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and the first Letter on a Regicide Peace

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EDMUND BURKE

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Preface

Burke's *Reflections* has long been seen as an epitomic text, supposedly articulating an – indeed the first – theoretical defence of ‘modern conservatism’. In keeping with the philosophy of the Series, this edition seeks to place it in the intellectual contexts in which its author conceived and wrote it, whilst also indicating those in which it came to be read. Alongside *Reflections* – Burke's early response to the Revolution – is included one of his last, the first *Letter on a Regicide Peace*, a work that reveals the development of his thought during the course of the Revolution and one that has helped to shape a particular view of international society.

The Introduction sketches a widening circle of contexts in which the works can be situated: beginning with the localised political circumstances faced by Burke at the time, and extending to the trans-historical and universal circumstances of human political agency to which Burke appeals in the course of his writing, and which have given his work a significance that has extended far beyond the specific conditions of the Revolution that gave rise to it – themselves of huge and still debated historical significance.

Neither Burke's prose style nor his references are easily accessible to modern readers. Accordingly both works have been generously annotated to assist in understanding the significance of his wide and nowadays often obscure allusions, whilst leaving readers as free as possible to interpret the text for themselves. Burke was prodigiously well-read in both classical and modern literatures. He possessed extraordinary recall and wove quotations into his speech and writing with great, and doubtless sometimes subconscious, facility. Identifying all of these would have completely changed the character of the edition, but it seemed important to give enough to provide some sense of how richly Burke's thinking is saturated

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in and conditioned by this literary and cultural heritage: a feature of the human mind which played such a central part in his political thinking.

Within the texts three kinds of aids have been provided for the reader. Burke's own notes are indicated by Roman numerals, whilst a second set of Arabic-numbered footnotes supplied by the present editor explain terminology, identify and translate quotations and other references. Significant events and brief biographies of persons mentioned more than once in the texts are explained in a separate set of Notes. The existence of such an entry is indicated by a superscript 'N' in the text. There is a separate Chronology of events relevant to Burke's life and engagement with the Revolution.

Finally there is a brief list of further reading. I have tried to identify writings which help the student to understanding and situate these works and to indicate some of the main schools of interpretation. The student should also consult the excellent companion volume to this, edited by Ian Harris: *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings* (Cambridge, 1993).

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Editors owe a huge debt to their scholarly predecessors. Three editions have been particularly helpful, even if I have not always followed their identifications or suggestions: E. J. Payne's nineteenth-century edition, now reprinted by the Liberty Fund with a new introduction by Frances Canavan (Indianapolis, 1999), the French translation introduced by Philippe Raynaud, with extensive notes by d'Alfred Fierro and Georges Liébert (Hachette, 1989) and the superb, and by far the best modern scholarly edition by J. C. D. Clark (Stanford, Calif., 2001). The first two also contain the *Letter on the Regicide Peace*. I have benefited over the years from conversations with many Burke scholars, recorded in other places. More recently I should particularly like to mention Ian Harris and Richard Bourke, who also read and commented on the Introduction.

Many thanks are due to colleagues in the Departments of Politics and History at Exeter who have indulged my obsession with Burke. Particular thanks are due to Jeremy Black for checking my footnotes, to Rebecca Langlands, who checked my translations from the Latin, and Chris Gill

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for identifying a particularly recalcitrant reference. Barbara Yates oversaw my French translation and helped research eighteenth-century French word usage. Huge thanks to Kate Berrisford for help in preparing and rationalising the text and notes. Needless to say, any errors that, despite all their efforts, remain, are my own.

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Editor's introduction

I

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin in 1730 to a Catholic mother and a Protestant Father.¹ He was educated in Ireland at both Catholic and Quaker schools, and at Dublin's Anglican university, Trinity College, before studying law at the Middle Temple in London. His initial ambitions were literary and his first two works, the *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) and – more particularly – the *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), gained him public recognition, the company of London's literary elite and the editorship of the newly-founded *Annual Register*, a political and literary review. Need for a secure income led him into political service, briefly as secretary to William Hamilton MP, on the staff of Lord Halifax, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland; but in 1765 he formed his major political connection, as secretary to Lord Rockingham, the leader of the Whig Party. Although twice briefly Paymaster General (1782 and 1783), his major role was as opposition pamphleteer, political fixer, and spokesman for the Rockingham Whigs. Burke produced polemical writings and speeches on a wide range of issues critical of the government, opposing its controversial taxation policy in the American Colonies, seeking reform of the tangled skein of national and royal domestic finances, of the East India Company's administration of British India, and, less publicly in

¹ The year of his birth is disputed. See the discussion of the case for 1729 and 1730 in by far the best and fullest modern biography by F. P. Lock: *Edmund Burke*, vol. 1: 1730–1784 (Oxford, 2006), pp. 16–17.

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that stridently Protestant age, to relieve the restrictions imposed on Irish Catholics in his home country.²

As this brief list reveals, Burke's political life, down to 1789, was firmly identified with reform and, in party-political terms, opposed to the Tories. Of course the eighteenth-century Whig–Tory polarity does not map easily onto the modern radical–conservative distinction, which itself only emerged out of the revolutionary events that dominated the last eight years of Burke's life. Nevertheless his opposition to the French Revolution surprised many, seeming to reverse his life-long commitment to reform and to liberty.³

Reflections was quickly recognised by contemporaries – foes and friends alike – as a definitive statement of anti-revolutionary principles; and has since been widely characterised as the founding statement of modern conservatism. From the start therefore it has been an ideologically charged work. For nineteenth-century liberals it articulated a peculiarly British political path between the violence and danger of revolutionary republicanism and the political absolutism to which many Continental monarchies were still wedded. Burke was subsequently recruited by twentieth-century cold warriors – particularly in America – against communism. Yet paradoxically Burke has also had an appeal for radicals. Most of those who opposed him in the 1790s – James Mackintosh, Coleridge, Southey and Wordsworth – later, as Coleridge put it, snapped their 'squeaking baby trumpet of sedition'⁴ and came to agree with him politically, helping to construct the culturally rich versions of the English past and society to which Burke's politics appealed and in which it could find root. Even the most un-Burkean writer of that decade – William Godwin, rationalist, individualist, atheist – later adopted positions on the role of habit and the emotions close to those which Burke had espoused.⁵

² Many of his writings connected with these issues have been collected, excerpted and introduced in the companion volume to this: *Edmund Burke: Pre-revolutionary Writings*, ed. Ian Harris (Cambridge, 1993).

³ Tom Paine, who had met Burke in 1788, wrote describing the progress of the Revolution, clearly expecting Burke's approval of events (Paine to Burke 17 Jan. 1790, *Corr.* vi, p. 67). Similarly Baron 'Anacharsis' Cloots, to Burke (12 May 1790, *Corr.* vi, p. 109).

⁴ S. T. Coleridge to George Coleridge c. 10 March 1798, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1956), vol. 1, p. 238.

⁵ There were those too who moved the other way. Most famously William Cobbett, a Tory in the 1790s, returned from America in 1811 with the bones of Tom Paine, to inspire a new generation of radical pamphleteers.

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The image of reflected light in the title is highly appropriate, since it both forms part of the internal strategy of the work and characterises its impact on the range of contexts in which it has been read and used. At one end of that range lies the local context of British, and even internal Whig Party, politics in which it was an intervention. At the other, there is a much wider context which sees in *Reflections* a conservative synthesis of a wide range of issues and a number of political-theoretical preoccupations and positions to be found in many early modern European states which were brought to a head in the French Revolution. Some of these – such as the doctrine of persisting natural rights – would, Burke believed, if allowed to prevail, be destructive of the political liberty enjoyed by modern, commercial, and constitutionally limited monarchies, a political form which he and many other leading thinkers then saw as the major achievement of the enlightened age. The triumph of the ideology of natural rights would, thought Burke, plunge Europe into a new age of barbarism – the emergence from which had only recently been charted by Scottish thinkers such as William Robertson and Edward Gibbon in his massive history of the long decline and fall of Rome. But in fact, during the past two centuries, it is increasingly the French Revolution that has been identified as the threshold event of political modernity, and the inspiration for similar revolutions. In denouncing that Revolution, *Reflections* challenges our conceptions of the transition to political modernity and makes a counterclaim to be the definitive text of that transition rather than the repudiation of it. Some have seen in it an even wider significance in which Burke is taken to be saying something about the very conditions of human social and political life, independent of the particular historical circumstances in which he wrote. Burke certainly thought himself to be making such claims; whether he succeeded is a much more contentious issue.

Indeed, given the surface features of Burke's writing – and his characteristically deprecatory remarks about theory – *any* claim that Burke writes at a level of theoretical abstraction can look distinctly odd. Readers coming to this text from the 'tradition' of early modern European political theory will be accustomed to the kind of systematic treatment we find in Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hume or Kant, in which epistemological preliminaries lead up to (or are implicated in) an account of human nature and moral psychology, to which is joined some account of pre- or early social existence, and from which emerges, through contract or practice, political society. *Reflections* utterly confounds such expectations

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of orderly exposition. As his radical opponents complained, the work seems to ignore any organisational principles at all.⁶ Instead, we have an apparently unsystematic⁷ and rambling 'letter' of inordinate length. Burke's concerns seem at first entirely polemical and focussed on purely factual historical or sociological issues: What had *actually* happened in 1688? What *is* the social composition of the Constituent Assembly? How bad *were* French finances? Statements which look as if they might belong to political philosophy appear rather as isolated insights or maxims— we may agree or disagree with them, but it is difficult to locate such remarks within any systematic chain of argument. However we are to characterise Burke's achievements in these works, we must, it seems, approach him in a different way than we do those whose concern was evidently with a systematic presentation of their ideas.

Burke's contemporaries – whether they agreed with him or not – recognised that he had achieved something important.⁸ No other attack on the Revolution in England was remotely so famous. His opponents, defending the Revolution's principles, recognised Burke and *Reflections* as *the* writer and *the* work to target: Burke thus clearly connected with his contemporary audiences; for them, at least – even his critics – his unsystematic exposition did not disqualify the importance of the work. They recognised that Burke wrote as a politician and a rhetorician, not as an academic or a philosopher. He wrote to persuade, not to satisfy canons of logic. Unlike philosophers, politicians and rhetoricians do not start from the most primordially imaginable propositions and derive conclusions from these; rather, they start from or appeal to propositions which may be unexamined but are thought by their audience to be true.⁹ Burke's arguments start from, or often presuppose, assumptions Burke

⁶ Thomas Paine excused his insertion of a 'miscellaneous' chapter in his reply to Burke, the *Rights of Man*, on the grounds 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' (*Rights of Man* (Harmondsworth, 1969 [1791]), p. 116); Mary Wollstonecraft describes her 'indignation when I attempt methodically, to unravel your slavish paradoxes, in which I can find no fixed principle to refute' (*Vindication of the Rights of Men*, ed. Sylvania Tomaselli (Cambridge, 1995 [1790]), p. 7).

⁷ In fact we know from at least one draft fragment that Burke worked out its structure very carefully (F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections* (London, 1985), pp. 59–60). For an excellent structural analysis of the work see the edition by J. C. D. Clark, pp. 5–9.

⁸ There are good accounts of the reception in Lock, *Burke's Reflections*, ch. 5 and in his *Edmund Burke*, vol. 2 (Oxford, 2006), pp. 332–50.

⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1357a.

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shared with his readers, and which he did not need to make explicit. And Burke could evoke the right kind of emotional links and associations the more easily since they shared with him, as we do not, a certain cultural repertoire. For them the genius of Burke was to have woven the political commonplaces and prejudices of the day into an argumentative fabric. Modern readers must recover these before we can assess Burke, let alone consider how his political thought might relate to our own age.

II

Burke was not uninformed about France. He read and wrote the language competently, and had visited France at least once, for two months early in 1773. As early as 1769 he had commented that the French economy threatened an 'extraordinary convulsion' not only to France but to the whole of Europe.¹⁰ Burke's initial response to the French Revolution, expressed in private letters, was one of astonishment. He thought: 'the progress of this whole affair is one of the most curious matters of Speculation that was ever exhibited'.¹¹ Through the autumn of 1789, however, his increasing concern at events – the growing boldness of the Paris mob, the abolition of feudal privileges (4 August), the rejection of an upper house in the new legislature (1 Sept.) and the attack on the royal bedroom in the Palace of Versailles (5–6 Oct.) – which would become one of the great rhetorical set-pieces of *Reflections* – all crystallised into a decidedly critical view of the Revolution.¹²

In November, Charles-Jean Francois Depont, the son of a French family who had stayed with the Burkes in 1785, wrote asking for assurance that the French were 'worthy to be free, could distinguish between liberty and licence, and legitimate government from despotic power'.¹³ Burke wrote a substantial reply¹⁴ expressing grave misgivings about the Revolution, but withheld it lest it compromise Depont, sending instead a now lost, brief and non-committal response. Depont wrote again reassuring Burke that he was in no danger and pressing him to send the original

¹⁰ *W&S*, ii, p. 151. ¹¹ *Corr.* vi, p. 10.¹² Burke followed reports of French events closely, reading 'the authorized, or rather the equally authentic documents on this subject, from the first instructions to the representatives of the several orders' (*Corr.* vi, p. 79).¹³ Depont to Burke, 4 November 1789, *Corr.* vi, p. 32. ¹⁴ *Corr.* vi, pp. 39–50.

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letter, which Burke then did.¹⁵ The opening of *Reflections* refers not only to Depont's second letter and to the initially withheld, but finally sent letter, but also to a third letter ('a second and more full discussion on the subject', p. 4) which had grown into *Reflections*.

However, on the same day (4 November 1789) as Depont's letter, an event took place in London that would significantly change Burke's thought and writing on the subject.¹⁶ On that day, the aged leading light of radical dissent, Richard Price,^N had delivered to a meeting of the 'Revolution Society',^N and subsequently published, an address on the 'Love of our Country'. The occasion was an annual celebration by Dissenters of the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688^N in which the Catholic James II had been ousted by parliamentary leaders in favour of the Protestants William and Mary. Price's sermon dismissed the 'blind and narrow principles' of conventional patriotism, urging his hearers instead to 'consider yourselves more as citizens of the world than as members of any particular community'.¹⁷ But he proceeded provocatively to assert three principles on which (he claimed) that English Revolution was founded, and in which he called on the Society to instruct the public. These were the rights to 'choose our own governors . . . cashier them for misconduct . . . [and] frame a government for ourselves'.¹⁸ He closed by stressing the insecurity of these principles, for 'though the Revolution was a great work, it was by no means a perfect work', and he exhorted his listeners and readers to redress the imperfect religious toleration it provided, and 'the inequality of our representation'.¹⁹

Burke had been aware of Price's pamphlet, but it was not until mid January that its content was drawn to his attention at a dinner party. 'Late as it was', he later recorded, he went home, read it, and immediately began composing a public response.²⁰ Thus, early in 1790 Burke seems to have had two works in mind, the 'more full discussion' of French developments in the projected letter to Depont, and the notes for a public response to Price. As early as 13 February *Reflections* was already being

¹⁵ Depont to Burke, 29 Dec., *Corr.* vi, p. 59; Burke to Depont [Nov 1789], *Corr.* vi, p. 39 is the letter Burke eventually sent but not until early January 1790.

¹⁶ In the introduction to *Reflections* that ascribes its origins to the correspondence with Depont, he refers to his sentiments (on the Revolution) having 'received another direction', which may well be the impact of Price's pamphlet discussed here.

¹⁷ Price, *A Discourse on the Love of our Country* [1789], in *Political Writings*, ed. D. O. Thomas (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 179, 193.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 193–4. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

²⁰ To William Weddell, 31 Jan. 1792, *Corr.* vii, pp. 56–7.

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advertised as 'in the press and speedily will be published', but its title at that point, *Reflections on certain proceedings of the Revolution Society of the 4th November, 1789, concerning the affairs of France*, reveals how much its original focus was England, and the work may at this time have simply comprised a response to Price.²¹ Still imminent in early March, it was to be transformed over the rest of the parliamentary session and the summer into a much larger work that integrated the two projects from which it had arisen.²²

We can date the completion of *Reflections* fairly closely. The latest event in France mentioned in the first edition is the correspondence between the 'Patriotic Society' at Nantes and the Revolution Society in London, reported in the *General Evening Post* for 4–7 September; whereas the French Finance minister, Necker, who resigned on 4 September, is described in *Reflections* as still in office.²³ So by early September Burke had completed the text, a fact corroborated by our knowledge that through most of the rest of September the Burkes were touring in the Malvern Hills and Wye Valley. They did not return to Beaconsfield, their country home, until about the 27th, by which date the work was printed and bound and advance copies sent to friends. It was published on 1 November.

III

By 1790 Burke had become somewhat isolated within his own party, and *Reflections* has been seen as a bid to regain prominence within and influence over the Whigs.²⁴ There were a number of reasons for this isolation. Since 1786 Burke had been deeply committed, on behalf of the House of Commons, to managing the impeachment of Warren Hastings,

²¹ *St James's Chronicle*, 11–13 Feb., *Gazeteer*, 13 Feb., *The World*, 13 Feb.; cited in *Lock*, vol. 2, pp. 254–5. Burke's correspondents at this time, to whom he showed drafts for comment, described the work as a pamphlet about England, directed at Dissent, and defending the Anglican established Church. The advertisement's claim that the work was 'in the press' – i.e. being printed – seems inconsistent with the fact that Burke had only begun composing the work, and may well have been advertising hype. But it was his habit to send copy as he wrote to the printers to be set, and to revise from the printed proofs, so the early stages of composition may still have involved sheets being 'in the press'.

²² Parliament was dissolved on 11 June. Burke was still very busy with the Hastings impeachment.

²³ See p. 208, n. 303.

²⁴ This is the context for *Reflections* to which L. G. Mitchell gives almost exclusive prominence in the modern collected edition of *Writings and Speeches*, 9 vols. (Oxford), vol. 8 (1989), pp. 29ff.

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Director of the East India Company and effective governor of British India.²⁵ Initially a huge celebrity trial, colleagues and the public had become bored with it. Cartoonists lampooned him dressed in a toga, pathetically imitating Cicero's prosecution of the provincial governor, Verres. Burke's dogged persistence threatened to bog down himself and his colleagues in an unpopular issue.²⁶

Further tensions arose over King George III's temporary 'madness' of 1788/9. During this the out-of-office Whigs had incautiously become too identified with the heir and expected Regent, the Prince of Wales – from whom the King was deeply estranged. Burke was extremely uncomfortable with what he saw as this disloyalty, and relations between himself and Charles James Fox, the populist leader of the Whigs in the Commons, never recovered.²⁷ The King's return to health left the Whigs – already in opposition – dangerously exposed and Burke semi-detached from them. Finally, the French Revolution cut, in a raw and destructive way, across the Whigs' sense of their own identity as essentially paternalistic, aristocratic champions of the cause of popular liberty. These tensions would ultimately divide them, some joining Pitt's Tory government, others following the radical and populist Fox into the political wilderness. Initially, however, the Revolution separated Burke from the majority who hoped to maintain the unity of the Whig connection. Whigs saw themselves as the defenders of parliamentary liberty against the prerogatives of the Crown – principles embodied in the Glorious Revolution of 1688.^N Many, particularly those around Fox, were eager to read into the earlier stages of the French Revolution a version of what had happened in Britain in 1688. But the Whigs of 1688 were heroes for many not only because they constitutionalised the monarchy, but because they avoided a repeat of 1649, when Parliamentary and military rebels had abolished it. Having tried and beheaded the King they had unleashed social forces and a range of political and religious ideas of a volatile and socially disruptive kind. It was with this second image of the Whigs, as safeguards against ideological discontinuity and social violence from below, that Burke now identified;

²⁵ The 'High Crimes and Misdemeanours' charged included breach of treaties with local rulers, extortion, illegal arrogation of powers, incitement to looting etc. ('Articles of Impeachment . . .', *W&S*, vi, pp. 125ff.).

²⁶ See cartoons 72, 93, 109 (rhetoric); 88 (Much Ado); 75 and 87 (Cicero); and 107 (coachman) in Nicholas K. Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A life in Caricature* (New Haven and London, 1996).

²⁷ F. O'Gorman, *The Whig Party and the French Revolution* (London, 1976), ch. 2 *passim*.

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and it was he who warned that 1789 was to be 1649 again rather than 1688.

This is the party-political context in which Burke wrote and published *Reflections*. It explains his preoccupation with distinguishing the principles of 1688 from those of the French Revolution, and to call the Whigs back to their 'true principles' – an intention explicit and amplified in his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791). There was a personal twist to this party-political context. The dinner-party conversation at which Price's pamphlet had been brought to Burke's attention had not been about France, or even primarily about Price's views of the English constitution, but about the Dissenters' unwillingness to support the Whigs (despite much shared politics) because of their disapproval of Fox's dissolute private life.²⁸ Burke's personal morals were quite the opposite of Fox's, but it was their ingratitude to a friend and colleague who had so strenuously supported the Dissenters' case for toleration that had initially so irked him about Price's pamphlet.²⁹ Given Burke's support for Fox against Price's personal attack, for Fox to then side with Price over France must have increased Burke's dismay and added personal emotional fuel to his opposition to those seeking to identify French aspirations with British principles. The break between Burke and Fox on the identity of Whig principles and the attitude to France would become deep, personal and irrevocable.

This context highlights Burke as a defender of a specific interpretation of Whig politics. Although Burke's significance is much wider than this, it is not a view that would have been foreign to at least some of his contemporaries.³⁰ Moreover, locating Burke in this context enables a

²⁸ Fox, a hugely popular politician and clearly a charming and amusing companion, was a man of many and large appetites, a prodigious gambler at both horses and cards, a womaniser, drinker and gourmand. His gambling debts of £120,000 (approximately £11m in today's prices) were paid off by his father but they subsequently twice bankrupted him. Rational dissent, although in Burke's view doctrinally lax, was morally austere.

²⁹ 'the asperity with which I expressed myself against these Gentlemen arose from my resentment for their . . . treacherous animosity to Mr Fox' (Burke to Weddell, 31 Jan. 1792, *Corr.* vii, p. 57).

³⁰ Oliver Goldsmith's mock epitaph catches one view:

Here lies our good Edmund, whose genius was such,
We scarcely can praise it, or blame it too much;
Who, born for the Universe, narrow'd his mind,
And to party gave up what was meant for mankind.

(Retaliation, ll. 29–33)

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more acute appreciation of the rhetorical skill of some of Burke's best-known passages, such, for example, as the famous passage beginning 'Society is indeed a Contract . . .'.³¹

The idea of the social contract as a basis of political authority was a seriously ambiguous legacy of the Revolution of 1688^N, bequeathed by John Locke's defence of it to the Whigs in his much anthologised *Second Treatise*.³² Whilst, as intended, this disposed of divine hereditary monarchical right, the idea of the constitution as a contract seemed to license dangerously radical readings of its ultimate status, in fact precisely those claimed by Price and attacked by Burke at the start of *Reflections*. The Whigs – as defenders of aristocratic and propertied government – had struggled for a century to tame the radical populist potential of this ideological inheritance. The Whig managers of the Sacheverall Trial^N of 1714 had desperately played down the radical implications of 'the contract'.³³ David Hume – a philosophical Whig if a dispositional conservative – had denied the relevance of contract to government, claiming both derived their being and justification from considerations of utility, so 'we gain nothing by resolving the one into the other'.³⁴ Josiah Tucker, a major critic of Locke's influence in America, suggested 'The idea of a *Quasi* – *Contract* instead of an *actual* Contract'³⁵ as a way of outflanking radical, activist readings of Locke. But the Whigs were too deeply identified with 'contract' to be able to dismiss it, and Burke's rhetorical problem was to explain why it did not entail a radical, reformist, revisiting of that contract as Price claimed.

Burke seeks to solve this problem in two ways. Firstly, forensically, by trying to demonstrate that, as a matter of historical fact, if 1688 is construed as 'the contract' it was a very conservative one, and it failed to establish anything like the principles claimed by Price, let alone the

³¹ Below, pp. 100–101.

³² Locke's text distinguished between the social contract, or compact *establishing* civil society, and the *entrusting* of government to a magistrate. However, as so often, the precision to which the theorist aspires was sacrificed to ideological need and 'contract of government' was what the Whigs were saddled with.

³³ See Geoffrey S. Holmes, *The Trial of Dr. Sacheverall* (London, 1973).

³⁴ David Hume, 'Of the Original Contract', p. 481 in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985) (originally in *Three Essays, Moral and Political* (London and Edinburgh, 1748)).

³⁵ Josiah Tucker, *A Treatise Concerning Civil Government* (London, 1781 [repr. New York, 1967, same pagination]), p. 141.

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French.³⁶ But in addition he rhetorically re-conceptualises the ‘contract’, so enlarging the time, space and agents within which and amongst whom the contract is construed that it both subverts the individualism and voluntarism implicit in the normal understanding of a contract and dignifies its terms and conditions beyond the possibility of utilitarian renegotiation. ‘Society’, he famously writes, ‘is indeed a Contract’, but whilst commercial contracts ‘maybe dissolved at pleasure . . . The state . . . is to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection.’ These noble aims are impossible to realise if the contract is construed as provisional, and revocable at will. Consequently ‘it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are yet to be born’.³⁷ This is a justly famous passage, but we gain added appreciation of Burke’s rhetorical skill in projecting the idea of contract onto a trans-historical dimension when we understand how the need to do so is framed by the dual imperatives of its unassailable place within Whig ideology and the need to deny its availability to radicals.

IV

This invocation of the wider canvas against which politics is conducted is more than a clever piece of rhetorical invention. For although Burke did think that radicals, such as Price and the aristocrats who flirted with them, were wrong to read the principles of the French Revolution into the Whig political tradition, and although persuading his party to return to their true principles was part of his aim, Burke himself believed that far wider issues were at stake; and it would be quite wrong to identify his main intention in writing *Reflections*, let alone its significance as a work of political thought, as merely party political.³⁸ Burke wrote to a fellow Whig MP: ‘I cannot say it was written solely within a view to the Service

³⁶ This is pursued at length in the first half of the *Appeal*, with direct quotations from the Sacheverell Trial^N, where establishing the moderate identity of 1688 was a major tactic of the prosecution.

³⁷ *Reflections*, pp. 100–101.

³⁸ Cf. Mitchell, *W&S*, viii, p. 29. This is a charge that Mary Wollstonecraft makes against him (*Vindication of the Rights of Men*, p. 45).

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of that Party. I hope its views were more general. But . . . this was *one* of the Objects in my contemplation.’³⁹

There is then already a second and much wider context implicit in Burke’s claims that his version of Whig principles embodies English constitutionalism – that is a claim about the distinctive character of *English* thought about and conduct of their politics. Burke later wrote of *Reflections* that his ‘intention had been to convey to a *foreign people* . . . the prevalent opinions and sentiments of a nation renowned for wisdom and celebrated in all ages for a well understood and well regulated love of freedom’ (my italics).⁴⁰ But it is hard not to think that Burke is here being disingenuous. Addressing *Reflections* to a Frenchman provides a pretext for explaining, supposedly to the French, why they would be wrong to think the French Revolution was emulating the English one of 1688. But in fact *Reflections*, as we saw, originated both in a letter to a Frenchman and as a refutation of views expressed on England by an Anglophone writer, the Welshman Richard Price. Despite being written *to* a Frenchman, in publishing in English and in England Burke signalled that his primary concern was to persuade an English audience why they would be wrong to think the French Revolution to be a version of the English. This equivocation over the target audiences of *Reflections* enabled Burke to appear to speak on behalf of the English audience whom he is in fact addressing, a rhetorical device that invites their connivance with the author’s aims and sentiments whilst enabling him to instruct them without seeming to. Once the direct attack on Price’s sermon is over, the contrast between what the French do and the ‘we’ on behalf of whom Burke speaks inveigles an English reader into accepting that the political thought of *Reflections* is not just Burke’s nor just Whig, but their own, English.

The English, who were increasingly becoming the British, thought of themselves and were seen by others, with some justification, as having generated quite distinctive political institutions and culture. The overthrow of James II in the Glorious Revolution^N established a balance between the powers of the King and the representative institutions very different from that of most other European monarchies. This balance was further tipped in Parliament’s favour by a succession of monarchs increasingly dependent on parliament. So curbed were the powers of the British King that Montesquieu had famously described England as:

³⁹ Burke to Weddell, 31 Jan. 1792, *Corr.* vii, pp. 54, 52.

⁴⁰ Burke, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), p. 3 (and in *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. D. E. Ritchie (Indiana, 1992), p. 56).

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'a nation where the republic hides itself under the form of a monarchy'.⁴¹ Whilst this constitutional balance was delicate – and the precise allocation of powers within it a matter of frequent debate – its existence was held to guarantee the liberty of the subject by preventing 'the Crown' – the Monarch or an executive acting in his name – from encroaching on the freedoms of individuals or of corporate bodies – the Church, parliament, the law courts etc.

The idea of the mixed or balanced constitution – combining elements of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy in the various offices of the constitution – was one which went back to antiquity, to the texts of Aristotle, Polybius and Cicero, some at least of which the educated would have read, and – as Burke does – quoted freely and from memory in the original. The 'balance' of the English constitution was celebrated in the work of William Blackstone, the foremost constitutional and legal scholar of the time. 'Balance' becomes, in eighteenth-century England, a pervasive political virtue. In contrast to the French concern to pursue a single principle in the establishment of their institutions, in England, wrote Burke, 'We compensate, we reconcile, we balance.'⁴² A vital issue in retaining this balance and thereby restraining the Crown was to maintain the independence of the Commons, an aim which was believed to require the independence of the electorate themselves, both as a body and as individuals. To enfranchise those who were dependent, either because of poverty or moral weakness, laid the way open to the capture of the Commons by those able to sway the electorate through bribery, rhetoric or fear. If political liberty required balance, then to be opposed – as Burke famously was – to the concentration of power in the Crown, did not at all imply enthusiasm for the extension of it to the economically dependent populace. To enfranchise the poor would not extend freedom, but endanger it. Independence is not, today, a fashionable political virtue, if indeed it is one at all, but for Burke and his contemporaries it was central: worries about independence and balance pervade his analysis of the new French Constitution.

In England, a major constraint on the executive was parliament's control over taxation and the purposes to which it could be put. Such considerations of political economy preoccupy Burke throughout large tracts of *Reflections*. Financially troubled absolutist regimes such as France

⁴¹ 'une nation où la république se cache sous la forme de la monarchie', *Esprit des Lois* (Paris, 1951), v.19, p. 304.

⁴² *Reflections*, p. 172.

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might at any time declare bankruptcy – a policy option under frequent consideration there in the 1780s. A bankruptcy would convert the state's debts into losses for the regime's creditors. This risk increased the cost of borrowing for absolutist regimes: creditors simply charged higher interest rates to offset the increased risk of losing the capital value of their loan. It was the French monarchy's failure to retain a sufficient tax-base to pay the interest on its loans that had forced the calling of the Estates General^N in the first place and so set the Revolution in train. However, in a parliamentary regime such as Britain's, many members of the legislature were themselves creditors: they had an interest in ensuring the stability and viability of both the political regime and its finances. Because its political leaders were incentivised to secure the property rights of creditors, a parliamentary regime could borrow money more cheaply. Economic stability and political liberty – in the sense of protection from arbitrary sovereigns – were brought into harmony and secured by harnessing both to a class interest – that of the property-owners.

The stability of property rights was also the foundation of what Burke saw as another basis of a free society – the existence of independent corporations or establishments, such as the Church, universities, charitable trusts and other elements of what we would now call civil society. Their ability to act with political and social independence rested ultimately on their economic autonomy, which, in turn, their property rights guaranteed. One of Burke's major criticisms of the revolutionaries was their expropriation of Church property and the change in the status of priests and other clerics from members of an independently funded corporation into state employees with, he foretold, a resulting loss of autonomy. This had further ideological implications. Burke, although personally devout, was disarmingly frank about religion's part in creating and disciplining social order. The fear of eternal punishment played a vital role in sustaining morality and inhibiting the poor from instigating, or allowing themselves to be recruited into, destructive social experiments. The disestablishment of the French Church in order to resolve the state's financial crisis seemed to him to break a virtuous circle in which the stability of property sustained an independent church which provided moral instruction that inhibited attacks on the social order, including property rights. Indeed, disestablishment could be seen – and he so presented it – as a calculated attempt to break the mutually supportive political, financial and moral elements of the eighteenth-century polity. On this

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view the revolutionaries' strategy positively *required* the destruction of Christian morality in order to overcome the inhibitions it placed on radical social change. The appropriation of Church property thus – from a revolutionary point of view – turned two problems into a single solution. At a stroke it provided much needed capital for a regime which had inherited a bankrupt economy and guaranteed the security of the national debt (the holders of which were themselves, thought Burke, the real force behind the Revolution), and it simultaneously undermined the very institution – the Church – that had provided ideological protection against such action. The revolutionaries went on to claim this as a breakthrough to a new kind of social order, one that would achieve stability through social equality, not ordered ranks, with secular, not religious values and ideals, and with paper money (backed by land), rather than gold or silver.⁴³

Burke denied that this could provide the basis for a stable social order. The reason was not only the rejection of Christianity or the moral repugnance of robbing the Church of its land: there was also an economic argument – which is still with us today – about the relative autonomy of the economy in the face of political intervention.

The revolutionary financial strategy was to restore the creditworthiness of the government and its new paper currency by nationalising the Church lands as security. These would be sold piecemeal over time, the proceeds amortising the national debt and creating confidence in the paper money – the *assignat*. The *assignat* was effectively a share in the national debt, a debt secured by the Church lands – indeed the original plan had been to offer *assignats* as certificates of investment in landed stock. It was the failure of the market to buy them that led the revolutionaries to impose them as currency. But this meant that parcels of expropriated land coming onto the market could be bid for in *assignats*, the value of which was itself pegged to the value to be realised by the sale of land determined by such bids. The plan reduced the unit of currency itself to a holding in a volatile stock market, the value of which would be set through speculation. Burke points out that this is not a market one can choose to enter, since merely to hold or use the currency is to be drawn into and subjected to it.

⁴³ The classic analysis of this aspect of *Reflections* remains J. G. A. Pocock's 'Political Economy of Burke's Analysis of the French Revolution', pp. 193–212 in *Virtue, Commerce and History* (Cambridge, 1985).

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Burke is often held by libertarians, on the basis of his tract on grain prices,⁴⁴ to be an enthusiastic supporter of free markets. However, like most eighteenth-century social thinkers (and unlike most modern market apologists) Burke was quite discriminating about the diverse characteristics of markets in different commodities. Indeed it is not clear that he possessed – and he certainly did not endorse – a conception of ‘the market’ as an abstractly modelled set of relationships in the modern sense. Like many eighteenth-century social theorists he was particularly concerned about the volatility of speculative *financial* markets, likening them to gambling dens, and suspicious of the kinds of morals, mentality and resulting behaviour needed to succeed in such an environment. He charged the revolutionaries with being the first and only people to have ‘founded a commonwealth upon gaming, and infused this spirit into it as its vital breath. The[ir] great object in these politics is to metamorphose France from a great kingdom into one great play-table; to turn its inhabitants into a nation of gamblers; to make speculations as extensive as life; to mix it with all its concerns.’⁴⁵

The volatility of the currency as itself an object of speculation would, he thought, discourage industry, learning and investment, for ‘who will labour without knowing the amount of his pay? Who will study to encrease what none can estimate? who will accumulate, when he does not know the value of what he saves?’⁴⁶ Even should the Revolution achieve some stability, the only ones to gain – and here as elsewhere Burke insinuates a conspiracy theory of the Revolution – will not be the poor, or even the idealistically motivated but foolish and gullible ideologues, but the urban financiers who understand the way these markets work:

France will be wholly governed by the . . . directors of assignats, and trustees for the sale of church lands, attornies, agents, money-jobbers, speculators, and adventurers, composing an ignoble oligarchy founded on the destruction of the crown, the church, the nobility, and the people. Here end all the deceitful dreams and visions of the equality and rights of men.⁴⁷

In his diatribe against the gambling-economy of revolutionary France Burke makes great play on the ambiguity of ‘speculation’,⁴⁸ which denotes

⁴⁴ ‘Thoughts and details on scarcity’, a paper on managing the grain shortage of the winter of 1795, was discovered in his papers after his death, and published in 1800.

⁴⁵ *Reflections*, p. 196. ⁴⁶ *Reflections*, p. 197. ⁴⁷ *Reflections*, p. 199.

⁴⁸ The word or its cognates appears no less than thirty-four times in the text.

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risk and irresponsibility in both philosophy and economics, and destabilises both meaning and social life. Increasing the speculative character of social life would disrupt continuity and expectations, leaving generations unanchored in any of the shared values or practices constitutive of society. It misreads Burke to present him as an unqualified enthusiast for an abstractly conceived 'market', the workings of which, he once pointed out, were, in the absence of its embodiment in particular situations and practices, at best established 'a priori'.⁴⁹

For Burke, cognitive instability is not just a concomitant of a speculative economy, it is a consequence of the way the French have chosen to reflect on and think about their society. The English based their politics, and political principles, like their law, on existent practices – on custom and precedent. The French revolutionaries by contrast, Burke points out, deduce their politics from abstract principles – the rights of men. This was more than a difference between the intellectual and moral resources available within two contrasting national political cultures, it was a conscious (if perverse) decision: an 'unforced choice, [a] . . . fond election of evil'.⁵⁰ Burke clearly thought the French might (like the English) have sought to reform on the basis of their (different) inherited institutions.⁵¹ The French turn to abstraction was a fundamental difference in political principle.

This is a third, much larger and more abstract context in which to read Burke. He not only sought to represent the Whig tradition as opposed to the populist politics of Fox, and English politics and political economy as opposed to that of revolutionary France; he also describes two different conceptions of politics.

V

One way of characterising that difference is between rationalist, reformist politics and a procedurally conservative politics. The rationalist starts

⁴⁹ In cases of conflict between political management and the dictates of untried market mechanisms Burke invariably sought to judge the issue on its merits and expressed his 'insuperable reluctance in giving [his] hand to destroy any established institution of government, upon a theory, however plausible it may be' ('Speech on Foxes India Bill', *W&S*, v, p. 387).

⁵⁰ *Reflections*, p. 41.

⁵¹ Many, even moderate Frenchmen disagreed. They thought there were insufficient resources within the *ancien régime* to regenerate liberty from them. Amongst English replies to Burke James Mackintosh's *Vindiciae Gallicae* pursued a similar line.

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from a set of principles – in this case those of natural right, or the rights of man – and seeks to deduce the features of a morally defensible political order from those principles. The presumption is that, if the principles are right, then all that is (legitimately) deduced from them will be so too. The task of politics is then conceived to be the reconstruction of the social world according to the principles. The procedural conservative,⁵² by contrast, begins with ‘really existing’ institutions and ideas which they take to be constitutive of a given political reality and then proceeds to sustain that reality, reforming as and where necessary in a piecemeal way so as always to maintain the functional integrity of the whole. This is to put the matter very abstractly, but not at a level unavailable to reflective eighteenth-century protagonists. Burke clearly had particular views about specific aspects of the English constitution which he thought enabled it to function so well. But he did not regard constitutional monarchy as the uniquely eligible form of government. Republics, where they existed, he thought perfectly legitimate, and even regarded what he called a ‘spirit of republicanism’ as a possible – indeed sometimes the only – source of reform within monarchies.⁵³ But he thought the attempt to transform a whole political culture according to some principle extrinsic to its own history and practices was hugely dangerous, and he thought the attempt to reform on the principle of unqualified democracy (even though, as he pointed out, the institutional arrangements did not conform to it) was disastrous, as indeed it turned out to be.

Burke thought that normative natural-rights claims – if successful – effectively overturn this inherited experience and restart institutional history with a clean slate. French protagonists and Thomas Paine make this quite explicit: it was because ‘the world is as new [to every child] as it was to the first man that existed, and his natural right in it is of the same kind’ that inherited institutional arrangements have only as much authority as successive generations choose to give them: ‘Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, *in all cases*, as the ages and generations which preceded it.’⁵⁴

⁵² The adjective ‘procedural’ is used to signal a distinction between it and another kind of conservative, the substantive conservative, who defends one particular unchanging order – often religiously sanctioned – and who becomes indistinguishable from a reactionary, as that order recedes into the past.

⁵³ Letter to William Elliot, 26 May 1795, in *Two letters on the Conduct of our Domestic Parties, with regard to French Politics* (1797), *W&S*, ix, p. 42.

⁵⁴ Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man* (Harmondsworth, 1969 [1791]), pp. 66, 41. And see the speech, recorded by Burke, of the Deputy Rabaud de St. Etienne, for whom

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Burke thought such claims foolishly overestimate the capacity of individual human reasoning and ignored the accumulation of experience which is embodied in institutions and social practices – ‘Old establishments are tried by their effects. . . we conclude that to be good from whence good is derived’.⁵⁵ The radical also presupposed an *individual* competence to judge and act on these matters, when in fact political wisdom is, Burke thought, necessarily social, collectively gained and held in institutions. We should be ‘afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and . . . [they] would do better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of . . . ages.’⁵⁶ The rejection of inherited practices constituted an act of epistemological and volitional original sin – pride. Since our contemporary societies take for granted not only a right to change but a virtual presumption in favour of the new over the old, it is worth underscoring the sense in which this – as Paine rightly sees – was the core issue. It is also worth bearing in mind that the concept of ‘democracy’ that Burke attacks is not what we call ‘liberal democracies’ today – which he might well have thought of as ‘tempered oligarchies’.

Claims about the capacity or competence of reason invoke philosophical questions at the highest level. These formed fundamental issues for philosophers from Descartes to Kant and thus had wider echoes in European and Enlightenment thinking. *Reflections* is a piece of persuasive, rhetorical writing, and though it presupposes them does not explicitly ground political philosophy in them. But Burke’s scepticism about the powers of individual reason was not mere prejudice. It had its basis in a philosophical epistemology quite as reflective as that of any of his Enlightenment predecessors. Two of Burke’s earliest works are preoccupied with the nature and limits of human knowledge and the implications of these for politics. The *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) deals with aesthetics, but for Burke and his immediate contemporaries, aesthetics derived from epistemology and both were implicated in issues of morals and religion. Burke thus connected his work with the wider field of the philosophy of knowledge and

Frenchmen ‘must be refashioned, have their ideas changed, their laws changed, their customs changed; . . . men changed; things changed; words changed; . . . everything destroyed; yes, destroy everything; since everything is to be made anew’ (*Reflections*, p. 171 fn. 322).

⁵⁵ *Reflections*, p. 175. ⁵⁶ *Reflections*, p. 90.

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the psychology of belief and insisted on its importance for 'any whose business it is to affect the passions'.⁵⁷

Burke's arguments were rooted in the debate provoked by John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). Locke made a number of central claims. The first was that the constituents of our mental world – ideas – derived exclusively from impressions of the senses. There were therefore no innate, pre-experiential ideas. Human understanding was built up piecemeal through individual experience and the 'operations of the mind' on it. Reason, one of the 'operations of the mind', was the 'comparison of clear and distinct ideas' from which conclusions could be drawn about the different (or similar) properties of those ideas.

Locke's concern was to identify the *limits* of reason and understanding in relation to religious faith, but his legacy was ambiguous. Identifying the limits of reason could be used – as was Locke's intention – to prevent theologians invoking reason to make extravagant and dogmatic claims in the field of religion, thereby grounding religious toleration in a congenitally necessary human agnosticism. But Locke's criterion – of reason as the comparison of clear and distinct ideas – could also be used as a critical principle: to dismiss as *irrational* such ideas as the Trinity, or the virgin birth, which were not 'clear and distinct' enough to be reasoned about. The devout responded by stressing that this merely showed the limits of reason, not the implausibility of faith. Whilst we now tend to think of scepticism as an anti-religious position, in the eighteenth century scepticism about the claims of reason was an essential weapon of the devout against the rationalist's critiques of religious claims. Those making such attacks (or thought to be doing so) were known as deists, and those who thought of themselves as orthodox ('true') Christians devoted enormous intellectual energy to identifying and denouncing them.

Burke was much exercised by these issues. He had not thought deists posed a threat to the religious basis of English political culture, although he feared their becoming numerous or influential as they had in revolutionary France; it was an influence he sought to oppose in *Reflections*. Nevertheless the philosophical arguments about the strength and weakness of reason earlier in the century had left a deep impression on him. His first published work had satirised the notorious deist Lord Bolingbroke. In the 'Preface' added to the second edition Burke explained that he had wanted 'to shew that, without the Exertion of any

⁵⁷ *Enquiry*, *W&S*, i, p. 282.