The French Minister of War, M. de la Tour du Pin provided an immediate answer to these questions. Quoting extensively from the minister, Burke highlighted the “turbulent anarchy” and “disturbance and confusion” that existed within the French army. In some corps the minister reported that the “bonds of discipline” had become “relaxed or broken” to the extent that “sooner or later they may menace the nation itself”. De la Tour du Pin framed the threat thus;

*the nature of things requires, that the army should never act but as an instrument. The moment that, erecting itself into a deliberative body,*

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<sup>109</sup> The other two “cementing” principles identified by Burke were the confiscation of (church) property and circulation of paper money, and the revolutionaries’ attempts to secure the “superiority of the city of Paris” (see Burke 2001: 359-66).

it shall act according to its own resolutions, the *government, be it what it may, will immediately degenerate into a military democracy*; a species of political monster, which has always ended by devouring those who have produced it” (de la Tour du Pin cited in Burke 2001: 380).

Burke confirmed that “the nature of things” required that armies should serve as “*mere instruments*”, or the “machine” of the state (Burke 2001: 384, 387). However, he diverged from the Frenchman’s expression of astonishment at the behaviour of the troops. To Burke’s mind, the cause was clear. The French had begun their revolution by “despising every thing that belonged to [them]”; they had acted “as if [they] had never been moulded into civil society” and had “industriously destroyed all the opinions, and prejudices, and ... all the instincts which support government” (Burke 201: 187, 390). In place of their existing arrangements and traditional levers of control they had substituted a “pure democracy”, underpinned by the “monstrous fiction” of the rights of man. As indicated above, Burke’s difficulty with the rights of man lay in the equality they presumed and the democratic universality of this notion. Owing to this universality, the army could not be exempted from partaking and, as a consequence, the Revolution had disregarded the “austere rules of military discipline” and “destroyed the principle of obedience” in the French army (Burke 2001: 310, 383, 388). “The soldier”, Burke explained,

is told, he is a citizen, and has the rights of man and citizen. The right of 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 2001: 388).

The National Assembly had facilitated this degeneration:

the doctrines which they have preached, the decrees which they have passed, the practices which they have countenanced. The soldiers remember the 6<sup>th</sup> of October ... 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 (Burke 2001: 381-2).

Having examined the present state of the French army, Burke subsequently moved to indicate how he believed events would unfold. It is of interest to note that this section of *Reflections* reads less like a prediction and more like an accepted fact, of which Burke was merely reminding his readers. In short, he argued that possession of the rights of man ideology, combined with the lack of authority displayed by the king (whom Burke described as a “cypher”) or the National Assembly (who were at the behest of the populace) would encourage an increasingly independent outlook amongst the army. Lacking in principles of subordination or determined political leadership, Burke warned the French that the “relation of your army to the crown will, if I am not greatly mistaken, become a serious dilemma in your politics”. He portrayed France as an unstable and insecure nation, exposed by a power vacuum and teetering on the brink of disaster. This was a dangerous prospect when faced with an institution which, it will be remembered, he had depicted as a “wolf”. An army, he stated, “must be constrained ... by a real, vigorous, effective, decided, personal authority”. It “will not long look to an assembly acting through the organ of false shew, and palpable imposition” and “will not seriously yield obedience to a prisoner”. Burke depicted the power vacuum as a typical upshot of democratic revolutions, which attacked hierarchy and stripped governments of the means of exercising political control. Nevertheless, he made little distinction between the consequences arising from these generalised observations and the more particular actions of the French revolutionaries. Thus the contradictory method of

appointing army officers, in which the National Assembly and the king could cancel each other out would also weaken the authority of the government, making the army “more independent, and more of a military republic” in which “not they but the king is the machine” (Burke 2001: 387).<sup>110</sup>

In earlier sections of *Reflections*, Burke had outlined the close relationship between democracy and tyranny. Conceived in the abstract, this argument would have demonstrated to his audience the inverse relationship between democracy and liberty. Using France as a case study, Burke was now able to put some meat on the metaphorical bones by charting the practical development of his argument. Destroying the traditional opinions and arrangements which secured order and replacing them with the rights of man would, he claimed, instigate an initial stage of decreased liberty in which the National Assembly would be forced to resort to martial law to suppress unrest amongst the population. This was, however, only a short term solution to the problem: “you must rule by an army; and you have infused into that army by which you rule, as well as into the whole body of the nation, principles which after a time must disable you in the use you resolve to make of it” (Burke 2001: 390). Eventually, “this weapon will snap short, unfaithful to the hand that employs it”, because, Burke informed,

the assembly keep a school where, systematically, and with unremitting perseverance, they teach principles, and form regulations destructive to all spirit of subordination, civil and military – and then they expect that they shall hold in obedience an anarchic people by an anarchic army” (Burke 2001: 395).

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<sup>110</sup> Although the authority to elect officers had been vested in the king, Burke pointed out that a “reserve of approbation” had been retained by the National Assembly. The effect of this power, he noted, was immense, since “those who can negative indefinitely, in reality appoint”. Further to affecting the morale of the officers, this “double negotiation for military rank” would also serve to “promote a faction in the assembly itself”. Burke foretold how those denied a promotion by the National Assembly would develop resentment towards that body and would “nourish discontents in the heart of the army against the ruling powers”. Likewise, those favoured by the Assembly, but not chosen by the king, “must slight an authority which would not advance, and could not retard their promotion” (Burke 2001: 387).



Swelled by the democratic rights granted by the revolutionaries' ideology, the army, becoming increasingly independent minded, would grow bolder and would eventually break free from its role as an instrument of government. At this point Burke foresaw that the National Assembly would be unable to control the army; if ordered by its governors to dissolve itself, instead it "would instantly dissolve them" (Burke 2001: 228). The final stage in the descent into tyranny would witness the development of a military dictatorship. Burke announced that cohesion in the army would deteriorate; it would become "mutinous" and "full of faction, until some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself". As soon as this eventuality occurs, "the army is your master; the master ... of your king, the master of your assembly, the master of your whole republic" (Burke 2001: 388).

### **Section Three: The contextual significance of Burke's arguments on representation and on the French army**

#### **3.1 Scholars' representations of Burke's redescription of the French Revolution**

Commentators have frequently denied the significance of Burke's anti-democratic arguments. One consequence of this has been to produce a censored version of Burke; a Burke who can legitimately be used to solve our own "present discontents", or with whom politicians can declare they share the "same goals" (McCue 1997; Redwood 1997: 189).<sup>111</sup> The abridged

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<sup>111</sup> Indeed, in many instances it is the need to produce a 'usable' Burke which has motivated the interpretative censorship.

Burke is generated in two main ways, the first of which has involved repackaging his arguments. As indicated above, this has often meant emphasising his “procedural” arguments to the neglect of the “substantive issues” which his text addressed (Fasel 1976: 32). Nonetheless, proponents of repackaging have often noted, but downplayed, the relevance of Burke’s anti-democratic arguments. In this vein, Peter J. Stanlis protests that “it was not democracy as a form of government but the Jacobin theory of the general will that Burke attacked in 1790”. This particular form of repackaging ensured that Burke could still be mobilised for deployment in modern battles and Stanlis (writing in the Cold War era) accordingly claimed that, in *Reflections*, “contemporary lovers of constitutional democracy will find effective armor and powerful weapons against every form of totalitarianism” (Stanlis 1958: 244, 249). More recently, Sanford Lakoff has suggested Burke’s “fear that reliance on popular taste and judgement would lead to cultural as well as political degeneration” was founded, not in an aversion to democracy, but instead in a “fear of mediocrity” (Lakoff 1998: 448, 457). This line is followed in a new edition of *Reflections* which depicts Burke as a “fundamentally liberal” writer. Here, Frank M. Turner argues that there “there is much less of a specifically antidemocratic impetus to Burke’s view of the sacredness of property than might first appear in the pages of the *Reflections*” (Turner 2003: xxxix, xxxi).<sup>112</sup> Turner’s point is that Burke believed an arbitrary monarch could confiscate property just as easily as the democratic government in France had. Aside from neglecting Burke’s own assertions to the contrary (he feared “popular persecution” over that suffered under a “cruel prince”), this judgement also seems to ignore the specifically anti-democratic role which property fulfilled in the Burkean polis (Burke 2001: 292-3, 208).

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<sup>112</sup> Other interpretations which characterise Burke as a political liberal include those by Bogus (2007), Boyd (1999), Lakoff (1998), McMahon (2003) and O’Brien (1968).

A second way in which commentators have generated an abridged Burke has involved focusing on Burke's depiction of the French Revolution and disregarding the extent to which he perceived it as a democratic revolution. Since *Reflections* was a reaction against a "highly politicised kind of fanaticism", Richard Bourke has maintained that we must understand the text "as an assault upon a species of political fundamentalism, and not as a Jeremiad against liberty, against progress or against human prosperity generally" (Bourke 1999: 118; cf. McMahon 2003: 244-5). Bourke is right to caution against the anachronistic pigeon-holing of Burke and his opponents into authors who were either 'for' or 'against' liberty. Moreover, Burke certainly dubbed the revolutionaries "philosophical fanatics" (Burke 2001: 318). However, it seems curious not to press on from here and attempt to identify the particular "species" of "political fundamentalism" that Burke found so disagreeable. This would undoubtedly aid our understanding of the political argument contained in *Reflections*, for it is surely true that Burke shaped his response to meet the specific threat occasioned by the French Revolution and the unique uses of it by Whigs in Britain. Democratic fundamentalism would, for example, require him to advocate different forms of political action than if faced with the fundamentalism of an absolute ruler.

In the recent Stanford edition of *Reflections*, J. C. D. Clark has argued that "although he feared the insecurity of property ... Burke did not fear communist levelling ... and did not diagnose the essential source of the revolutionary ideology as democratic". The mention of "communist levelling" is puzzling and best ignored, since it is unclear what Clark means by his anachronistic use of the term "communist". His diagnosis of Burke's perception of the problem posed by the revolutionaries' ideology seems to be expressed with greater clarity. Nonetheless, Clark clouds the issue by equivocating; he first acknowledges that Burke regarded the rights of man as the "ideological emblem" of the Revolution, and yet later states

that “Burke said little about the new ideology of individual political entitlement, which was not the central point at issue in France” (Clark 2001: 73, 88). As I have demonstrated above, Burke’s critical appraisal of the revolutionaries, the events of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> October, and the French National Assembly indicated that he believed each to be fuelled by the ideology of the rights of man. Furthermore, his warning of anarchy, both domestically and in France’s colonies, was premised upon the spread of the rights of man, which encouraged a democratic culture, thus striking out against traditional principles of subordination; “men, with them, are strictly equal and are entitled to equal rights in their own government”, Burke complained of the French (Burke 2001: 346, cf. 388). His view of the prevalence and danger arising from the rights of man suggests that Burke viewed such ideas as being “the central point at issue in France”, even if J. C. D. Clark does not.

Rather than examining his analysis of the French Revolution as an end in itself, of greater importance for the present study is the fact that Burke was extremely anxious about the influence French principles were exerting on British politics. Labelling British radicals as “smugglers of adulterated metaphysics”, he explicitly warned his peers, many of whom were desirous of domestic political reform, against any involvement with these types and simultaneously urged them to instead “recommend ... the example of the British constitution” (Burke 2001: 255, 145-6, 413). Once viewed in this critical context, it becomes apparent that anti-democratic arguments were actually integral to Burke’s project, in the form of highlighting the merits and legitimacy of the (aristocratic) British model of governance and revealing the corresponding illegitimacy of democratic ideas. This being the case, the remainder of this chapter uses Burke’s anti-democratic intentions as a springboard from which to investigate his political argument, focusing on his utterances concerning political representation and his prediction of the development of a military dictatorship in France. It

considers both lines of argument as interventions in prevailing contexts of debate in order to grasp the point of Burke's argument or (to adopt the parlance) what Burke was "*doing in*" employing these arguments in that particular manner, at that particular time (Skinner 1988c: 77).

### 3.2     *The character and significance of Burke's arguments on representation*

This subsection concentrates on explaining the character of Burke's attitude to political reform, his arguments on the composition of a legislative assembly, and his arguments concerning the mode of representation in a state. Before investigating the wider intellectual context, it is perhaps necessary to recall the attitudes of radical and moderate opponents of the Whig establishment.

To recap, the state of political representation in Britain, *circa* 1790, was a hot topic. Radical societies, such as those highlighted by Burke in his *Reflections*, equated "true liberty" with political participation, and considered the lack of a "fair and equal" system of representation in Britain to be the "fundamental grievance" of the times. These groups gazed upon the new-modelled French system with jealous eyes and hoped that Britain might be "provoked" by the French example into altering her own system of representation (Price 1991: 192; Revolution Society 1789: 77-8). Moderate Whigs, including those at the head of Burke's parliamentary party, were likewise critical of the British arrangements and urged the establishment to heed warnings from France and undertake "timely reform" of the existing system (PH 28: 456). In this vein, Charles James Fox repeatedly questioned the validity of virtual representation and others similarly sought to make the House of Commons "a real Democracy, and a free, and fair, and unbiased representation of the people" (PH 28: 472; Anon. 1792: 34). In attacking

the current arrangements, many political moderates were prepared to borrow more radically democratic concepts, such as the rights of man and majoritarianism; nevertheless, even those who refrained from employing these ideas highlighted, from a democratic point of view, the flaws in the existing system. Shorter parliaments, for example, which had traditionally been urged as a means of purifying the system of corruption, were increasingly lauded as a way of making the House more accountable to the people, thus “correct[ing] the great vice in the representation of the people” and “strengthen[ing] the intercourse and connection between the representative and the constituent” (PH 23: 873).

Consulting the wider context, it is apparent that Whigs of a more conservative bent are distinguishable by their (often complete) opposition to any reform of parliamentary representation. Upon seeing off Alderman Sawbridge’s motion in 1784, for example, one MP expressed his hope that the issue “might be laid at rest for ever” and further stated “that any alteration in the state of parliamentary representation would prove highly dangerous and destructive to the constitution” (PH 24: 1005). To those anxious to safeguard the constitution, the latter half of the eighteenth-century was “big with danger”. “From the peer to the cobbler”, declared Francis Basset, “all are reformers; the political tinkers are all attempting to mend the constitution” (Basset 1783: 34-5).<sup>113</sup> It is important to acknowledge the extent to which radical arguments appeared on the radar of the governing elite during this time, as modern commentators have often downplayed the radicals’ impact, dismissing them as an “extremist fringe” (Clark 2000: 412). Although radicals never achieved the reforms they desired, the Whig establishment remained highly fearful of the “wild and extravagant ideas in the public, with regard to the representation”, foremost of which Thomas Pitt

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<sup>113</sup> Interestingly, Basset noted that, of the “many writings endeavouring to prove the propriety, and indeed the necessity of a change in the representation”, the now forgotten *Lucubrations During a Short Recess* was the “most generally read” and “the most usually quoted” (Basset 1783: 27). The text cited by Basset was published in 1782 by the Scottish MP, Sir John Sinclair.

highlighted as being the association drawn between liberty and political participation; “freedom”, he explained to the House, “is stated to consist in equal personal representation” (PH 22: 1424-5). Concerned to halt the spread of such dangerous ideas, the most common strategy employed against reform was, what might be termed, the ‘floodgates’ argument. This essentially involved stating that tending to minor grievances in the system of representation would inevitably pave the way for root and branch changes. For some this was because minor reform would encourage further proposals, either from the public or from the minds of “wild and distracted politicians” (PH 22: 1428; PH 24 763). However, others identified an all-or-nothing quality to the theory of equal representation. To this end, even extending the suffrage minutely would be akin to opening the floodgates because the theory “is *at least* as true in the extreme as in the degree” (Anon. 1783: 33). “If it is true”, argued one MP, “it admits an inherent right in every individual, who is free only inasmuch as he possesses it, what right have you to make exceptions? ... If it is a natural right, all have the right or none; there is no medium” (PH 22: 1428-9). This oft cited argument was frequently supported by reference to the American example, when British sympathisers had “flattered themselves they could restrain the application of the principle to one object only, the right of *internal taxation*”. In truth, the colonists’ separation from the empire was one of the “necessary consequences” of championing the American case, since the principle underpinning their dispute was applicable, not just to internal taxation, but in every other sphere of government too (Anon. 1783: 30, 31).

It is, therefore, essential to acknowledge the levels of fear and apprehension generated in conservative quarters by moves to reform the system of representation. Whereas Henry Flood had blamed virtual representation for the loss of the American colonies, conservatives instead insisted that it was the principle of “*actual* representation” which had “stripped Great-

Britain of her dependencies, and left her scarcely any thing of her lately wide-extended empire” (Anon. 1783: 31). The conservative fear was multiplied during the 1790s, when those of a more guarded disposition felt threatened by theoretical and popular agitation in favour of reform. The system of representation provided a key cause of complaint and, in this vein, conservatives believed that many sought reform only “as a step towards the total overthrow of our constitution, and the reducing to practice the whole system disseminated by Thomas Paine and his followers”. The specific danger, in this respect, was occasioned by the attitude of moderates (i.e. those who “join the cry for reform, [yet] who would abhor the thoughts of destroying the constitution”), and Members present during Flood’s motion of 1790 sought to convince their reformist colleagues that “the circumstances and times were such, as made not only the question [of parliamentary reform] dangerous, but the discussion of it dangerous likewise” (Young 1794: 97; PH 28: 471). Conscious of the radicals’ jealousy of their European neighbours, conservative Whigs also noted that “the mode now introduced into France is extolled, as incomparably better than ours”. In response, loyalists hailed the merits of the British system in an attempt to rectify “the mistakes people labour under, with regard to the affair of representation” and persuade the nation that “representation is not founded on any right inherent naturally in man to legislate for himself, or to be governed by his own consent” (Young 1794: 76, 78; Nares 1792: 47; cf. PH 30: 809).

Fleshing conservative opinion out in this way illustrates the extent to which Burke shared a similar attitude to reform *circa* 1790. This is particularly noticeable as regards the alarm he felt at radicals hailing the French system of representation over the British model, and the perceived difficulty occasioned by moderate Whigs pushing for political reform. To address these problems Burke adopted what evidently appears to have been a familiar conservative strategy; he sought to polarise the debate. In line with other conservatives, Burke foresaw an



all-or-nothing quality in calls for a more equal system of representation and in the rights of man ideology more generally. Consequently, in an attempt to close off certain discursive avenues, he sought to demonstrate that the anarchical potential in democratic ideas rendered them irreconcilable with British politics, beyond the extent to which they featured in the mixed constitution. In this vein, one may point to his highlighting that the principle of “fair and equal representation ... goes much further than to an alteration in the election of the house of commons” and his declaration that it would additionally, and uniformly, strike at the House of Lords and the monarchy. An alternative example would be the untold lawlessness which he predicted would grip French society upon the dissemination of ideas of the rights of man, which could be denied to none and which “admit no temperament and no compromise” (Burke 2001: 215, 217). He supplemented this polarising rhetorical strategy with a number of key arguments concerning the composition of representative assemblies and the ideal mode of representation. Regarding the former, it will be remembered that Burke took umbrage at the lack of elite representation in the French National Assembly, arguing that it was composed of “men formed to be instruments, not controls” and adding that the “state suffers oppression” when non-elites are permitted to govern. The worry in elevating these types to power was that they would be averse to moderation and would pursue their own private interests ahead of those of the state. As an antidote, he maintained that the “natural landed interest of the country” should form the bulk of a representative assembly, as moderate governance could only be secured by those who were “respectably composed, in point of condition of life, of permanent property, of education, and of such habits as enlarge and liberalize the understanding”. Indeed, Burke charged the landed aristocracy with a vital political role as the defenders of liberty and argued that the stable transmission of their estates (guaranteed by ensuring that the nobility were “out of all proportion, predominant in the

representation”) exerted a trickle down effect guarding the property, and hence the liberty, of others (Burke 2001: 198, 206, 194, 207-8).

Burke’s arguments recommending representation by elites are entirely in line with the conservative view, which declared the exercise of political power to be “beyond the reach of common minds” (Nares 1792: 43; cf. Jenyns 1782: 131-2). On account of their birth, wealth, titles, and their increased opportunity for leisure time, it was presumed that the nation should be “advised and directed by the most respectable members of it” and that its interests could be best realised “by contracting the circle in which political power is to move” (Jenyns 1782: 130; Holford 1793: 16; cf. Nares 1792: 44, 46; Anon. 1791b: 53; Blackstone 1765-9a: 153). It is important to note that this custodial conception of politics formed the basis of Whig ideology. Consequently, there was a certain amount of overlap between conservative and moderate varieties of Whiggism on this issue, and elements of Burke’s arguments on the composition of representative assemblies would undoubtedly have appealed to some of his more moderate readers (see, for example, PR 27: 95). In this vein, it is similarly worth mentioning that few radical critics of the Whig establishment ever advocated that representatives should be drawn from the masses and instead expected the wider population to vote for their intellectual superiors (Dickinson 1977: 228-9).<sup>114</sup> However, the distinctly conservative elements of Burke’s argument are derived from the role he identified for the landed aristocracy; his suggestion that this group should be “out of all proportion, predominant in the representation” echoed precisely the outlook of reactionary figures such as Lord North, for whom “the bulk and weight of that House ought always to be in the hands of the country gentlemen” (PH 25: 455). Whereas political moderates sought to bolster the

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<sup>114</sup> Gregory Claeys indicates that the “turning point” in the development of a genuinely plebeian democratic movement was the formation of the London Corresponding Society in January 1792 (Claeys 2007: 76)

“democratical part” of the constitution and railed against the Commons becoming “another aristocratical power”, conservatives relied upon the “aristocratical weight of property” forming a buffer in the lower House against the influence of the crown and the “ridiculous, new-fangled doctrines” of the people (Anon. 1995: 320; PH 22: 1427; Basset 1783: 34; cf. Paley 1785: 483). Although the people “naturally look up to the great proprietors of land”, the key political benefit to be gained from “country gentleman” was their independence, for “the greater fortune of the representative, the stronger his security from temptations” (Anon. 1791b: 53; Basset 1783: 34; Nares 1792: 55). Moreover, by possessing the “greatest stake in the country” they were deemed to be “the most deeply interested in its welfare” and thus the most fit to govern (PH 25: 455; cf. Nares 1792: 51-2, 55; PH 23: 832-3).

This position espoused by the Whig establishment contrasted markedly with that of reformers who considered the landed elite “bad judges” of commercial, mercantile, and manufacturing interests (Burgh 1774-5a: 51). Granting that landed property secured political independence, the Society of the Friends of the People (of which many of Burke’s party were members) was likewise critical of the excessive power wielded by landed wealth. To this end, they stated that it was “highly unjust” that those without the backing of such wealth were *de facto* barred from standing as candidates and complained “loudly” that, under the present system, the electorate’s choice was largely confined “within the ranks of opulence” (PH 30: 796).<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> This argument was delivered in a petition to the House of Commons which was heard in conjunction with Charles Grey’s motion for parliamentary reform in May 1793 and which declared that “at the present day the House of Commons does not fully and fairly represent the people of England”. The Society of the Friends of the People objected to the number of representatives assigned to particular counties, the partial state of the franchise, and septennial elections. Regarding the size of the counties, the petition cited the fact that Rutland, the smallest county, and Yorkshire, the largest, sent the same number of representatives; it likewise questioned the fact that Cornwall, “with its extravagant proportion of borough members”, outnumbered the representatives from Yorkshire, Rutland and Middlesex combined, and it highlighted the fact that the total number of MPs representing Scotland exceeded by one, the number returned for a single county in England. (This county was unnamed, but we can presume that the petitioners had Cornwall in mind). The petition also argued that landed property was over represented in the electorate and in the candidates: they stated “that property, whether well or ill employed has equal power; that the present system of representation gives to it a degree of weight which

Those in opposition to the establishment thus moved for a wider representation of interests in the Commons. Burke's conservative take on the composition of representative assemblies is clear, and with this moderate opposition strand of Whiggism in mind it could be argued that his position borders on reactionary since, in *Reflections*, he was cautioning against change by convincing his audience that the existing makeup of the House of Commons guaranteed the best possible form of representation.

In his arguments on the mode of representation, Burke took a swipe at the level of popular influence in the French model of representation and at British radicals who had argued that popular choice conferred legitimacy on political institutions. Disavowing such ideas, Burke denied that popular choice could serve as a marker of legitimacy, and instead maintained that forcing representatives to become "bidders at an auction of popularity" would render them "flatterers instead of legislators; the instruments, not the guides of the people" (Burke 2001; 413). In this vein, he targeted the majoritarian principles which underpinned revolutionary France's new system, and which had recently been hailed by Henry Flood in the House of Commons (PH 28: 454-5). Denouncing this approach, which apparently involved regarding the constitution as a "problem of arithmetic", Burke moved to recommend the "totally different" example evidenced in Britain. Essentially, under the British model, the government acted as "a trustee for the *whole*", which meant that the entire nation was

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renders it independent of character; enables it to excite fear as well as procure respect, and confines the choice of electors within the ranks of opulence; because, though it cannot make riches the sole object of their affection and confidence, it can and does throw obstacles, almost insurmountable, in the way of every man who is not rich, and thereby secures to a select few the capability of becoming candidates themselves, or supporting the pretensions of others. Of this your petitioners complain loudly, because they conceive it to be highly unjust, that while the language of the law requires from a candidate no greater estate, as a qualification, than a few hundred pounds per annum, the operation of the law should disqualify every man whose rental is not extended to thousands". The system, it was heard, consequently compelled electors to "choose from amongst those who themselves abound in wealth, or are supported by the wealth of others" (PH 30: 789, 796). In a tightly argued piece, Iain Hampsher-Monk has rightly pointed to the civic humanism of the Society of the Friends of the People. However, in instances such as that cited above it can be argued that the Society also evidenced more recognisably democratic concerns (Hampsher-Monk 1979).

represented, even if a given area did not elect any Members. Thus conceived, the restrictions and “the very inequalities of representation” actually appeared as a benefit, since the uneven distribution of MPs ensured that representatives would govern in the interests of the nation, rather than in the interests of individual areas; “Cornwall elects as many members as all Scotland. But is Cornwall better taken care of than Scotland?”, Burke queried. Providing an explicit answer to this rhetorical question was unnecessary, for “the people of England ... look upon the frame of their commonwealth, *such as it stands*, to be of inestimable value”. To Burke’s mind, the constitution was an “invaluable treasure”, thus grievances, should they arise, would be owed not to the constitution, but to the conduct of those in power (Burke 2001: 209, 355, 175, 413).

In many respects, Burke’s arguments on the mode of representation accorded entirely with those articulated by other conservative defenders of the Whig establishment. During the debates on parliamentary representation in the 1780s, one opponent of reform announced that it was “pretty generally known” that the British system “is a representation of property, not of numbers” (Basset 1783: 2). Again, there was a certain amount of overlap with more moderate Whigs on this point, and many reformers accepted that the “franchise ought not to go beyond property” (PH 28: 455). As was often the case, variations arose from differences in emphasis, and moderate reform was premised upon relaxing, not eradicating, the property qualifications for the electorate. Nonetheless, as the first section of this chapter demonstrated, moderate reform was pursued with the intention of widening the electorate to secure a more equal representation, thereby shoring up the democratic part of the mixed constitution. To this end, Henry Flood stated that “the representative must be chosen by a body of constituents, whereof the elective franchise may extend to the majority of the people” and he argued that the people should exert “efficient influence ... not by the shadow, but by

the substance of representation; or, in other words, by an actual, and not a virtual representation” (PH 28: 454-5). The conservative defence involved a balancing act; their Whiggism forced them to recognise the theoretical concept of popular sovereignty, but, in practice, they departed from this position, claiming of the people that one “must not contend, because they are the *foundation*, that therefore they must also be the *superstructure*”. Naturally, they maintained that the present mode of representation furnished the people with an “ample share” of political power (Rivers 1784: 101, 102).

The key weapon in the conservative arsenal was the concept of virtual representation. A contextual examination of the structure of late eighteenth-century political argument reveals that conservatives consistently appealed to this idea in order to manoeuvre away from notions of popular political power and to instead justify the inequalities of the existing arrangements. Theoretically parsimonious, the concept had been employed in response to American complaints about their lack of input on decisions which directly affected them. It was founded upon two main points, the first of which held that “every member, though chosen by one particular district, when elected and returned serves for the whole realm” since “the end of his coming thither is not particular, but general; not barely to advantage his constituents, but the *common* wealth”. In short, should a Member sacrifice the interests of the nation to those of his local area it “would be a Departure from his Duty” (Blackstone 1765-9a: 154; Whately 1765: 109). Second, it was argued that MPs were under no obligation to seek, or be directed by, public opinion. “We are not the deputies but the representatives of the people”, announced Lord North when opposing William Pitt’s reform motion in 1783; “we are not to refer to them before we determine. We stand here as they would stand; to use our own discretion, without seeking any other guidance under heaven” (PH 23: 853). Adherents to virtual representation affirmed that by disregarding local attachments the system abolished

“invidious distinctions” amongst constituents and, despite not conferring the vote, or even a representative on all, it thereby ensured that “the person and property of every individual are equally protected” (Rivers 1784: 289). This line of argument was used to confront those who identified liberty with political participation, for the conservatives could disavow the need for such measures by asserting that “that country enjoys the benefit of civil liberty, where the laws of the land hold an equal course to all, not where all are equally represented” (PH 22: 1426-7). A further advantage claimed was that virtual representation ensured political accountability, as under this arrangement an MP was “a PUBLIC MAN, accountable to the whole nation, and, consequently, not the obedient creature of any particular part of it” (Rivers 1784: 283).

Although attacked by radical and moderate Whigs, the theory of virtual representation remained “well known” as the “doctrine of Parliament” and was regarded as “an incontestable truth” by those seeking to uphold the conservative establishment (Anon. 1785: 7; Rivers 1784: 283). Indeed, it was rolled out by Burke’s sometime political nemesis Charles Jenkinson to dismiss yet another attempted reform in 1793 (PH 30: 816). Burke’s characterisation of the unreformed parliament illustrates his absolute belief in virtual representation. At this stage in *Reflections* he was thus restating a conventionally conservative strain of Whiggism. To this end, Burke denounced the French system for its tendency to promote faction and its inability to secure a mode of representation “which equally regarded the whole”. Moreover, he was highly critical of the lack of accountability offered under the revolutionary arrangements (Burke 2001: 355, 356). Viewed as part of the aforementioned intellectual context, and considered also in relation to the prevailing practical political context, Burke’s contribution seems to be reasserting the legitimacy of virtual representation in the face of democratically inclined objections from British radicals who

were keen to copy the French model. In lauding the British system of representation over the French it is similarly likely that Burke was reminding his more moderate peers, many of whom were prepared to employ democratic ideas, of the principles which helped to maintain their dominant position in society and to which, therefore, they ought to adhere. As he observed in *Reflections*, France's "new constitution is the very reverse of ours in its principle; and I am astonished how any persons could dream of holding out any thing done in it as an example for Great Britain" (Burke 2001: 356).

By emphasising this aspect of Burke's conservatism, the conclusions in this chapter challenge the notion that *Reflections* was "knowledgeable, prudent, worldly and moderate" (Conniff 1994: 233). Though perhaps "prudent", a definite upshot of the reading offered thus far is to render Burke's text a more insular and conservative work. However, it can be argued that further to its conservatism, *Reflections* also contains some reactionary assumptions in its defence of the British model of representation. As previously mentioned, critics of virtual representation decried the inequalities generated by its uneven levels of representation. In his defence of the concept, Burke denied that the inequality of the system was a cause of complaint; to this end, he cited the example of Cornwall electing "as many members as all Scotland" and suggested that "few trouble their heads" about this particular iniquity (Burke 2001: 355). In truth, it would seem that a great many heads had previously been troubled by this very example, including Burke's own, as, in 1776, he had declared to the Commons that Scotland was "neither properly taxed, nor fully represented" (PH 18: 1229; for instances of the Cornwall/Scotland complaint see PH 23: 846; PH 24: 758, 761; PH 30: 803). In addition to being assailed by reformers, it is significant that conservative Whigs also accepted that virtual representation was problematic. In his hugely influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, William Blackstone outlined the concept then stated "not that I assert it is in fact



quite so perfect as I have here endeavoured to describe it; for if any alteration might be wished or suggested in the present frame of parliaments, it should be in favour of a more complete representation of the people” (Blackstone 1765-9a: 166; cf. Paley 1785: 489). “That there are defects in the representation is true”, confessed the anonymous author of *Considerations on the Intended Reform in the Parliamentary Representation of the People*. However, the author’s guarded nature left him/her unable to advise reformation, since the intended gains “may not be more than counterbalanced by the evil consequences it may lead to” (Anon. 1785: 17).

“But is Cornwall better taken care of than Scotland?”, Burke had asked in *Reflections*. These admissions from conservative authors suggest a rather different answer to that which he might have hoped for. Burke’s text finds no faults with virtual representation and suggests no need to shore up the democratic element of the constitution. “The people of England”, he maintained, “look upon the frame of their commonwealth, *such as it stands*, to be of inestimable value”; the British constitution was an “invaluable treasure”, which could be recommended wholeheartedly to the French, since any grievances the British had were owed “not ... to their constitution, but to their own conduct” (Burke 2001: 355, 175, 413). Given the willingness of other conservatives to admit to defects in the system of representation, Burke’s utterances appear as reactionary statements from an author determined to overlook the faults he had previously acknowledged so as to present the rosier picture (and, ergo, the most inviting argument) possible. It might be suggested that the unstable context in which Burke was writing explains his reluctance to highlight any flaws in the British model. Nevertheless, this very same context did not prevent other conservative authors from owning up to their own doubts about virtual representation. In his critique of Thomas Paine’s proposals, Alexander Dalrymple, for instance, disclosed that he was “far from saying that the

present representation of Great Britain is as perfect as it might be” (Dalrymple 1793: 9). Most interesting, in this vein, are the arguments of loyalists who explicitly dissociated themselves from Burke’s sentiments. The anonymous author of *A Defence of the Constitution of England* rejected out of hand the arguments of “internal enemies” such as Richard Price and the Revolution Society, who aimed “to introduce confusion under the name of reformation”. However, in a fascinating move, the author neglected to identify with Burke either, ultimately deciding that

we are in possession of a Constitution; which, though not so sacred and supernatural as that which is presented by Burke, is not in a state to want the tinkering hands of Richard Price, John Horne Tooke, Joseph Priestley, and the disaffected sectaries (Anon. 1791b: 59).

Highlighting the guarded, and often reactionary, nature of Burke’s arguments on representation will clearly be unpalatable to some modern commentators. Joseph Pappin III has implored that, “to characterize Burke as one who supports tradition for its own sake, as one who resists all change, as one who rejects the possibility of progress, is to distort Burke”. Before gaining a reputation as one of Pappin III’s “Burke detractors”, it is necessary to clarify the nature of the insight gained by the present contextual reading of *Reflections* (Pappin III 2002: 39, 49). For sure, certain sections of *Reflections* justify a “gradualist” interpretation of Burke’s arguments. However to accept this rather woolly characterisation as an assessment of the text as a whole means denying the extent to which Burke was broaching a multifaceted problem that required a complex and intricate answer. Responding to a motion moving for moderate reform of the system of parliamentary representation, Lord North once declared himself an enemy “to any and every alteration of the constitution” (PH 24: 1004). In *Reflections*, Burke fell short of adopting such an absolute position. Often, he carved out a

rhetorical “middle”, placing himself between the extremes of an “unreformed existence” and “absolute destruction” (Burke 2001: 328). Nevertheless, *pace* Pappin III, it is clear that the contrast Burke developed between the French and British systems of representation portrayed the concept of virtual representation, which underpinned the British system, as an ideal model. It neglected the shortcomings which radicals, moderates, conservatives, and Burke himself had, at various times, all acknowledged. On the basis of this argument in *Reflections* it is extremely unlikely that “forty years later he might well have supported [the extension of the suffrage]” (Lakoff 1998: 448).<sup>116</sup> Burke’s opposition in *Reflections* to more democratic measures was premised not only on the dangers of mob rule, as Lakoff recognises, but also on the unfailing merits of the existing system of virtual representation. With regard to the issue of parliamentary representation, Burke did not draw from the French example the conclusion that “reform was the only true alternative to Revolution” (though this was, in fact, the position of his Foxite peers) (Conniff 1994: 217). By contrast Burke manoeuvred himself into a more reactionary position and, in his defence of aristocratic Whiggism, sought to convince his peers to adhere to an altogether more inflexible form of political action.

### 3.3 The character and significance of Burke’s arguments on the French army

The final subsection of this chapter demonstrates the extent to which Burke’s arguments on the French army are essential for understanding his critique of democratic government and of democratic ideas more generally. The passages in question appear towards the end of Burke’s lengthy ‘letter’. Sandwiched in between his detailed reviews of the French electoral and financial systems, these aspects of *Reflections* seem a long way from the pyrotechnics of his discourse on Marie-Antoinette; indeed, discussions of the specific institutional

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<sup>116</sup> Lakoff’s assertion refers to the passage of the Representation of the People Act in 1832.

arrangements of revolutionary France may seem to hold little interest for political theorists. Although J. G. A. Pocock, through his excellent account of the political economy of Burke's analysis of the French Revolution, has illustrated the fallacy of such a view, Burke's thoughts on the French army have received comparatively little scholarly attention (Pocock 1985: 193-212). Instead of affording it the same levels of investigation that other sections have been subjected to (most notably the aforementioned ode to Marie-Antoinette), the majority of commentators have been content to cite Burke's arguments on the French army as evidence of his supposedly "prophetic gifts" (Kirk 1990b: x). This is because his remark concerning the eventual rise to power of "some popular general" seems to anticipate the *coup d'état* effected by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799 (Burke 2001: 388). Rather than enquiring into the force of Burke's utterances at this stage in his text, for many it is sufficient to explain Burke's argument by simply surmising that he "prophesied the rise of Napoleon" (Lakoff 1998: 458). However, investigative shortcomings do not provide the only explanation for the prevalence of this view, since cooing over his "Cassandra-like prediction" has enabled some interpreters to emphasise the intellectual whip hand that Burke supposedly held over his peers (Hitchens 2004: 132). To this end, Russell Kirk, in his hugely influential *The Conservative Mind*, maintained that "Burke saw into the future where Condorcet and Mably saw merely the rosy interior of their own fantasies and mistook it for the prophetic afflatus" (Kirk 1953: 39, cf. 56).

It is worth reiterating the key points in Burke's argument concerning the French army. Although he was, in principle, discussing the specific institutional arrangements of revolutionary France, it is of interest that he framed certain elements of this section in very general terms. In this vein, he wrote of the inherent difficulties and risks governments faced in attempting to manage the military, observing that "armies have hitherto yielded a very

precarious and uncertain obedience to any senate or popular authority". It was in "the nature of things" that armies should act as "*mere instruments*" or as the "machine" of the state, and maintaining them in this role required that they "be constrained ... by a real, vigorous, effective, decided, personal authority" (Burke 2001: 387, 384, 387). Second, Burke's utterances suggested the tyrannical nature of military rule. He facetiously stated that the National Assembly was attempting to "limit logic by despotism" by deploying troops to quell disturbances; moreover, in this respect, he also drew an explicit contrast between the "submission to fear and force" that was obtained by the military and the traditional order secured by "the mild authority of opinion" (Burke 2001: 391, 394).<sup>117</sup> Lastly, Burke forecast that the "pure democracy" of revolutionary France would descend into a "military republic". Having destroyed the "authority of opinion" by propagating rights of man ideology, he believed that the French had irrevocably weakened the state and told how the army, once unshackled from the controlling power of opinion, would "not look long" to a weakened government and would likewise "not seriously yield" to a king who was a mere "cypher". Eventually, the "anarchic army" would cease to act as a "*mere instrument*" of the state. Instead they would look to a "popular general" whose ability to command and cajole his men would enable him to exploit the power vacuum and become "the master of your [the French] whole republic" (Burke 2001: 291, 387, 395, 388).

As summarised above Burke's argument is comprised of two main points; one concerning the nature of armies and another relating to the inevitable degeneration of the democratic regime in France. By way of explanation James Conniff has proposed that much of this section of *Reflections* "simply mirrors the classical sources on revolution", since Plato saw despotism as

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<sup>117</sup> By using troops to control the riotous public, Burke argued that the National Assembly were attempting to curtail the operation of the rights of man. Since such rights carried "universal consequences", he maintained that the apparent attempt to deny these rights to certain elements of the population was an attempt to "limit logic" (Burke 2001: 391).

a corollary of anarchy, and Aristotle held that democracies were followed by oligarchies which often gave way to military rule (Conniff 1994: 225-6). Conniff's contention may contain some degree of accuracy, for, as indicated above, Burke explicitly cited Aristotle when arguing that democratic government shared "many striking points of resemblance with a tyranny" (Burke 2001: 292). However the instability of democracies was a common theme in eighteenth-century political thought. As a concept it was expressed most notably by the French jurist Baron de Montesquieu, for whom the "spirit of extreme equality" would encourage a state of "licentiousness" which would cause wives, children, and slaves to "shake off all subjection" (Montesquieu 1800: 129-30). Montesquieu's description offered a more extended analysis than that provided by Plato and Aristotle, and Burke's discussion of the French army certainly echoed the specifics of Montesquieu's account – including the latter's belief that democracy would destroy manners, deprive a people of liberty and ultimately result in a nation succumbing to "conquest" at the hands of "a single tyrant" (Montesquieu 1800: 129-131; cf. Burke 2001: 151-2, 269, 388).<sup>118</sup> Moreover, as with Aristotle, Burke referenced Montesquieu's work to support his claim that the democratic Revolution in France had facilitated the onset of tyranny (Burke 2001: 358-9). Nonetheless, although both authors exerted a broad influence on Burke's critique, his argument concerning the role of the French army in the degeneration of the Revolution seems indebted to other sources as *Reflections* eschewed Aristotle's oligarchic stage of development and likewise probed far deeper than Montesquieu had into the minutia of the conquest of the state. Instead, it seems likely that Burke drew upon the anti standing army discourse which was a highly prevalent mode of eighteenth-century political argument.

### 3.3.1 Anti army arguments in the seventeenth-century

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<sup>118</sup> On the intellectual links between Burke and Montesquieu, see Courtenay (1963).

The English anti-military attitude dates back to the Elizabethan era and was enshrined in Stuart period when the Petition of Right 1628 limited the authority of the monarch to impose martial law. The outlook was expressed only in “casual and general terms”, until the cry of “No Standing Armies” became “politicised” in the 1670s through parliamentary opposition to Charles II’s attempts to raise forces in peacetime (Schwoerer 1974: 8-18, 188, 189). By 1675 the Earl of Shaftesbury and his coterie regularly associated standing armies with corruption and took the term to mean “an army of professional officers and long-service soldiers, commanded, maintained, and above all paid by the state” (Pocock 1975: 410, 411). Issues over the monarch’s ability to raise an army contributed to the English Revolution of 1688, and Article VI of the subsequent Bill of Rights struck out against this very power.<sup>119</sup> However, the standing army controversy of 1697-9 witnessed the most important ideological developments as it was during this time that anti standing army arguments “were forged into coherent statements”, fostering an intellectual tradition which remained “vital” over the course of the next century (Schwoerer 1974: 1).

The controversy turned upon William III’s (formerly William of Orange) desire to retain a standing force after the declaration of peace in the war against France in 1697. Debate became highly polarised and those in opposition to the King’s plans argued from a variety of premises, declaring that maintaining a standing army in peacetime under the authority of the executive would be “politically dangerous, economically costly, socially menacing, and

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<sup>119</sup> The Bill of Rights (officially titled An Act Declaring the Rights and Liberties of the Subject and Settling the Succession of the Crown) was passed by Parliament in December 1689 and restated, in statutory form, the Declaration of Right, through which the Convention Parliament had invited William and Mary to become joint sovereigns. Lois G. Schwoerer argues that Article VI of the Bill of Rights occasioned a “genuinely revolutionary change” as it ensured that there could be no standing army in peacetime without the consent of Parliament, thus altering the balance of power between the monarch and Parliament (Schwoerer 1974: 189).

morally hazardous” (Schwoerer 1974: 3).<sup>120</sup> It was common, however, for combatants to neglect the “lesser Inconveniences” occasioned by a standing army, in favour of broaching those “which strike at the Heart's-blood of our Constitution” (Trenchard 1697a: 28-29). In short, the key complaint was that a peacetime standing army would destroy liberty. “To live under a Force and yet to enjoy Liberty or be a Freeman at the same time” was believed to be “an utter impossibility and a contradiction in Terms” (Johnson 1698: 6). A wealth of historical evidence, both from continental Europe and from England (under “the Usurper Cromwel”), was produced to prove that preserving a standing army was “fatal” to liberty (Fletcher 1697: 14, 5). Referring to the “Obvious” truth of this argument, John Trenchard considered the point “so self-evident”, that he was “almost asham'd to prove it: for if we look through the World, we shall find in no Country, Liberty and an Army stand together”. The “the Constitution”, he continued, “must either break the Army, or the Army will destroy the Constitution” (Trenchard 1697a: 12, 11).

Essentially, the dangers lay in the sheer power of the military. “Their Desires are always Commands”, wrote one author, “for there is no debating nor disputing against Legions”. “From the day you set them up, you set up your Masters; you put your selves wholly into their hands, and are at their discretion. It is the Conquest of the Nation in the silentest, shortest, and surest way” (Moyle 1697: 13-4, 16; cf. Trenchard 1697b: 13). This power could be realised in two ways. First, opponents were exercised by the potential for standing armies to increase the power of the executive, declaring that “Standing Forces are the fittest Instruments to make a Tyrant” (Fletcher 1697: 20). Dismissive of Parliament’s ability to

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<sup>120</sup> Opponents hoped to have no standing army at all, whilst the King sought to retain forty thousand troops, almost all of whom would have been foreign and were regarded as foreign mercenaries (Rubini 1967: 133). Caroline Robbins has argued that the opposition’s arguments were “unrealistic” as they ignored the needs of contemporary warfare, as well as Parliament’s ability to control taxation and thus limit the size of the army (Robbins 1959: 103).



control the revenue (less income from taxes meant less money to fund an army), many cited examples from abroad, stating that “most Princes of *Europe* are in possession of the Sword, by standing Mercenary Forces kept up in time of Peace”, and further noting that “all such Governments are changed from Monarchies to Tyrannies” (Fletcher 1697: 6-7). Thus conceived, the issue was interpreted as one of sovereignty. Although much of the world had succumbed to a “universal Deluge of Tyranny”, England possessed a “limited mix'd Monarchy”, and, with an army at his constant disposal, it was argued that the king would subsequently have “all power in his hands” (Trenchard 1697a: 2; Moyle 1697: 15; cf. Johnson 1698: 9). Even if William III (a “Prince in whom we know no Vices”) posed no threat, authors keenly reminded their readers that the same guarantee could not be made for his successors, for “if the Parliament give the best King a Standing Army, the worst King shall hereafter claim and have it” (Trenchard 1697a: 6; Moyle 1697: 14).

The second way in which it was claimed that the power of the army could threaten the nation's liberties was through a military coup. This idea has been neglected by modern commentators, many of whom have concentrated on outlining authors' fears of an increase in executive influence (see, for example, Worden 2006: 462). Evidencing this view, J. G. A. Pocock has written that proponents of anti standing army arguments were not necessarily alarmed by the prospect of a Cromwellian type figure usurping power, but were instead determined not to create a monarch akin to a “Continental potentate who does not depend upon his estates to supply his standing troops” (Pocock 1975: 413; cf. Pocock 1989b: 121-2). Nevertheless, the threat of a military coup formed the basis for a recognisable strand of argument in the anti standing army literature. Walter Moyle hinted at such a danger in the quote cited above when he likened allowing a standing army to permitting the “Conquest of the Nation” and foretold that a permanent force would soon become the people's “Masters”.

Developing this theme he speculated on the “fatal Consequences” of being caught in “the Bondage of a Standing Army”. In such an eventuality, he warned, that there would be no means of freeing the nation from their control since “our Estates, Lives and Liberties will be all at their Command. They will have the Keys to our Money, and the Titles to our Lands in their Power” (Moyle 1697: 22). For some, the “Debauchery and Wickedness” of soldiers and officers alike (“Men who make a Trade of War”) meant that they should be regarded with suspicion; “if such Manners do not fit Men to enslave a Nation, Devils only must do it” (Fletcher 1697: 19).

The idea of a military coup was given its fullest expression by John Trenchard, one of the most prominent opposition authors in the debate. Tapping into contemporary fears of a Stuart restoration, Trenchard argued that “the most likely way of restoring King *James*, is maintaining a Standing Army to keep him out”. This was because relying on the military meant depending “upon the uncertain and capricious Humours of the Souldiery, which in all Ages have produced more violent and sudden Revolutions, than ever have been known in unarmed Governments”. Here, Trenchard’s argument echoed the aforementioned concerns over the character of military men. The army could not be trusted since it was formed from “Men of dissolute and debauched principles”; men “who make Murder their Profession, and enquire no farther into the Justice of the Cause, than how they shall be paid”. However, he expanded this point by stressing the “Chain of Dependence” which existed in armies. This “Chain” provided a cause for concern as it bonded the troops to their officers. Consequently, “if two or three of the chief Officers should be disoblged” then “we shall have another Rehearsal Revolution, and the People be only idle Spectators of their own Ruin”. The Roman Empire had frequently witnessed such a course of events as sixteen of the twenty-six Emperors had apparently been deposed by their own armies. Moreover, Trenchard drew

similar examples from English history, pointing to occurrences during the Civil War period and the Revolution of 1688, when James II's army deserted the sitting monarch to join William of Orange. Soldiers, he cautioned, "like some sort of ravenous Fish, fare best in a Storm" (Trenchard 1697a: 27-8).

It is of immense interest that this argument was repeated by Lord Somers, a figure widely heralded in the eighteenth-century as the architect of establishment Whiggism. Indeed, in his *Reflections*, Burke proudly declared that he "never desire[d] to be thought a better whig than Lord Somers" (Burke 2001: 168). During the standing army controversy Somers sided with the crown, though his text, entitled *A Letter Ballancing the Necessity of Keeping a Land-force in Times of Peace: With the Dangers that May Follow on It*, evidenced Whiggish equivocations.<sup>121</sup> The threat of a military coup was one such example and was, according to Somers, the "strongest Objection" to William III's desire to retain a peacetime army. The specific threat was that

this Force will grow upon us, and continue among us: it will have such an Influence within Doors, that it will maintain it self in the H. of Commons; or, if that should fail, it will turn them out of Doors, and quickly find ways to subsist, to grow upon the Ruins of Liberty and Property.

Alive to this very real possibility, Somers confirmed Trenchard's excavations of the past by admitting that "History is so full of Instances this way" (Somers 1697: 14).

In sum, opposition authors writing in the standing army controversy portrayed a peacetime army as an illegitimate concept. Such a force was represented as being inconsistent with

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<sup>121</sup> John Trenchard spotted these equivocations and duly highlighted them in his *Letter from the Author of the Argument against a Standing Army, to the Author of the Ballancing Letter* (Trenchard 1697b: 12).

liberty, either because of concerns that the monarch would employ the army as an instrument of tyranny, or because of parallel worries that the army would usurp control of the state. The wide uptake of this latter point was illustrated by a prominent supporter of the court admitting that he too feared such an eventuality. The impact of the controversy meant that the anti standing army outlook quickly became “a political and constitutional principle of enduring significance” (Schwoerer 1974: 188). Although during the next century the danger was “little more than a bogey in political reality”, it has been suggested that the argument against retaining a professional peacetime force was one of the “seminal historical and political ideas of the period” (Pocock 1989b: 120-1). Despite being hailed by Professor Pocock as one of the dominant modes of eighteenth-century political argument, remarkably few studies have examined this anti-military attitude. It would seem that many scholars associate anti standing army arguments with the seventeenth-century, for the concept is entirely absent from the wide-ranging *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* and is instead covered in the *Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700*.<sup>122</sup> The only full-length treatment of the history of English conflicts over standing armies (excellent though it is) is aimed at the seventeenth-century and there remains no detailed assessment of manifestations of the argument in the eighteenth-century (Schwoerer 1974). In a brief postscript to her study of the seventeenth-century outlook, Lois G. Schwoerer notes the “ongoing influence of the anti-standing army ideology” and concludes that, in later expressions, the “most persistent and articulate opponents [of standing armies] were intellectuals and reformers on the left, who had been deeply influenced by seventeenth-century libertarianism and republicanism” (Schwoerer 1974: 195, 188). In his own studies, J. G. A. Pocock echoed these sentiments by linking the anti-army argument to contemporary fears over perceived increases in the political

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<sup>122</sup> This is indeed a strange omission, for the issue of standing armies was broached almost annually in Parliament during the eighteenth-century, where it frequently occasioned “very long and warm debate” (PH 8: 46). Furthermore, debates over the concept vexed constitutional theorists, historians and political commentators throughout the century.

power of the court; indeed, for Pocock, the argument “was a bogey intended for country gentlemen, part of a hydra-headed monster called Court Influence or Ministerial Corruption, whose other heads were Placemen, Pensioners, National Debt, Excise, and High Taxation” (Pocock 1989b: 122; cf. Pocock 1975). Each of these assessments is correct to a point, though setting out the proper development of the argument will illustrate the uses it held for Edmund Burke and its relevance for understanding his *Reflections*.

### 3.3.2 Anti army arguments in the eighteenth-century

As Schwoerer and Pocock have noted, the argument was an extremely common weapon in the arsenal of radical critics of the Whig establishment, for whom standing armies were “threatening and pernicious, and the ready Instruments of certain Ruin” (Trenchard and Gordon 1724: 209). It remained popular with radicals throughout the century and offers yet another example of the Anglicised view of the French Revolution, as English sympathisers were wont to declare the revolt significant because it would “teach kings, that a standing army may be infected with a popular enthusiasm” (Anon. 1791a: 27). Radical proponents of this attitude invariably conceived the issue in very black and white terms. Thus a permanent military force was deemed “incompatible with *publick liberty*”, since “the army is the very creature of the court”; agreeing to any request for the augmentation of the land forces would “be a most certain prelude to slavery: ‘Twould be a giving up of all our liberties at once; ‘twould be a putting an absolute power into the hands of the crown” (Bolingbroke 1735: 11; Burgh 1774-5b: 346; PH 9: 525). This unequivocal stance was born from paranoia over the threat to liberty and it often led advocates to champion nostalgic or unusual positions; they hoped, for example, to “restore” the conditions of a previous, military free era and occasionally even disavowed local militias (the traditional preference of seventeenth-century

republicans) for fear that they were under the control of King George III (PH 26: 639; PH 18: 1236). Their opponents stated that a standing army was necessary for reasons of national defence and Adam Smith, in his *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, identified the military as being a key motor in the preservation and perpetuation of civilised society (PH 18: 1230; Smith 1776: 47-68). With this in mind, it would seem that the unambiguousness of the radical viewpoint became anachronistic in the eighteenth-century. However, as a result of their ideological eccentricities (and perhaps also because they never attained, and were never likely to attain, political office), radicals were able to uphold a rigid belief in the “evil of a Standing Army” (Buchan 1793: 34). Considering the illegitimacy of standing armies, the French Revolution promised an opportunity for a fresh start, and, discussing the enlightened, post-revolutionary era, Joseph Priestley confidently explained that “in this new condition of the world ... standing armies, those instruments of tyranny, will be unknown” (Priestley 1791: 151).

Examples such as these may provide the most common instances of eighteenth-century appeals to the anti standing army argument. However, further to its being popular with “intellectuals and reformers on the left”, it is crucial to note two additional points of interest regarding the anti-military attitude (Schwoerer 1974: 188). First, the argument reached the wider political consciousness. This happening may have been a result of the sheer frequency with which related Bills were introduced into the House of Commons, for this level of exposure would certainly have ensured that a larger audience became acquainted with the argument. Nonetheless, regardless of the means by which cross pollination occurred, by the middle of the century conservative authors were acknowledging that standing armies could be a vehicle through which the court could exercise excessive political influence. In the Court/Country battle of the early Hanoverian period, Robert Walpole’s propaganda machine

had sought to redescribe standing armies in more favourable terms, framing the force as a modern concept essential for ensuring the safety of the constitution (Goldie 2006: 76). Although generally a supporter of Walpolean Whiggism, David Hume departed from this strain in his *History of England* to salute the Parliament of 1679 and argue that their voting standing armies illegal had been “very necessary for the full security of liberty and a limited constitution” (Hume 1763: 104).

It is highly significant that mainstream figures demonstrated a more complex, and even contradictory, attitude towards standing armies. Whereas radicals consistently opposed the retaining of any such force, believing that it would inevitably be used by the crown to diminish liberties, moderates and conservatives often held to a less absolute position. Conceived in the abstract, they equated martial law with arbitrary law, because it is “built upon no settled principles, but is entirely arbitrary in it’s decisions”. Moreover, they associated standing armies with absolute monarchies, on account of the “main principle of their constitution, which is that of governing by fear” (Blackstone 1765-9a; 395). However, as Blackstone explained, these theoretical misgivings often gave way to the harsh realities of practical politics;

as the fashion of keeping standing armies has universally prevailed over all Europe ... it has also for many years past been annually judged necessary by our legislature, for the safety of the kingdom, the defence of the possessions of the crown of Great Britain, and the preservation of the balance of power in Europe, to maintain even in time of peace a standing body of troops, under the command of the crown; who are however *ipso facto* disbanded at the expiration of every year, unless continued by parliament (Blackstone 1765-9a: 401).

The political mainstream thus grudgingly accepted the need for a permanent military force, though the fact that Parliament was compelled to renew the force annually is testament to the unease with which standing armies were regarded.<sup>123</sup> Conscious of this tension between Whig theory and practice, moderate opposition groups sought to make political capital by exploiting the belief that a perpetual army posed a potential threat to liberty. This was often a key tactic in the Rockingham Whigs' attacks on the government in the House of Commons. Opposing the Mutiny Bill in 1770, William Dowdeswell (the Rockinghams' leader in the lower House) declared the militia to be "a very dangerous power" for the civil magistrate to have at his disposal and Edmund Burke seconded, reminding MPs of the risks involved in maintaining an "annual army" to ensure that such dangers "whether as facts in history, or facts in law, did stand full in the broad eye of day" (PH 16: 1334). The Rockingham party repeated this strategy in the aftermath of the Gordon Riots, when the army had been deployed to quell the disturbances. Speaking first on this occasion Burke referred to the military as "the notorious bane of liberty" and Charles James Fox landed the political blow, attributing the need to involve the military "solely to the weak administration of public affairs" (PH 21: 662; cf. PH 21: 663).

These examples illustrate the mainstream appeal enjoyed by the anti standing army argument in the latter half of the eighteenth-century. Further to being recognised as a theoretical commonplace, it was an argument which was available for use by moderate critics of the regime and, following Hume's *History of England*, even those Whigs of a more conservative stripe. Rather than evidencing genuine concerns about jeopardising the nation's liberties, it would seem that moderate critics such as the Rockinghams Whigs were primarily engaged in

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<sup>123</sup> As a further precaution against military tyranny, during elections any soldiers based in the vicinity were required to move two miles away, at least one day prior to voting (De Lolme 1775: 40-1).



political point scoring. It is true that, in the instances cited above, the Rockinghams focused on the perceived threat standing armies posed to liberty. Nevertheless, it is similarly clear that their appeal to this argument was part of a broader political strategy as they elsewhere displayed the ideological flexibility common to parliamentary opposition groups. Their opposition to the Scotch Militia Bill in 1776, for example, prioritised expense as being the key impediment to any extension of the Scottish forces; withal, despite their public posturing during the Gordon Riots, the party's leaders (and Burke) had privately pressed for the imposition of martial law (PH 18: 1229; Walpole 1910: 311).

In addition to reaching the wider political consciousness, a second point to note is the continuance of the fear that a standing army would be able to depose the government and effect a military coup. Seventeenth-century opponents of standing armies (as well as Lord Somers, who wrote for the court) had been alive to this hazard. The basic danger had lain in the power of the army, allied to the inherent "Debauchery and Wickedness" of soldiers and officers alike, and this line of argument was certainly reiterated in the following century (Fletcher 1697: 19). MPs, for example, worried that by consenting to a standing army they had "erected a power superior to themselves", which would eventually "turn ... against those from whom they had at first their commissions" (PH 7: 509; PH 8: 383). For the present purposes, it is perhaps of greater interest that eighteenth-century figures also repeated the more subtle version of this argument, in which proponents had rooted the threat of a military coup in the army's "Chain of Dependence" that bonded the soldiery to their officers (Trenchard 1697a: 27). To this end, Roger Acherley forecast that the soldiers' "Habitual" way of life could provide a cause for concern (Acherley 1727: 56). Moreover, Adam Ferguson likewise cautioned that standing armies fostered an unhealthy link between the troops and their officers. The soldier, Ferguson maintained, would seek "to advance his

Leader, [so] that he may follow him to the Summit, and partake of the Power and the Spoil”. Evidencing this danger, he told how “Caesar and even Pompey found their Strength in those Legions which they had too long commanded in different Provinces” (Ferguson 1756: 26, 28; cf. Burgh 1774-5b: 356).

It was commonly held that the military should only act as a tool of the state. If the army was allowed to develop separate interests from the state, then the latent danger in the relationship between officer and soldier would become a reality; in short, an independently minded army would pose a threat to the operation of government. Although it reviewed the situation annually Parliament always voted to preserve a standing army and the eighteenth-century witnessed a gradual rise in the number of peacetime forces that were retained.<sup>124</sup> This steady increase arguably fed the fear that the army could, in time, become aloof from the political establishment and could exist as a discrete military establishment. “If the Sense of the Land Forces should differ from the *Sense* of the Two Estates of Lords and Commons”, Acherley warned, “it is obvious, That those Forces, being *Armed*, may Compel ... a Compliance with their *Sense*, or Disperse the *Unarmed* and *Naked* Parliament”. Given such an eventuality, Parliament would be unable to disband the army, and the relationship between the officer and his troops would be crucial in enabling the army to threaten the stability of the nation; “if the Captain General and his Army should *Conspire*; the Army, to make the Captain Powerful; and the Captain, to gratify the Army; the Naked Power of this Constitution would become precarious” (Acherley 1727: 56-7).

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<sup>124</sup> After the standing army controversy, the peacetime force serving in Britain was reduced to around seven thousand troops (Schwoerer 1974: 189). By the mid 1770s, James Burgh estimated that it had grown to number almost fifty thousand. In characteristically radical fashion, he stated that “there can no account be given of this alarming increase, but the increase of corruption, and the decrease of attention to liberty” (Burgh 1774-5b: 343).

This potential danger was acknowledged by Whigs of all ideological shades. However, as with the aforementioned possibility that a standing army would enhance the powers of the crown, there was a marked difference in the perception of the immediacy of the threat. Whereas radicals maintained that it was “eternally true, that a Free Parliament and Standing Army, are absolutely incompatible and can never subsist together”, authors from the political mainstream were once again more circumspect (Trenchard and Gordon 1724: 234; cf. PH 7: 507). Noting the theoretical risks, Blackstone cited historical examples to prove that “in a land of liberty it is extremely dangerous to make a distinct order of the profession of arms”. Nonetheless, he plainly thought it possible to guard against creating “a body too distinct from the people”. The key, in this respect, was to ensure that the “citizen and the soldier be more intimately connected together”. This could be achieved (and, more crucially, *was* achieved in Britain) by regularly rotating the troops and by making the soldiery “live intermixed with the people; no separate camp, no barracks, no inland fortresses should be allowed” (Blackstone 1765-9: 395, 401-2). As evidence of the conventionality of the fear, even ardent supporters of standing armies recognised the dangers of fostering an independently minded military. In this vein Adam Smith described how “men of republican principles” believed that a standing army was a threat to liberty and agreed that “it certainly is so wherever the interest of the general and that of the principal officers are not necessarily connected with the support of the constitution of the state”. Smith offered the examples of Caesar and Oliver Cromwell to demonstrate the potential threat. However, his position, like Blackstone’s, is distinguishable from that held by more radical authors because he did not think that retaining a standing army would inevitably lead to military despotism. Whereas Blackstone advocated the need to encourage integration between the army and wider society, Smith held greater faith in the ability of the state, particularly the sovereign and the nobility, to act as a controlling influence on the army. Thus,

where the sovereign is himself the general, and the principal nobility and gentry of the country the chief officers of the army; where the military force is placed under the command of those who have the greatest interest in the support of the civil authority, because they have themselves the greatest share of that authority, a standing army can never be dangerous to liberty (Smith 1776: 67-8).

There are at least two benefits to having illustrated the status of anti standing army arguments in the eighteenth-century. First, it is clear that the argument has a more complex history than has hitherto been recognised. It had a far greater uptake than the “intellectuals and reformers on the left” that Schwoerer associates it with, and had a wider reach than the criticisms of executive influence that Pocock identifies. Taken in isolation, these are valuable discoveries which increase our understanding of eighteenth-century political argument. Nevertheless, given the focus of the present study a more important benefit concerns the impact which this contextual investigation has on our ability to explain the character of Edmund Burke’s utterances on the French army.

In this vein, it is apparent that Burke’s argument evidences similarities with the anti-military outlook set out above. Although some (such as Adam Smith) were enthusiastic about the advantages of retaining a peacetime force, Whigs of all political persuasions were alive to the potential for standing armies to pose a threat to liberty. Despite this theoretical fear, mainstream authors grudgingly accepted the need to keep a standing army. Hence, although they shared the same fears, what differentiated radicals from more mainstream authors was the latter group’s belief that the state could exercise sufficient control over the army to employ it in its favour, and to ensure that it would not become a danger. In *Reflections*, Burke acknowledged the potential difficulties governments faced when attempting to manage

a permanent army; successfully keeping a reign on the army required “greater skill and attention” because, he noted, “armies have hitherto yielded a very precarious and uncertain obedience to any senate or popular authority”. Moreover, he claimed that “the nature of things” required that the military should serve as “*mere instruments*”, or the “machine” of the state (Burke 2001: 379, 387, 384). Given the highly conventional nature of the fears surrounding standing armies and given the fact that he was aware of the argument, having previously employed it in the Rockingham Whigs’ attacks on the government, it is extremely unlikely that Burke’s statements contain only a chance similarity with prevailing assessments of armies. Instead, it seems far more plausible to argue that Burke intended to draw upon this prevalent mode of argument; consequently, *Reflections* can thus be reclassified as having contributed to the ongoing debate on standing armies. Additionally, the brief statements cited above enable us to locate Burke on the spectrum of anti-army attitudes. He acknowledged the “precarious” relationship which governments bear to armies, yet by stating that armies should naturally serve as the “*instruments*” of governments he implicitly revealed the accompanying belief that they *could* function in this role. These passages therefore indicate the extent to which Burke’s argument affirmed establishment Whiggism as expressed, for example, by William Blackstone.

Having placed Burke’s text in the standing army literature, we can now determine the character of his uses of this argument. It is very apparent that Burke’s utterances on the French army relied heavily upon conventional arguments relating to the dangers of standing armies. There are two basic reasons for this. First, since *Reflections* was an intended act of communication, Burke’s intentions in writing must, to a certain extent, have been conventional so as to “be recognizable *as* intentions to uphold some particular position in argument” (Skinner 1988c: 77). Second, by reiterating views that were generally accepted,

Burke was able to appeal to his readers' prejudices. By adopting this strategy, he would have been better able to carry them along with his argument, thus procuring a certain level of agreement from them. This was particularly important because many did not yet share his assessment of the French Revolution or the political situation in Britain.

Burke's contention that the National Assembly were resorting to "despotism" by deploying troops to suppress disturbances and engineering "submission to fear and force" provides a significant example of his conventionality (Burke 2001: 391, 394). As the contextual investigation of the anti-army outlook revealed, using the army to govern was considered a mark of tyranny; indeed, these passages in *Reflections* certainly recall Blackstone's aforementioned equation of military rule with absolute monarchies (cf. Blackstone 1765-9a: 395). Owing to the widespread acceptance that this attitude commanded, Burke could have expected his readers to agree with his basic sentiments concerning the Assembly's actions. This being the case, his argument would have drawn a very convincing association between the government of post revolutionary France and the tyranny of absolute rulers. In making this link and in highlighting the tyranny of France's new administration, Burke was challenging and repudiating the dominant view about the French Revolution, i.e. that it had overturned an arbitrary monarch and enabled France to participate in an English form of liberty. Such ascriptions of intentionality can often be corroborated by referring to an author's beliefs and motives, since both are closely connected to the intentions with which we act (Skinner 1988d: 278). To this end, Burke believed that the French had installed a "despotic democracy", and, as Chapter Two established, he was motivated to redescribe their Revolution by his increasing concerns over its influence on the domestic political situation in Britain. This evidence seems compelling enough to support the above view on Burke's use of the anti-army discourse, though in this instance the interpretation is further strengthened by

the fact that Burke had previously appealed to the same argument to perform the same act (i.e. discrediting the government) during the Gordon Riots. In repeating the tactic used by the Rockinghams' against Lord North's government it would seem that Burke was restating a popular belief and relying on the rhetorical force that this accepted criticism carried.

His assertion that France would succumb to a military coup offers a further illustration of Burke's appeal to conventional arguments against standing armies. The notion that an army could depose a government was one of the potential dangers acknowledged by radical and mainstream Whigs alike and it is notable that Burke's forecast reiterated each of the factors which were commonly understood to exacerbate this danger.<sup>125</sup> First, the revolutionaries had enlisted a "very large" army; second, they had weakened the authority of state (the army "will not long look to an assembly acting through the organ of false shew, and palpable imposition" and "will not seriously yield obedience to a prisoner", Burke reminded); and third, they had allowed the army to become "more independent, and more of a military republic". As a final nod to convention, he guessed that the coup would be led by "some popular general", thus exploiting the long-standing fear that a parlous situation would develop "if the Captain General and his Army should *Conspire*" (Burke 2001: 379, 387, 388; Acherley 1727: 57). These constituent parts were arguably designed to render permissible Burke's analysis of France's degeneration. They appear to have hit the mark with some, drawing a stinging rebuttal from a French correspondent and a cautionary note from one of his British critics who urged the army to remain true to the Revolution (Du Fresnoy 1790: 57; Macaulay 1790: 89-90). Nonetheless, in employing the anti standing army argument Burke did not limit himself to reiterating ideological commonplaces, and in order to properly

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<sup>125</sup> It is also of note that this line of argument had been articulated by Lord Somers, William Blackstone, and Adam Smith – mainstream Whigs, whose works Burke owned and with whom he explicitly identified.

understand his appeal to such sentiments it is essential to grasp the more novel aspects of his argument.

Although he employed the existing conventions as footholds, Burke ultimately refashioned the anti-army outlook to serve his own purposes. The idea that a standing army would depose the government and subject the nation to the tyranny of military rule was standardly deployed to highlight the illegitimacy of maintaining a permanent land force. Rather than targeting standing armies *per se*, Burke's *Reflections* aimed to discredit the democratic principles which underpinned the French Revolution and which he feared were gaining ground in Britain. He undoubtedly used the standing army argument as a vehicle to help him accomplish this aim; however, in doing so, he pinpointed the propagation of democratic ideas as the catalyst which would eventually encourage the military to develop separate interests to the French state. Burke believed that rights of man ideology deemed all men to be "strictly equal" and bestowed individuals with "equal rights in their own government" (Burke 2001: 346). Daniel I. O'Neill has shown that Burke feared that promoting the rights of man would engender a process of "deep democratization", in which "political democratization" would inevitably be accompanied by "radical social and cultural democratization", transforming previously "disciplined and docile subjects into fearless participatory citizens" (O'Neill 2007: 127, 156, 152).<sup>126</sup> The army could not be exempted from the effects of this all-

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<sup>126</sup> O'Neill's *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate* outlines Burke's interpretation of the mechanics of this process, which involved the subversion of the church and the nobility. These institutions were central to Burke's idea of civilisation as they embodied his aesthetic understanding of the principles of the sublime and the beautiful, working as the "carrot and stick to keep the masses in that state of habitual social discipline vital for a people ... to emerge and develop in a civilized fashion" (O'Neill 2007: 143). O'Neill's Burke viewed democracy as "the radical transformation of natural moral sentiments". This process which attacked, undermined, and reversed the state of "habitual social discipline", thereby encouraging absolute equality and enabling the masses to act with unfettered liberty. Understood in this way, Burke equated democracy with savagery and, O'Neill informs us, interpreted "deep democratization" as "the literal death of Western civilization" (O'Neill 2007: 127). This reading of *Reflections* offers crucial insights into Burke's perception of the threat occasioned by the French Revolution, and it has been a source of much inspiration to the present author. Nevertheless, one might query certain aspects of O'Neill's interpretation of the text; specifically, his account of Burke's understanding of the



encompassing process, for “the soldier”, Burke reminded, “is told, he is a citizen, and has the rights of man and citizen”. Eager to stress the corrosive effect which these empowering principles would have on the opinions and institutions which guaranteed the traditional order, Burke maintained that the army would henceforth be disinclined to bow to the authority of the National Assembly or the king. “You have infused into that army by which you rule, as well as into the whole body of the nation, principles which after a time must disable you in the use you resolve to make of it”. Ostensibly addressed to the revolutionaries, this observation was no doubt intended as a warning of the repercussions of failing to halt the spread of democratic ideas, and Burke underlined his point by calculating that the state’s

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consequences of removing the institutional guarantors of civilisation. O’Neill asks “what did the death of Western civilization look like [according to Burke]?” and concludes that “the short answer is that the collapse of civilization meant the rise of a shameless political, social, and cultural democracy”. This “short answer” refers accurately to the short-term, but in the longer-term Burke foresaw that democracy would degenerate into the tyranny of a military dictatorship. O’Neill does not deny this point, though nor does he include it in his account. However, it is essential to acknowledge this perceived end-state for at least three reasons. First, as the present chapter demonstrates, doing so ultimately allows us to situate Burke’s utterances in the context of the anti standing army discourse and therefore explain the character of his political argument. Second, acknowledging the role of the army in his description of France’s demise enables us to better understand Burke’s conception of democracy. O’Neill’s work helps us to realise that Burke considered democracy to be a cultural and political phenomenon, and he recognises that Burke also regarded this phenomenon as being inherently unstable because it removed the traditional guarantors of order, whilst simultaneously encouraging licentiousness in the population. In O’Neill’s words, “it undermined the innate moral sentiments of the masses and transformed them from disciplined and docile subjects into fearless participatory citizens” (O’Neill 2007: 152). Nonetheless, by neglecting to acknowledge the role he perceived for the French army, we remain unaware that, further to being unstable, Burke also believed that democracy was *unsustainable*. Owing to its universal tendencies, in addition to affecting the masses, democratic ideology also transformed the army into “fearless participatory citizens”, encouraging them to develop separate interests to the state and thereby hastening the onset of a military coup. Given the unsustainability of democracy, the “triumph of savagery” would be short lived (O’Neill 2007: 226). This leads us to a third point concerning O’Neill’s account of Burke’s understanding of the consequences of removing the institutional guarantors of civilisation. The thrust of this point is that O’Neill’s reading contracts Burke’s analysis by attributing to his *Reflections* a questionable dichotomy between civilisation and savagery. O’Neill rightly understands the established church as Burke’s institutional embodiment of the aesthetic principle of the sublime. The church was the “stick of sublimity” which secured the masses’ obedience (and thus civilisation) “via awe, fear, and the threat of divine eternal retribution”. We can agree with O’Neill that Burke thought undermining the church and its effects would be akin to undermining civilisation itself, occasioning a “reversion to savagery” (O’Neill 2007: 143, 10). However, overlooking Burke’s belief in the unsustainability of democracy and his prediction of the rise of a military dictatorship renders O’Neill unable to recognise that “savagery” was, to Burke’s mind, only the immediate upshot of democratic revolution. Beyond the “complete disorder” generated by the Revolution, lay the order imposed by martial rule (O’Neill 2007: 151). As described by Burke, this order was the type of order secured through “despotism”, i.e. “submission to fear and force” (Burke 2001: 391, 394). Distinct from savagery, it was likewise distinct from civility, for although the church also relied upon fear its function was legitimised by its acting as the “surrogate for an omnipotent God on earth”. Moreover, civilisation ultimately rested upon the “balanced institutional alchemy of the sublime and the beautiful”, and the church’s role was complimented in this sense by the nobility, which secured obedience by engaging the affections of the masses (O’Neill 2007: 142, 143).

weapon would soon “snap short, unfaithful to the hand that employs it” (Burke 2001: 388, 390, 395). Familiar with this line of argument, his Whig audience would also have been well aware of the dire consequences for a nation that lost control of its army.

The contextual study of Burke’s arguments on the French army has thus far enabled us to recognise that Burke’s utterances drew upon the prevailing anti standing army discourse. Although he reiterated many of the conventional assumptions associated with this discourse, it has been demonstrated that Burke’s text evidenced a degree of innovation by framing democratic ideas as the catalyst which would facilitate the onset of a despotic military government. The political and social empowerment occasioned by the spread of democratic ideas would, he maintained, oblige the French National Assembly to resort to martial law. Eventually, the democratic plague would infect the army, encouraging them to revolt against the authorities and overwhelm the state under the command of “some popular general”. As previously mentioned, martial law and military governments were eighteenth-century bywords for tyranny. It is essential to understand this point, since grafting an anti-democratic element onto the anti-army argument enabled Burke to aim the existing argument at a different target: he could argue that the “pure democracy” currently governing France resulted in tyranny because the Assembly was deploying the troops to maintain order, and could also argue that the democratic Revolution would result in tyranny because it would degenerate into a military dictatorship. In short, Burke’s subtle “move in argument” ultimately enabled him to indicate that the propagation of democratic ideas necessarily decreased, rather than increased liberty (Skinner 1988d: 274). It will be remembered that Burke’s line on standing armies mirrored the position of conservative figures such as Blackstone by accepting the possibility that an army *could* be controlled by the state. When juxtaposed with his description of the tyranny in France this point becomes increasingly

potent, implying a normative justification of Burke's traditional model of governance; for the army *had been* obedient to France's *ancien régime*, and likewise *remained* obedient to the aristocratic regime in Britain.

Recalling the domestic political situation as outlined at the beginning of this chapter illustrates the practical merit in undertaking these key ideational moves. Richard Price had equated "true liberty" with a "fair and equal" system of representation and, by assailing the British system of representation, had simultaneously declared Britain to be lacking in liberty (Price 1991: 192). Price was Burke's mouthpiece for radicalism, but the association between liberty and political participation had been common in reformist circles since the time of the American dispute. It was replicated by a host of other authors and societies, many of whom (Price included) now looked to France to "be our model, as we have been yours" (Barbault 1790: 36). In issuing his utterances on the French army, it can be argued that Burke was disavowing the association between liberty and political participation. Moreover, his argument sought to wrestle control of the debate by redefining the radicals' concept of participation to portray it, not as a mark of liberty, but as a harbinger of tyranny. Burke depicted democratic opinion as being fundamentally unstable and *Reflections* balked at the notion of extending the remit of such opinion beyond the limited franchise which he accepted as part of Britain's mixed constitution. To this end, he caricatured the radicals' call for increased participation, representing such reform as a first step towards imitating France; "you see *why they* are so much enamoured of your [the French] fair and equal system of representation, which being once obtained, the same effects might follow" (Burke 2001: 215). According to Burke, these effects would be licentiousness, followed by the tyranny of a military dictatorship. To avoid this fate he warned that British Whigs were required to hold

firm to the existing arrangements which were able to keep the democratic threat, and thus the army, at bay.

To conclude, this chapter has investigated Burke's basic purposes in offering arguments on representation and on the French army. Understanding these arguments in the prevailing context of attempts by radical and moderate figures to employ the French Revolution to effect domestic reforms reveals the extent to which Burke issued both arguments to counter the democratic threat which he believed Britain faced *circa* 1790. It has been demonstrated that Burke meant his passages on the political role of the landed aristocracy and virtual representation to be taken as a repudiation of more democratically inclined ideas that were circulating at the time. In doing so, Burke moved to a more guarded and reactionary position which reinforced his defence of aristocratic Whiggism. Moreover, his discussion of the French army manipulated the existing anti standing army discourse to create an entirely original form of anti-democratic political argument. By tracing France's descent into a military dictatorship, Burke explained to his readers that increasing democratic ideas necessarily decreases liberty. In short, rather than recommending "timely reform" to placate British radicals (as his Foxite colleagues had) these sections of *Reflections* show that Burke adopted a very different course of political action to meet the perceived democratic threat. Instead of shoring up the democratic part of the tripartite constitution (again, as the Foxites sought to), Burke engaged in an ideological retrenchment which aimed to shore up and defend the aristocratic world.

The following, and final, chapter draws the overall argument together by restating the key points and reflecting on the wider significance of the thesis.

## CONCLUSION

The basic aim of this thesis has been to gain a historical understanding of what Edmund Burke was up to in writing his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. These concluding remarks summarise the main argument of the thesis whilst drawing out the most significant methodological and interpretative contributions it makes to Burke scholarship, and the contributions it makes to the wider discipline of the history of political thought.

### **Section One: Restating the argument**

Burke's *Reflections* is firmly established in the canon of political theory and is now routinely employed by contemporary conservatives to add intellectual legitimacy to their own projects. Moreover, the text is overwhelmingly studied as a commentary on the French Revolution or understood as offering a warning about the dangers of revolutionary excess. Focusing on Burke's direct engagement with the French Revolution is no doubt important; indeed, his uncommonly perceptive analysis of the events taking place across the channel singles *Reflections* out from the more ephemeral works of his contemporaries. Notwithstanding this point, it is clear that Burke was doing a great many things in his text. To this end, the present study has sought to indicate that a significant portion of his political argument aimed to counter what he termed the "smugglers of adulterated metaphysics" (Burke 2001: 255). These "smugglers" were the dissident figures that Burke identified as posing a threat to Britain by virtue of their "wild and dangerous politics" and their holding the French revolutionaries up "as objects for imitation" (Burke 2001: 223, 325). By contrast to the vast

majority of previous scholarship, the thesis has investigated Burke's perception of the nature of the threat occasioned by this transfer of the principles and the authority of the French Revolution to a domestic setting.

Revisiting his private correspondence and parliamentary speeches *circa* 1790, the thesis has illustrated that Burke's alarm was rooted in his belief that the political and linguistic actions of British radicals represented a democratic threat to the nation's existing aristocratic constitution. This threat arose from the unique uses that radicals made of the French Revolution when employing its principles and authority to buttress and justify their existing arguments for reform. A key focus in this respect was the unreformed system of representation. Indeed, Burke's *bête noir* described this as the "fundamental grievance" of the period (Price 1991: 192). Although the thesis aimed to recover the historical identity of *Reflections*, undertaking such a task necessarily involved reconstructing various contexts of radical argument in order to grasp the precise problems raised by the radicals' uses of democratic ideas. In doing so, it was found that such opponents of virtual representation made their case by asserting strong notions of popular sovereignty and by associating liberty with political participation. The English Revolution of 1688 served as an important vehicle for expressing ideas of popular sovereignty, and by reiterating a populist interpretation of 1688 radicals were able to justify their claims and infuse the British constitution with ideas of choice and accountability. This argument was particularly potent in 1790 because the French Revolution was widely equated with the English event. Combining their use of 1688 with an appeal to the authority of the French Revolution (as Richard Price did) thus enabled radicals to draw upon an additional, more recent, precedent which could potentially affirm the legitimacy of undertaking political reform. It seems that radicals further strengthened their case for reform by referencing the new-modelled French system of representation, which

promised a genuinely accountable and participatory government. In this vein, they employed the French system as an example to denounce the lack of participation, and hence the lack of liberty, in Britain.

These radical uses of democratic ideas undoubtedly underpinned Burke's political fears in his *Reflections*. However, as the thesis has shown, his anxiety over the democratic threat was heightened by the behaviour of certain members of the governing elite. Although similarly wedded to an aristocratic conception of politics, such figures were willing to tolerate and/or employ natural rights arguments. Moreover, they equated events in France with the English Revolution of 1688; joined with radical societies to hail France's apparent adoption of an English-style liberty; and furthered their own opposition to the British system of virtual representation by seizing upon events in France to convince their contemporaries to shore up the democratic element of Britain's tripartite constitution.

The thesis has investigated *Reflections* as a purposive intervention in these prevailing intellectual and political contexts. More specifically, it has focused on Burke's reading of the English Revolution, his utterances on representation, and his discussion of the French army, to illustrate how his uses of these arguments addressed the dilemmas arising from the refraction of the French Revolution in the context of British politics. The aim in each case was to understand what forms of political action Burke was undertaking in issuing these arguments in the manner that he did.

Regarding his appeal to the English Revolution, Chapter Three indicated that, in stating that it had been "obtained by a just war" and in propagating the idea of resistance *in extremis*, Burke was dissociating 1688 from notions of popular choice and government accountability (Burke

2001: 180). Moreover, by repeatedly describing it as an “act of *necessity*” Burke was limiting the significance of the English Revolution as a political precedent, thereby rendering it passive rather than active history (Burke 2001: 165). Here, Burke’s arguments largely followed the prevailing conservative Whig discourse on the event. This is of note because, like the other members of the Rockingham party, he had previously articulated a moderate opposition discourse which associated 1688 with theoretical notions of popular sovereignty. In the interpretation proffered in *Reflections* Burke engaged in an ideological retrenchment to strip Whiggism of its democratic potential, thus curtailing what he believed to be its more dangerous elements; i.e. those which could enable a genuinely radical and democratically inclined discourse to flower. Burke likewise rendered the English Revolution passive history by restating an older position which framed the event as a continuation of England’s ancient constitution. Outmoded amongst his peers, this position upheld the prescriptive authority of the ancient constitution and subsequently restricted future political practice. However, further to this, the research also uncovered Burke’s manipulation of the conservative discourse on 1688. In addition to divesting the event of any authority to affect contemporary politics, Burke simultaneously claimed that the Declaration of Right (which declared William and Mary as joint sovereigns) had “for ever settled” the “fundamental principles” of the constitution (Burke 2001: 163). In doing so, he was depicting the English Revolution as active history and investing it with enough authority to constrain the actions of future generations by limiting their ability to alter the country’s constitutional arrangements.

Chapter Four demonstrated related points. Burke’s arguments on the composition of assemblies and on the mode of representation reveal his adherence to a distinctly conservative discourse which contrasts markedly with that offered by other members of his party. Whereas moderate Whigs aimed to shore up the democratic part of the mixed



constitution to prevent the House of Commons from becoming “another aristocratical power”, in *Reflections* Burke was cautioning his readers against such change and hailing the existing system in Britain, under which the “natural landed interest” was “out of all proportion, predominant in the representation” (Anon. 1995: 320; Burke 2001: 207-8). Burke likewise reiterated the conservative concept of virtual representation, which was commonly used to confront arguments that associated liberty and political accountability with actual representation. Although he certainly employed the concept in such a manner, Burke also undertook an unconventional move in argument by denying its faults and presenting virtual representation as an ideal model. In arguing in this way, he was countering criticism of virtual representation and reinforcing the existing aristocratic political system. Chapter Four similarly illustrated that Burke was abating the influence of democratically inclined arguments when discussing the role of the French army in his description of the degeneration of revolutionary France. Locating Burke’s utterances in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century tradition of anti standing army arguments, it indicated that Burke portrayed the propagation of democratic ideas as the catalyst that would enable a military force to develop separate interests to the state; an outcome which was conventionally believed to facilitate the onset of a despotic military dictatorship. Burke’s point served as a normative justification of the aristocratic Whig regime in Britain. However, in grafting an anti-democratic argument onto the existing anti standing army argument he was also showing his readers that increasing democratic ideas necessarily decreases liberty.

## **Section Two: Significant contributions offered by the thesis**

Having restated the argument, this next section sets out three key contributions that the thesis makes to Burke studies and to the wider history of political thought. First, it highlights the methodological contribution to the literature on Burke, which turns upon the unique use of Quentin Skinner's historical approach; second, it focuses more directly on the critical significance of the thesis for studies, and uses, of Burke's thought; third, it indicates how the research contained herein contributes to the history of political thought by greatly increasing our knowledge of eighteenth-century political argument.

## 2.1 Contributions to Burke studies

### 2.1.1 Methodological contributions to Burke studies

The present thesis offers three significant methodological contributions. First, it demonstrates the feasibility of putting Quentin Skinner's approach to textual interpretation into practice. This possibility had previously been questioned by critics who cautioned historians of political thought to approach Skinner's theory with "due circumspection" on account of the "practical difficulties" of implementing his interpretative injunctions (Boucher 1985: 243, 213). Second, pursuing a Skinnerian approach to the study of *Reflections* has enabled the thesis to sideline existing approaches and highlight the limitations of approaching the text through the prism of the 'Burke-problem'. This influential, yet wholly scholastic, dilemma relates to the question of the coherence of Burke's thought. It entails taking Burke's corpus of work as one's unit of analysis and understanding his *Reflections* in terms of the fundamental coherence/incoherence of his entire *oeuvre*. Studying *Reflections* as part of a broader concern with Burke's thought as a whole numbs us to the precise problems that he was addressing in this text; as a result, 'Burke problem' scholars have been unable to grasp

the particularity or the complexity of Burke's arguments in *Reflections*. By contrast, Skinner's writings highlight the heuristic advantages of following a "text-by-text approach" which assumes that authors' individual texts were asking and answering their own questions (Skinner 2006: 241). In this vein, understanding an author's use of a certain argument in a certain text involves (though is not limited to) situating his/her argument in an appropriate problem complex. Adopting this approach, the thesis illustrated that Burke's utterances on the role that he believed the army would play in furthering France's transition from democracy to military dictatorship was a response to radicals' assertions that the propagation of democratic ideas necessarily increased liberty and to Charles James Fox's suggestion that the example of revolutionary France proved the merit of extending citizenship to the soldiery.

Before highlighting the third methodological contribution that the thesis makes to Burke studies, it is necessary to note that Skinner's meta-theoretical writings have received extensive critical attention. One source of criticism is that his text-by-text approach generates an "atomized history" in which the past is conceived "as a series of unrelated episodes" (Nederman 1985: 344; cf. Femia 1988). These comments seem a tad extreme, for, as Chapter One indicated, Skinner's "mythology of coherence" does not deny that a past author can evidence coherent beliefs across two or more texts. Indeed, Chapter Two demonstrated this point by fleshing out Burke's aristocratic conception of politics and his beliefs about the danger of encouraging the propagation of democratic ideas. However, it is important to acknowledge that pursuing Skinner's approach produces a certain type of history, i.e. one that is sceptical of the practice of tracking the fortunes of particular doctrines or concepts, and one that is less disposed to linking the arguments in a given authors' texts, or to reading them as though they were actually issued as separate parts of a more general treatise. Since it has adopted a text-by-text approach, the thesis has not been concerned to undertake a comparison

between Burke's arguments in *Reflections* and those in his later texts that may have addressed similar themes. Consequently, we cannot justifiably extend the conclusions of the thesis beyond the remit of commenting on Burke's political argument in *Reflections*.

For instance, a footnote toward the end of Chapter Four employed the insights offered by situating Burke's discussion of the French army in the prevailing contexts of anti standing army arguments and radical arguments that equated liberty with political participation to query a recent interpretation of Burke's text. Further to occasioning a "reversion to savagery" and "complete disorder", as Daniel I. O'Neill has maintained, it was revealed that Burke portrayed democracy as an unsustainable phenomenon that would shortly give way to a military dictatorship which would secure order through "despotism" and "submission to fear and force" (O'Neill 2007: 10, 151; Burke 2001: 391, 394). This scholarship significantly advances our understanding of what Burke was doing in *Reflections* by illustrating that he was dissociating democratic ideas from liberty and simultaneously representing democracy as an unsustainable model of government that would inevitably degenerate into tyranny. Yet, we cannot subsequently suggest that this point explains Burke's overriding difficulty with democracy, or argue that it accounts for his complete assessment of the consequences of democratic revolution. To make such claims would require one to adopt a different approach which focused more broadly on Burke's utterances throughout the 1790s. That the thesis is unable to comment on these matters should be viewed not as a limitation of the study, but instead as an example of the inevitable trade off that arises when one determines the focus of one's research. In short, the aim of the thesis was to investigate *Reflections* as a purposive intervention in various British contexts of debate in order to grasp what Burke was doing in issuing the arguments that he did in the manner that he did. To this end, Skinner's text-by-

text approach has proved beneficial as it has enabled the study to improve our understanding of the particularity and complexity of Burke's argument in his *Reflections*.

It has thus far been stated that the thesis has offered significant methodological contributions to the literature on Burke by having demonstrated the feasibility of putting Skinner's precepts into practice and having highlighted the limitations of approaching *Reflections* through the prism of the 'Burke-problem'. The thesis offers a third methodological contribution as it indicates the heuristic value of employing a Skinnerian approach when studying Burke's *Reflections*. Burke scholars have previously questioned the merit of applying Skinner's meta-theoretical writings to Burke (see Freeman 1980: 6-14; Welsh 1995: 12-19). However, the present study repudiates these judgements, for pursuing Skinner's precepts has undoubtedly made the substantive points of the thesis possible; indeed, the interpretative merits and contributions of the thesis simultaneously evidence the methodological merits and contributions. As Chapter One indicated, the dissatisfaction with the existing literature on *Reflections* is that it remains inattentive to Burke's use of certain arguments or concepts in addressing the political problems he faced up to in *Reflections*. By contrast Quentin Skinner's work directs us toward the dimension of linguistic action, so that we might learn what the authors of past texts "were *doing* in writing them" (Skinner 1978a: xiii).

Following Skinner's interpretative injunctions has therefore allowed the thesis to offer a distinct methodological contribution to the field as it has been able to pose previously unasked questions of Burke's text, i.e. questions that aim to grasp the linguistic acts that Burke was engaging in when writing his *magnum opus*. There are clear advantages to adopting this approach. For instance, it has allowed the thesis to submit innovative conclusions about Burke's utterances on the French army. This section of *Reflections* had

previously received limited scholarly attention; nevertheless, further to understanding that Burke was appealing to the tradition of anti standing army arguments, a consequence of the present study is to alter the perception of this passage by highlighting its significance to Burke's project and stressing that it forms one of the most important weapons in his anti-democratic arsenal. Likewise, when examining Burke's appeal to the English Revolution of 1688, commentators have generally sought to determine the accuracy of Burke's account and to "analyze whether it is valid, in the light of modern scholarship" (Stanlis 1991: 216). Pursuing a Skinnerian line of inquiry, the thesis has been less interested in passing judgement on the validity of Burke's statements and has instead been concerned to recover his illocutionary intentions in framing his reading of 1688 in the manner that he did. To this end, the thesis has broken entirely new ground by extending J. G. A. Pocock's analysis of Burke's ancient constitutionalism and demonstrating that, in appealing to this political language, Burke was recalling his audience to an outmoded position which repudiated radicals' arguments by portraying 1688 as passive rather than active history, thereby divesting it of any authority as a reformist precedent.

### 2.1.2 Interpretative contribution to Burke studies

The most important and original contributions of the thesis concern its immense significance for studies, and contemporary uses, of Burke's political thought. As previously mentioned, these interpretative contributions have been generated by employing Quentin Skinner's approach to textual interpretation. Nonetheless, further to this, each of the interpretative contributions is bound up with the investigation of Burke's intervention in various prevailing *domestic* contexts, rather than concentrating on his direct engagement with the French Revolution. Shifting the focus from France to Britain in this way constitutes a truly

innovative move which sets the thesis apart from other studies of Burke's text. Moreover, this move serves as a crucial point of departure which enables the thesis to make three distinct interpretative contributions to Burke studies. First, the study advances our understanding of *Reflections* by offering unique insights into the context in which it was issued. For instance, by surveying the surrounding intellectual and political contexts it has been able to uncover the various ways in which the idea of the French Revolution was refracted in existing contexts of debate in Britain, not to mention the very different uses to which radical and moderate opponents of the Whig regime put the Revolution in order to further their particular domestic aims. For radicals, these uses revolved around employing the authority of the French Revolution to augment their populist understanding of the English Revolution and their belief that liberty was directly proportional to political participation. Although moderate Whigs performed a similar trick, they used the revolutionary change taking place in France as an example of what could happen, should Britain not undertake "timely and temperate reform" to shore up the democratic part of her constitution (PH 28: 455).

With this in mind, undertaking a detailed study of Burke's interpretation of the political situation in Britain *circa* 1790 has deepened our knowledge of his interaction with this prevailing context by demonstrating, first, that he was alarmed by the actions and attitudes of members of both of these groups, and second, that he believed that both of these groups represented a democratic threat to the British constitution. Additionally, the thesis has also revealed the complexity of Burke's interpretation of this context by illustrating that he differentiated between the different types of threat posed by radicals and moderates. Regarding radicals, who "sophistically confounded ... the right of the people ... with their power", this threat apparently took the form of a frontal assault on the existing aristocratic

constitution (Burke 2001: 221). “With these ideas of every thing in their constitution and government at home, either in church or state, as illegitimate and usurped, or, at best as a vain mockery, they [the Revolution Society] look abroad with an eager and passionate enthusiasm”, Burke warned his readers in *Reflections* (Burke 2001: 217). However, he viewed moderate Whigs such as Charles James Fox in a different light. The threat from this quarter bottomed in the moderates’ ability to serve as unwitting gatekeepers for more extreme doctrines that could disrupt Burke’s political party and eventually prove a danger to the wider governing elite. As Chapters Two and Four made clear, this possibility came about because prominent figures in his party did not share Burke’s assessment of the political problems facing the Whig establishment in 1790. Instead of interpreting the Dissenters’ appeals to Parliament and the actions of the French revolutionaries as prompting a democratic challenge to the aristocratic establishment, the Foxites viewed both as occasioning issues of participation. Furthermore, to Burke’s horror, Fox, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and others thought it entirely possible to reconcile the use of natural rights language with an aristocratic conception of politics. Consequently, Burke’s basic purpose in writing *Reflections* entailed recalling this section of his audience to a more appropriate ideological position. As he later revealed, “I thought I should do service to a Party of Gentlemen to caution the publick against giving Countenance to a project, calculated for the ruin of such a party” (Corr 7: 62).

Having indicated the ways in which the thesis contributes to our understanding of the British context in which *Reflections* was issued, a second key interpretative contribution turns upon the insights that the research offers into Burke’s perception of the nature of the political problems that he faced up to. To this end, it is highly important to stress that Burke was primarily stirred by the perceived propagation of *democratic* ideas. This finding constitutes a notable contribution to Burke studies because many commentators have downplayed the



significance of the anti-democratic dimension of Burke's arguments and have instead maintained that *Reflections* railed against the revolutionaries' use of abstract arguments, or their political fundamentalism. Moreover, others have actually denied that Burke's arguments contain a specifically anti-democratic character; thus, for J. C. D. Clark, "Burke did not fear communist levelling ... and did not diagnose the essential source of revolutionary ideology as democratic" (Clark 2001: 73). It is clear that Burke was perturbed by the accompanying dangers arising from the abstract and fundamentalist nature of his opponents' principles and behaviour. However, instead of concluding the investigation at this point, the present study has attempted to dig deeper and inquire into Burke's view of the *type* of abstract fundamentalism that he confronted and the practical political affects that he feared from its spread. In doing so it has shown that he was ultimately concerned to prevent the democratic empowerment that would be brought about by promoting the rights of man and their "monstrous fiction" of social and political equality (Burke 2001: 189). "Men, with them", Burke cautioned, "are strictly equal, and are entitled to equal rights in their own government" (Burke 2001: 346).

The most perceptive recent scholarship on *Reflections* has recognised the extent to which Burke was concerned to counter a perceived democratic threat (Herzog 1998; O'Neill 2007). Inasmuch as it argues that we must grasp Burke's belief that the principles of the French Revolution posed a democratic danger to the existing aristocratic world, the thesis is very much in line with this prior work. Nonetheless, as Chapter One demonstrated, Herzog and O'Neill conceive Burke's text as a commentary on the French Revolution and therefore focus exclusively on understanding Burke's interpretation of, and direct engagement with, the Revolution. Consequently, by focusing on Burke's perception of the democratic threat occasioned by British radicals' appropriation of the principles of the French Revolution, and

by investigating the political actions that flowed from his belief that “the Leaders” of his party (by which he meant Fox and Sheridan) were “with all their might going on, to propagate the principles of French Levelling”, the present study departs from existing scholarship to offer an innovative contribution to Burke studies (Corr 6: 451).

Further to offering unique insights into the British context in which *Reflections* was issued and into Burke’s perception of the nature of the political problems that he faced up to, a third interpretative contribution turns upon the substantive points that the thesis makes about Burke’s political argument. Indeed, this represents the most exciting and the most interesting dimension of the study as the descriptions of what Burke was doing in countering the perceived democratic threat provide what is hitherto the most comprehensive explanation of his engagement with late eighteenth-century British politics. Moreover, such descriptions simultaneously highlight the critical significance of the thesis for studies, and uses, of Burke’s thought. In this vein, undertaking a detailed contextual investigation of *Reflections* enables us to confirm the findings of other studies and question the idea that Burke was “ahead of [his] time” (Lakoff 1998: 464). By contrast to this view (which remains popular in certain circles), the thesis has revealed that Burke employed a large number of conventional eighteenth-century arguments to further his basic intentions in writing. For instance, his reading of the English Revolution largely drew upon a prevailing conservative vocabulary which rendered the event as passive history by reiterating key components of the seventeenth-century Tory interpretation; his arguments on the composition of representative assemblies and on the mode of representation restated establishment assumptions by hailing a system of virtual representation by the landed elite; and his appeal to the anti standing army discourse was grounded in commonplace fears about the threat that peacetime forces posed to liberty, and the despotism of military rule.

Although other commentators have noted the extent to which Burke relied upon conventional eighteenth-century arguments, the present study has illustrated that this literature grossly underestimates the novelty and complexity of Burke's political argument in *Reflections*. For some, to characterise Burke as an "original thinker ... is to misread the principles that he actually asserted", whilst for others Burke essentially served as a latter day spokesman for Walpoleanism (Dreyer 1979: 83; Browning 1984: 71, 65; cf. Clark 2001). Nonetheless, as a result of the research undertaken in this thesis, it is apparent that we simply must reappraise this view if we are to properly understand what Burke was doing in addressing the problems raised by the political behaviour of British radicals and key figures within his party. In short, it is now clear that, in *Reflections*, Burke was manipulating the ideological conventions of Whiggism. For example, the thesis has demonstrated that in setting out his 'Revolution principles', Burke withdrew the right of resistance from the broader populace ("it is not to be agitated by common minds") and instead argued that this Whig standard was possessed only by the narrow governing elite ("those whom nature has qualified to administer in extremities, this critical, ambiguous, bitter portion to a distempered state"); moreover, in representing 1688 as a continuation of the ancient constitution, Burke repudiated the Walpolean discourse which his party adhered to and, in an entirely novel move, portrayed the English Revolution as having provided a constitutional full stop that bound society into the existing aristocratic arrangements (Burke 2001: 181). Burke's appeal to the notion of virtual representation evidenced similar originality, for he contradicted even the most conservative defenders of this system by neglecting its shortcomings and presenting it as an ideal model. Finally, it is plain that Burke completely transformed the prevailing anti standing army argument. Interested in targeting the constitutional threat posed by the propagation of democratic ideas rather than that posed by the maintenance of a peacetime force, he grafted an anti democratic element

onto the existing argument. In doing so, he pinpointed the rights of man as the catalyst which would allow the soldiery to develop separate interests to the state – a process that was commonly believed to facilitate the onset of a despotic military dictatorship.

It is telling to note the character of the commonplace assumptions that Burke reiterated and the innovations that he introduced into Whig ideology. Essentially, in each of the instances cited above Burke was either following an existing conservative discourse, or shifting Whiggism onto a more conservative, and occasionally reactionary, footing. By grasping this dimension of his text we are able to bring his work into sharper focus and re-evaluate the status that we ascribe to his political argument. This in turn enables us to bring out the critical significance for modern day studies, and uses, of Burke's political thought. Concerning the former, recovering the conservative nature of his intentions in writing enables the thesis to overturn the interpretations offered by eminent Burke scholars who have previously located the text "in the mainstream of English political thought" by describing it as Burke's "agonised attempt to hold together a middle ground" (Clark 2001: 97; Pocock 1987b: xii). If we are to attain a properly historical understanding of *Reflections* it seems crucial to reposition the text on the political spectrum. This repositioning is significant, not because we may prefer one description over another, but because Burke's use of certain arguments enabled him to perform certain linguistic actions. Acknowledging the guarded and reactionary vocabulary that Burke employed when, for example, he hailed the inequalities of the system of virtual representation, or when he used the authority of 1688 as a straitjacket to constrain the actions of would be reformers allows us to appreciate the precise forms of political action that he engaged in at these junctures. Without recognising such points, it is likely that one will misunderstand what Burke was doing in his text.

With regard to contemporary uses of Burke's thought, emphasising the reactionary and anti-democratic nature of his political argument allows us to question the validity of recent attempts to portray him as the "patron saint" of the "Big Society" (Marquand 2010). This concept apparently provides the ideological underpinning of the present Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government. In truth, the Big Society is rather vaguely specified. However, it is crucial to note that the Prime Minister grounds the concept in "community empowerment", and has subsequently claimed that putting the idea into practice will result in "the biggest, most dramatic redistribution of power from elites in Whitehall to the man and woman on the street" (Cameron 2010). Appropriating Burke as the "authentic voice" of such a project rests on an interpretation of his career that claims he was concerned with "emancipation", and, more specifically, a reading of *Reflections* that depicts him as having championed "experience" over "abstract theorising" and the community over "aggressive individualism" (Rajan 2010; Marquand 2010).<sup>127</sup>

Taking the substantive points of the thesis into consideration, it seems clear that the link between Burke and the Big Society is misplaced. Whereas the Big Society stresses "community empowerment", Burke held to an aristocratic conception of politics which meant that he was fundamentally opposed to developing notions of public agency. Reconstructing Burke's beliefs in the context of his political career, Chapter Two demonstrated that rather than being concerned with "emancipation", Burke was wary of encouraging a more active

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<sup>127</sup> Burke's supposed defence of community is based upon his notion of 'little platoons'. In *Reflections*, he denounced those members of the French nobility who had furthered the cause of the Revolution as "discontented men of quality" who "generally despise their own order". In an effort to discourage such behaviour amongst the British aristocracy, he sought to remind them of their ties by stating that "to be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind. The interests of that portion of social arrangement is a trust in the hands of all those who compose it; and as none but bad men would justify it in abuse, none but traitors would barter it away for their own personal advantage" (Burke 2001: 201, 202). Rather than a defence of "community empowerment", it can be argued that Burke's point is more accurately read as an attempt to encourage members of society to identify with their particular place in the social order, and to therefore maintain the hierarchical nature of that existing order.

political role for extra-parliamentary opinion because he believed that the people were incapable of independent thought. To Burke's mind, the servile nature of the people posed a potential threat to the stability of the existing order as he believed that they would simply follow whatever stimulus they were exposed to – including those offered by radical figures such as Thomas Paine. Moreover, undertaking a historical interpretation of *Reflections* also appears to undermine any attempt to represent Burke as a forerunner of the Big Society. Indeed, pressing on to inquire into the type of abstract thinking that stirred him, the thesis has illustrated that Burke was primarily moved by the threat occasioned by the propagation of democratic ideas. Consequently, in intervening in the British context of debate, Burke was denying the accountability of government, limiting the political role and rights of the people, hailing the inequalities of the existing constitutional arrangements, and highlighting the dangers of encouraging increased political participation. In short, if the Big Society entails a “dramatic redistribution of power from elites”, it would be completely and utterly unpalatable to Burke. He would no doubt have regarded it as being anathema to freedom and would have railed against it in the same manner in which he attacked any project that threatened to empower the wider populace. Employing the thesis in this critical capacity does not entail rejecting the possibility that Burke's *Reflections* can inform our present age. Nevertheless, in order to learn from the classic texts, it seems evident that we must first clarify the nature of the wisdom they impart by recovering the precise forms of political action that their authors were recommending.

## 2.2 Contributions to the history of political thought

The Conclusion has thus far discussed the methodological and interpretative contributions that the thesis makes to Burke studies. These two categories undoubtedly represent its most

significant contributions. However, although the primary concern of the thesis has been to understand what Burke was doing in issuing arguments on the English Revolution, on representation, and on the French army, pursuing a Skinnerian line of inquiry has necessitated studying the wider conventions governing contemporary uses of these arguments. By investigating these prevailing contexts, the thesis has made a number of important discoveries which contribute to the wider history of political thought by questioning prevailing scholarship and greatly increasing our knowledge of the structure of eighteenth-century political argument.

With regard to the English Revolution, the thesis studied Burke's uses of the right of resistance and his assertion that 1688 represented continuity in British history. In doing so, it overturned conventional assumptions about the currency of dynamic interpretations of the event. Historians are aware that one could articulate a more forceful interpretation of 1688 by associating it with popular resistance, or by describing the transfer of the throne as an election. Nonetheless, it is commonly assumed "that Rockingham, Fox and Burke had never talked in this way" (Pocock 1987b: xiii). By illustrating the contrary, and showing that Fox and Burke regularly reiterated such rhetoric in their attempts to curtail the power of King George III, the thesis indicated that this discourse was employed more widely than has hitherto been realised. Moreover, highlighting the frequency with which the Rockinghams appealed to this reading of 1688 deepens our knowledge of the political strategies adopted by one of the century's most prominent opposition parties. Additionally, undertaking contextual research on eighteenth-century interpretations of the English Revolution has demonstrated that Walpolean influenced modernist readings, which described the event as having established a new era of liberty, were extremely prevalent throughout the eighteenth-century. This is significant because prevailing scholarship has downplayed such an idea, instead

believing that “Walpolean modernism had lost much of its value as polemic [by the time of David Hume’s *History of England*]” (Pocock 1987a: 376). By contrast, reviewing historical, legal, and political sources from the period reveals that a version of this strand of argument had in fact seeped into the consciousness of the nation and, importantly, was repeated by the leaders of Burke’s political party during their disagreement with him in the debate on the army estimates in February 1790. Uncovering the conventional nature of the modernist view is crucial as it enables us to comment more accurately on the status ascribed to 1688, and to the ancient constitution more broadly. This in turn aids our ability to situate those such as Burke who contradicted this reading.

Having studied the conventions surrounding arguments on representation, the thesis is also able to offer contributions to the history of political thought in this area. Confirming the belief that the late eighteenth-century witnessed a “qualitative leap” in reformist arguments, it demonstrated that both moderates and radicals were willing to attack virtual representation on grounds of equity (Brewer 1976: 20). However, this did not mean that traditional Country remedies were “shunted aside”, as has been argued elsewhere (Kramnick 1982: 635). Rather, these arguments continued to be employed, both separately and in conjunction with those that called for a more equitable system of representation. In this vein, the thesis indicated that some reformers even put Country arguments to more democratically inclined aims. Regarding the conservative response, it would seem that such figures took the reformist threat far more seriously than has previously been acknowledged. As a result of the detailed reconstruction of conservative attitudes, we can now describe as anachronistic any attempt to dismiss the reformist charge as that of an “extremist fringe” (Clark 2001: 412). Moreover, despite recoiling from any attempt to alter the situation, conservatives appear to have openly acknowledged the defects and inequalities in the representation secured by the existing



system. This discovery makes Burke's decision to hail the inequalities of virtual representation in his *Reflections* all the more intriguing.

Finally, it can be argued that the investigation of the anti-military outlook undertaken in the thesis also offers important contributions to the wider discipline of the history of political thought. In short, it shows that the anti standing army argument had a much more complex history than is presently recognised. To this end, a contextual study of appeals to the discourse during this period has revealed that it was employed rather more frequently, and that it was expressed in a greater variety of ways than was previously thought. Judging from its appearance in the *Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700* and its absence from the lengthy *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, it would appear that most commentators associate the argument with the seventeenth-century. Those who have identified eighteenth-century appeals to anti standing army arguments have maintained that the argument found favour with "intellectuals and reformers on the left" (Schwoerer 1974: 188). Moreover, it is understood as being "part of a hydra-headed monster called Court Influence or Ministerial Corruption"; i.e. a wider discourse that was standardly employed to critique the perceived influence of the court (Pocock 1989b: 122). These assessments are correct up to a point. However, the thesis has illustrated that the argument was similarly acknowledged in the political mainstream. As a consequence it was reiterated by a more diverse range of characters, including the Rockingham Whigs (on numerous occasions), and conservative figures such as David Hume and William Blackstone. In the abstract, each of these groups equated standing armies with absolutism. Nonetheless, establishment groups are distinguishable from radicals because they often sacrificed their theoretical misgivings when faced with the harsh realities of practical politics. This means that conservatives grudgingly accepted the need for a standing army, though their Whiggish

reticence is evident in the fact that Parliament was required to renew the force annually. In addition to demonstrating that it reached a wider audience, the thesis also indicates that the anti standing army argument was employed to highlight the specific threat of a military coup. This danger is almost entirely neglected in the scholarly literature, yet it was articulated by radicals and court writers during the standing army controversy 1697-9, and was repeated by similarly diverse figures in the following century. As with the previous point, establishment figures appear to have been more optimistic about the ability of Parliament to contain the threat. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise that MPs and conservative Whigs did accept the possibility that the army could overturn the government, for grasping this point not only sheds light on the structure of eighteenth-century political argument, but it likewise helps us to understand that Burke was exploiting this fear in certain sections in his *Reflections*.

### **Section Three: Final conclusion**

To summarise, this Conclusion has drawn out the methodological and interpretative contributions that the thesis makes to studies, and uses, of Burke's thought. In doing so, it has demonstrated the limitations of adopting a 'Burke problem' approach to the study of *Reflections*, whilst simultaneously establishing the merits of pursuing a Skinnerian line of inquiry which focuses on studying what Burke was doing in writing the text. By adopting this approach the thesis has been able to overturn assessments in the existing literature which claim that Burke articulated a moderate and orthodox Whig creed. Indeed, by situating his utterances on the English Revolution, representation, and the French army in a variety of intellectual and political contexts the thesis has pinpointed those moments at which Burke departed from the prevailing conventions to demonstrate the original aspects of his political

argument. Moreover, it has evidenced the anti-democratic character of his illocutionary intentions by showing that, in addressing the perceived democratic threat, he was cleansing Whiggism of its populist potential and recommending more conservative forms of political action to his moderate peers. With regard to the critical significance of this finding in the early twenty-first century, these concluding remarks have illustrated that it is inconceivable to frame Burke as the forebear of the so-called Big Society. Lastly, the Conclusion has emphasised the contributions that the thesis makes to the wider discipline of the history of political thought. To this end, it has indicated that the contextual research undertaken in the thesis has questioned the validity of other scholars' assumptions relating to the prevalence and status of certain modes of argument, thereby deepening our knowledge of eighteenth-century political argument.

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