

Edmund Burke and International Conflict*

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I INTRODUCTION

There is a significant body of scholarly literature that habitually presents the writings of Edmund Burke as constituting a contribution to international relations theory. This perspective derives in large part from an examination of Burke's later writings, especially those concerned with the outbreak of the French Revolution and the pattern of its subsequent development.¹ Some of this literature claims Burke as the inaugural representative of a specific 'English school' of international thought.² This is not completely without foundation since Burke did indeed champion the cause of the British constitution as an exemplary model of political engineering, favourably contrasting it with the organisation of France. But this fact is hardly sufficient to qualify him as a British 'theorist' of international relations – or as the creator of any kind of 'school' for that matter. Burke was above all else a publicist and a politician, although it is clear that he was preoccupied with international affairs, particularly as these unfolded after 1789.

But while it is distorting to appropriate Burke to either nineteenth- or twentieth-century academic categories and norms, mistaking him for a 'theorist' or an 'international lawyer', it is clear that his arguments do draw on assorted traditions of

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¹ The pioneering monograph in this field is Jennifer M. Welsh, *Edmund Burke and International Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995). But see also R. J. Vincent, 'Edmund Burke and the Theory of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 10:2 (1984), pp. 205–18; David Boucher, 'The Character of the History of the Philosophy of International Relations and the Case of Edmund Burke', *Review of International Studies*, 17:2 (April 1991), pp. 127–48; Jennifer M. Welsh, 'Edmund Burke and the Commonwealth of Europe: The Cultural Bases of International Order' in Ian Clark and Iver B. Neumann eds., *Classical Theories of International Relations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); David P. Fidler and Jennifer M. Welsh eds., *Empire and Community: Edmund Burke's Writings and Speeches on International Relations* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).

² See Martin Wight, 'Why is there no International Theory?' in Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight eds., *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966); and Vincent, 'Edmund Burke and the Theory of International Relations', op. cit. On the English school more generally, see Timothy Dunne, *Inventing International Society: A History of the English School* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).

legal theory, including common law and natural law traditions.³ Of course the key question has to be what Burke did with these traditions – what insights they may have contributed to his thinking about politics, and what programmes of action they may have helped to justify.⁴ My main concern in this chapter is to isolate Burke’s views on international conflict as they developed over the course of his career. I do however submit to the main emphasis of recent scholarship and concentrate on the period after 1789, when Burke’s arguments became striking and original – largely on account of the unprecedented situation that he was forced to think creatively about. I build on the work of others who have explored the terms on which Burke advocated regime-change in Revolutionary France, but I try to break new ground in analysing his understanding of the causes of conflict.

Burke believed that conflict inside France, and subsequently hostilities within Europe, had been fostered by the militant destructiveness of the Revolution. It was his dissection of the causes underlying this destructiveness that prompted him to endorse a drastic form of intervention. He saw the Revolution as having begun as a bid for domestic political conquest. In due course he described it as driven to secure the conquest of Europe. I identify the underlying principles to which Burke ascribed this hungry ambition. He construed these basic principles as representing a radical new departure in the history of Europe and the world. From this angle they could be taken to have ushered in the era of modern politics, although their modernity was curiously regressive. They had succeeded in undoing the achievements of civilisation by twining a kind of savagery with insurgency.

In charting the emergence of modern militancy Burke offered a bleak assessment of some of the key characteristics of post-Revolutionary politics. His diagnosis readily lent itself to desperate foreboding, and it was easily co-opted to serve as retrograde polemic. But nonetheless it stands as a corrective to the naïve liberalism of the nineteenth century that fêted commercial civilisation as containing the means of

³ For Burke’s debt to common law forms of argument, see J. G. A. Pocock, ‘Burke and the Ancient Constitution: A Problem in the History of Ideas’, in idem, *Politics, Language, and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Chicago and London, 1971). For Burke’s place in the history of ‘modern’, post-Grotian natural law, see David Armitage, ‘Edmund Burke and Reason of State’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61:4 (October 2000), pp. 617–34.

⁴ This is centrally addressed in Iain Hampsher-Monk, ‘Edmund’s Changing Justification for Intervention’, *The Historical Journal*, 48:1 (2005), pp. 65–100. See also, more recently, Brendan Simms, ‘A False Principle in the Law of Nations: State Sovereignty, Liberty and Intervention in the Age of Westphalia and Burke’, in Brendan Simms and David Trim eds., *Humanitarian Intervention: A History to 1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

abolishing conflict. In his *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*, Benjamin Constant took modern liberty as exemplified by trading nations to have bred among their populations a spirit of ‘calculation’ distinct from the ancient impulse to belligerence and dominion.⁵ Despite this deliverance, the French Revolution had invented an entirely new ‘pretext’ for war in the midst of an emergent commercial pacifism – that of liberating nations from the ‘yoke’ of their own governments.⁶ But for Constant this declared mission was a hypocritical masquerade. The true underlying cause of modern insurgency and bellicosity was a misplaced attempt to revive a bygone Spartanism in a modern setting.⁷

However, although Constant’s thesis stands as a reminder of the fatal misalliance between Revolutionary expectation and the means of its realisation, it hardly captures the peculiarity or elucidates the vehemence of modern conflict. It tries to explain insurrectionary violence in terms of ideological anachronism – as if the partisan spirit of post-Revolutionary history was a product of ‘mistranslation’, or of the burden of ‘incommensurability’ between existing circumstances and antiquated values.⁸ It is an assumption of this chapter that Burke’s account of modern conflict more accurately captures both the character and the causes of militant hostility. His most convincing contribution to political analysis lies in his attempt to anatomise international conflicts originally founded on doctrinal disputes. In order to scrutinise the dynamics of post-Revolutionary ‘ideological’ combat, he developed an account of partisan animosity on the analogy of religious warfare. But the analogy has standardly been literally applied, leading to gross simplification. This situation obliges us to return to Burke’s original argument in order to extract its true explanatory force.

The essay proceeds in three stages, corresponding to the main sections into which it is divided. I begin with Burke’s earliest treatment of the perceived threat to international stability posed by the advent of Revolutionary democracy in France. I

⁵ Benjamin Constant, *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments* (1810), ed. Etienne Hofmann, trans. Dennis O’Keefe (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003) p. 356. For a discussion of this dimension of Constant’s thought, see John Dunn, ‘Liberty as a Substantive Political Value’ in *Interpreting Modern Political Responsibility: Essays 1981–1989* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 366–8, where Gabriel Bonnot de Mably features as the main ideological culprit.

⁸ On the problem of political ‘mistranslation’ in the sense intended here, see Sudipta Kaviraj, ‘Marxism in Translation: Critical Reflections on Indian Radical Thought’ in Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss eds. *Political Judgement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For an attempt to resuscitate Constant’s views on historical ‘incommensurability’ as a means of explaining the ‘disaster’ of Jacobinism, see Bernard Williams, ‘Saint-Just’s Illusion’ in *Making Sense of Humanity and Other Philosophical Papers, 1982–1993* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

proceed in the next section to set out Burke's commitment to balance of power politics during the aftermath of the Seven Years War, itemising the pillars that in his view supplied that arrangement with support. In my last section I turn to his examination of the collapse of the post-Westphalian 'system' of international politics under the influence of the implacable 'disposition' of France. My aim throughout is to develop a deeper sense of Burke's account of the causes behind the domestic implosion of French power, and by extension of the sources of international conflict both immediately preceding and then in the midst of the Revolutionary wars.

II COUNTRIES AGAINST COURTS

Burke rose in the House of Commons on 9 February 1790 to deliver an assessment of developments in France. It was his first public statement on events across the Channel since before the elections to the Estates General in the spring of 1789. The intervention was occasioned by a debate on the army estimates that had been initiated the previous Friday, on 5 February. On that day, questions had been raised about the logic of increasing the peace establishment in the context of a reduction of Britain's imperial responsibilities and in the absence of a tangible foreign threat. The military establishment for 1790 exceeded that at the outset of hostilities against America in the early months of 1775. But it was also in excess of the average army establishment since the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. Despite the loss of the thirteen American colonies, together with both Florida and Minorca, Britain's military capacity had been incrementally expanded as the requirements for imperial security had decreased. Having estimated the defences of the Empire at large, the opposition turned its attention to the state of Europe next: although the Speech from the Throne had acknowledged the absence of any discernable belligerent attitude on the part of the major powers on the continent, the opportunity for economy was being ignored. It was above all the unsettled state of politics in France that pointed to the possibility of retrenchment.⁹

Fox joined the debate early with an attack on the government's measures before dwelling on the situation in France. On this occasion, as he put it to the House, he was not alarmed by the 'constitutional' threat posed by an expanding military

⁹ *The Parliamentary Register; or History of the Proceedings and Debates of the Commons* (London: 1790), XXVII, pp. 48–50. The objections were raised by Marsham in response to the Secretary of War, Sir George Yonge.

establishment in peace-time Britain; instead, he was dismayed by the waste of military expenditure given the predicament of France: she hardly posed a danger under the conditions of present disorder, and when she emerged from her current ‘tumults’ she would prove a ‘better neighbour’. Fox anticipated improved international relations on account of the form of government France was likely to assume once she secured the expected benefits of her ongoing revolution. At that point, as Fox imagined it, a correspondence between the domestic constitutional organisation of Great Britain and post-Revolutionary France would ensure a mutually supportive political relationship.¹⁰

It was as a result of the commitments paraded in Fox’s speech, delighting in the triumph of liberty in France, that Burke felt compelled to respond the following Tuesday, on 9 February. He had been absent from the Chamber during Fox’s intervention on 5 February, but with his colleague now declaring himself to be one of those who ‘exulted’ in the Revolution he felt driven at last to take a stand.¹¹ Burke’s fraught exchange with Fox famously culminated in his announcement that he was henceforth ‘*separated in politics*’ from Fox’s ally, Richard Sheridan.¹² Soon the ‘Substance’ of his Speech was to make its appearance as a pamphlet; almost immediately thereafter it was translated into French.¹³ Having disapproved of Lord Valletort for indiscreetly publicising his views on the state of France as recently as 23 January, Burke was now determined to challenge what he perceived to be a pervasive complacency about the Revolution.¹⁴ It remained for him to demonstrate how developments in France could be construed as having a bearing on the international scene.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 54–59.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 75: ‘a change, as sudden and unexpected, had take place in <French> affairs, in which some exulted, and of which number, in one point of view, he considered himself as included, from feelings and from principle’.

¹² Ibid., p. 100.

¹³ *Substance of the Speech of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, in the Debate on the Army Estimates, in the House of Commons, on Tuesday, the 9th Day of February, 1790. Comprehending a Discussion of the Present State of Affairs in France* (London: 1790); *Discours de M. Burke, sur la situation actuelle de la France, prononce par ce celebre orateur, & un des chefs de l’opposition, dans la Chambre des communes d’Angleterre. Le fevrier 1790. Lors du fameux debat sur les estimations de l’armee* (France: s.n., 1790). There were in fact multiple (flawed) translations of this Speech: see William B. Todd, *A Bibliography of Edmund Burke* (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1964; rpt. Godalming, Surrey: St. Paul’s Bibliographies, 1982), entry numbers 52 f–j. The earliest report of the Speech in France appeared in *Le Moniteur* for 24 February 1790. Reviews appeared in *Journal historiques et littéraire* (15 June 1790) and *Révolutions de Paris* (April 1790).

¹⁴ For Burke’s reprobation of Valletort’s imprudence on this score, see F. P. Lock, *Edmund Burke Volume II: 1784–1797* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 255.

Burke began by submitting that military preparations ought to be based on a desire to preserve the balance of power in Europe. He recognised, with Pitt and Grenville, that there did not exist any tangible threat to a balance favourable to Britain, although less immediately apparent hazards required ongoing vigilance. Nonetheless, outwardly France had in effect abolished herself from the political map of Europe. Since the beginning of her efforts to reform the monarchy, she had only achieved an unintended degradation of her power – corrupting her constitution, her military and her commerce. Burke proceeded to examine each corruption in its turn before concluding with a panegyric on the Glorious Revolution: whereas 1688 introduced reform so that revolution could be prevented, 1789 delivered the progressive dilapidation of France.¹⁵ The question was how this outcome affected the politics of Europe.

Burke's early engagement with the crisis in France was motivated by his concern with its likely effect on British politics. Although he conceded that the Revolution represented a reduction in French power, nonetheless he viewed its significance in terms of international affairs. Already with his first recorded responses to the news from France, he emphasised how developments had beggared all prediction. Reports gave the impression of a 'wonderful Spectacle' of revolution, as Burke put it to the Earl of Charlemont on 9 August 1789: the course of events was at once 'paradoxical and Mysterious', leaving observers with no option but to marvel.¹⁶ 'Every step taken' is 'a New prodigy', he confided to Philip Francis on 15 November.¹⁷ He spelled out to William Windham, a close disciple, the result: 'What has happened puts all speculation to the blush'.¹⁸ Attempts to calculate the consequences would continue to be baffled, but it was still imperative to have a sense of how proceedings might develop.

In a letter sent to Burke on 15 September 1789, Windham related how he considered the present crisis almost over. He had acquired first-hand experience of France between the middle of August and early September, informing Burke on his return that 'the new Constitution will be settled without a struggle'.¹⁹ But Burke had been more sceptical from the beginning. In response to Windham he made this

¹⁵ *Parliamentary Register*, pp. 80–94.

¹⁶ *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke Volume VI, July 1789–December 1791*, eds. Alfred Cobban and Robert A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 10.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25 (27 September 1789).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20 (15 September 1789).

scepticism apparent. It was difficult to see how the Revolution could be stopped, and so it was unlikely that any form of civil discipline could be imposed.²⁰ Two months later he concluded that political life in France would yet have to pass through a variety of ‘transmigrations’ before it could settle on a final form of existence.²¹ This uncertainty continued into the new year. ‘Man is a gregarious animal’, Burke mused in a January letter to an unknown correspondent. As a consequence of this tendency it was inevitable that the corruption of French manners would yield to the instinct for society sooner or later. Ultimately the Revolution would have to assume ‘a more habitable form’.²² However the prospect of that eventuality lay far off.

Nonetheless, the proximity of France gave permanent grounds for caution. Although Burke repeatedly voiced his conviction between September 1789 and February 1790 that the Revolution had all but completed the ‘extinction’ of France, he continued to betray an acute awareness that she remained a ‘Neighbouring and rival Country’.²³ At no time was this sentiment more loudly proclaimed than during the opening of the debate in the House of Commons on 9 February 1790. On that occasion, in response to Henry Flood’s notice that he would seek a debate on the right to an ‘equal representation of the people’ as soon as business in parliament permitted, Burke called attention to the desperate condition to which France had been reduced by succumbing to the allure of pleas for democratic rights. There was, he declared, ‘a wild storm gathering over all Europe’. While he did not elaborate on the form that the impending upheavals were likely to take, he left little doubt as to the enormity of the disturbance in the offing: ‘this was a moment, of all the periods in the history of the world, the most critical to all Europe’.²⁴

In a part of his reported intervention on the army estimates for 1790 that was excised from the final published version of his speech, Burke indicated where this elusive danger lay. ‘Who’, Burke asked, ‘... could seriously imagine that there was not less danger to be apprehended from France, as an enemy, than as a friend?’ He then went on to answer his own question: France’s friendship in her current condition would be altogether more threatening since it would encourage those already inspired

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25 (27 September 1789).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 46 (Letter to Charles-Jean-François Depont, n.d. November 1790).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²³ On the extinction of France, see *ibid.*, p. 36 (Letter to Lord Fitzwilliam, 12 November 1789); *Parliamentary Register*, p. 89. For the earliest reference to France’s neighbourhood with Britain, see Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, p. 10 (Letter to Lord Charlemont, 9 August 1789).

²⁴ *Parliamentary Register*, pp. 64–65.

to imitate her example.²⁵ A letter sent to Burke by Thomas Paine from Paris less than a month earlier gives an indication of the fears Burke had in mind. ‘The Revolution in France is certainly a Forerunner to other Revolutions in Europe’, Paine contended, oblivious to the consternation he would awaken in his recipient. He then offered a brief *tour d’horizon* of the political situation across Europe, inspecting developments in Bohemia, Rome, Spain and Brabant. Every effort to suppress the dissemination of French ideas would inevitably have the opposite effect – that of ‘spreading’ the relevant ‘doctrines’, thereby encouraging the French ‘Contagion’.²⁶

Paine was frank in his view that the communication of French doctrines would succeed in bypassing the familiar stalemate of European power politics. ‘Politically considered’, he surmised, the Revolution represented a ‘new Mode of forming Alliances affirmatively with Countries and negatively with Courts’.²⁷ In other words, Revolutionary ideology offered a novel method for subverting the established sovereignties of Europe. Domestic resistance could be fomented from outside the jurisdictions of European courts by the introduction of infectious new ideas. When Burke came in February to object against Fox that the immediate disposition of France was not the issue – republics, like monarchies, could be lured into concord or roused to aggression as circumstances varied – and that therefore the decisive question in international politics was that of ‘*strength*’ rather than the forms of governments, he was keenly aware of the fact that the power of France no longer resided simply in her economic and military capacity.²⁸ But in this he was only developing a thought that had also occurred to Paine, a thought which Paine had then presumed to communicate to Burke.

Paine felt sure that there was not a court in Europe that would dare to tangle with France in its hour of fragility and distraction. Her fragility, as a matter of fact, was the secret of her strength. France’s political weakness was a product of her divisions – of the fractiousness of the army in particular. However, it was precisely the example of military insubordination that made the Revolution dangerous to its neighbours. The process of smuggling dissident opinion abroad, leading to the hostility of ‘Countries’

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²⁶ Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, pp. 71–72.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁸ *Substance of the Speech of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, in the Debate on the Army Estimates, in the House of Commons, on Tuesday, the 9th Day of February, 1790*, third edition reprinted in Edmund Burke, *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Ian Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 308.

against their ‘Courts’, would acquire maximum leverage at the point where radical principles infiltrated foreign forces. Even Prussia would balk at a reckless forward policy against the French, unnerved by the potential impact of Revolutionary rhetoric on her own army.²⁹ Similarly alert to the exposure of European states to the circulation of opinion, Burke fastened in his 1790 Speech on the army estimates onto the problem of Britain’s ‘vicinity’ to insurrectionary France.³⁰

In the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which finally appeared nine months after the publication of his Speech on army estimates, Burke refined the expression of his distress about the growth of ‘epidemical fanaticism’ across Europe. It was, he claimed, being publicised by the intrigues of zealous proselytism, reminiscent of the spirit of the Reformation. To what country in Europe, he asked, did the ‘fury’ of Münster Anabaptism not ‘furnish just cause of alarm?’ A century and a half later the peril, in Burke’s estimate, was still graver: not only was Revolutionary fanaticism being ‘dispersed with incredible assiduity’, but it promoted a blind destructiveness that defied comparison with the past.³¹ In a policy statement drafted for private circulation just over a year after the appearance of the *Reflections*, Burke famously described the French ‘disease’ as proceeding from a ‘*Revolution of doctrine and theoretick dogma*’.³² He was now angling for a direct confrontation with France, building on his earliest concerns about the infectiousness of democracy, but extrapolating more brazenly to the implications of his diagnosis. His point was that democracy could not be contained except by a forthright military response.

In the final section of this article I turn to consider the reasons why Burke came to the conclusion after 1791 that direct intervention in French affairs had become necessary. But more immediately it remains to be shown how the infectiousness of French principles operated in Burke’s mind. By the early- to mid-1790s he had decided that France was not merely dispensing poisonous philosophy, but was intrinsically aggressive at its core. However, this was not Burke’s original perception. In 1790 his view was that French republicanism was no more belligerent than any other form of power. But if it was not particularly militant, it was singularly catching:

²⁹ Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, p. 71.

³⁰ Burke, *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, p 309.

³¹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), pp. 134–35.

³² Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on French Affairs* (1791) in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke Volume VIII: The French Revolution 1790–1794*, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 341.

republicanism in France was democratic, and democracy had tantalising popular appeal.

In his 1790 Speech on army estimates Burke discoursed at length on the historical significance of the vicinity between France and Britain. It was always the case that a ‘similarity of sentiments’ would foster ‘connections’ between peoples. But in the seventeenth-century it was the correspondence between the manners of European courts that threatened to draw all sentiment toward the most slavish forms of politeness. Versailles had been the capital of this gallantry and splendour, seducing both Charles II and James II into an emulation of this brand of ‘gilded tyranny’. It was Britain’s good fortune that while this ‘infection’ had bewitched the monarchy and insinuated itself to some degree among ‘all ranks of the people’, it had not debauched the nation as a whole, leaving a patriotic alliance the wherewithal to resist it. But today ‘the disease is altered’, Burke now warned. The forms of flattery that can induce a population to admire monarchical despotism fall short of the inducements held out by democracy: popular vanity, of all forms of political corruption, is the most captivating.³³

Since the spirit of democracy is driven by the principle of equalisation it is forced to trade in the business of comparison.³⁴ It tempts by the promise of power and advantage – ‘our natural inclinations are flattered’, as Burke put it – but it maddens under the influence of envy and malice. Burke invoked the aspiring and embittered ambition that afflicted the Roman populace after the fall of the Republic as depicted by Tacitus at the outset of his *Histories* in order to make sense of the ferocity of the Revolution: hostility against privilege was motivated by ‘spite’ (*livor*) but it covered itself by a ‘false’ appeal to ‘liberty’ (*falsa species libertatis*).³⁵ This, according to Burke, accounted for much of the vindictiveness that incited Revolutionary violence, but he further surmised that vindictiveness was encouraged by irreligion. Atheism, Burke contended, gave licence to violence, and irreligion in France was ‘embodied into a faction’.³⁶

When Fox extolled the virtuous potential of the Revolution in France on 5 February 1790, the news was relayed to Burke and it touched a nerve. What stung him

³³ Burke, *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, pp. 309–10.

³⁴ For a discussion of Burke’s views on Revolutionary democracy, see Richard Bourke, ‘Enlightenment, Revolution and Democracy’, *Constellations*, 15:1 (March 2008), pp. 10–32.

³⁵ Cornelius Tacitus, *Historiae*, ed. C. D. Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), I, i; cited in Burke, *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, p. 310.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

in particular was Fox's suggestion that the current disposition of the armed forces across the Channel proved that military habits were compatible with citizenship – ‘*a man, by becoming a soldier, did not cease to be a citizen*’, Fox had insisted.³⁷ It was on precisely this line that Burke fixated in his response to Fox in the Commons four days later. He adverted to the recent record of disorder among the French troops, and traced this to the confusion bred by a divided military command: the existence of a nominal allegiance to the monarchy was contradicted by a declared allegiance to the nation; the crown and municipal forces were pitted against one another; and the whole was submerged within a polity drowning in a rising tide of democracy and atheism. With France comprising ‘a balance of armies, not of orders’, the threat of domestic anarchy was evident. The extremity of the situation was such as to mark the end of the balance of power in Europe as established by the Treaty of Ryswick in 1797.³⁸ The problem remained how to develop a suitable response.

III PARTY AGAINST FACTION

Burke's concern with the state of France dates back to the beginning of his career. It formed part of a larger preoccupation with the fortunes of power politics in Europe. In *An Account of the European Settlements in America*, which he put together with his friend and collaborator William Burke at the outset of the Seven Years War, the condition of European politics is surveyed through an assessment of the colonial policies of the great empires – the British, the Dutch, the Portuguese, the Spanish and the French. Political success is traced to entrepreneurial *virtù*, or to the spirit of invention and enterprise. National capacity is measured in terms of international power as promoted by the colonial ‘projects’ of the leading European states.³⁹

However, at the same time it is admitted that undertakings of this kind need to be vetted by discriminating judgment: while countless ‘visionary schemes’ supported under Cromwell inevitably came to nothing, the encouragement to innovation nonetheless spurred energy and momentum; on the other hand, the jealousy of Spain was altogether counter-productive, consigning the national spirit to a condition of

³⁷ *Parliamentary Register*, p. 55. Fox defended his remark against Burke's attack on it on 9 February 1790. See *ibid.*, p. 95.

³⁸ Burke, *Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, pp. 316, 318.

³⁹ Edmund Burke and William Burke, *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757; 3rd rev. ed.: 1760), 2 vols. On the contrast between Britain, France and Spain more generally, see *ibid.*, I, pp. 64–5 and pp. 234–320. For brief remarks on Holland and Portugal, see *ibid.*, II, pp. 57–8.

lethargy and decline. But set alongside the example of the Spanish and the British, the ambition of the French seemed to pay consistent dividends: ‘We have been engaged for above a century with France in a noble contention for the superiority in arms, in politics, in learning, and in commerce; and there never was a time, perhaps, when this struggle was more critical’.⁴⁰ By deliberately attending to her colonial and trading policy, the might of France had persisted down to the present war.

In the *Account*, the remarkable rise of France to its peak of grandeur in the mid-seventeenth century is traced to the strategy of recovery from the Wars of Religion, in the first instance ascribed to the genius of Richelieu, but credited above all to the perseverance of Colbert.⁴¹ The apotheosis of Colbertian policy is identified with French dominance of West-Indian trade – ‘upon the whole, we have the greatest reason to be jealous of France in that part of the world’.⁴² This dominance had been the product of naked energy and zeal promoted under the tutelage of an absolute monarchy. But it remained a question whether the domestic conditions favouring ‘active industry’ abroad would continue to be responsive to the demands of ‘systematic policy’.⁴³ In a pamphlet published six years after the Peace of Paris, as the fall-out from the Seven Years War continued to pervade British political debate, Burke itemised the reasons for doubting the compatibility in France between domestic harmony and foreign ambition, anticipating ‘some extraordinary convulsion’ in the French financial system that would ultimately engulf the whole society and state.⁴⁴ But equally he detected a ‘cankerworm’ in the British ‘rose’ – a distemper that might yet poison its constitutional balance.⁴⁵

The *Observations on a Late State of the Nation* is Burke’s earliest pamphlet, written at the age of twenty-nine, during the early part of his parliamentary career. Its purpose was to defend the record of the Rockingham administration against a recent spate of attacks from Grenville supporters, but most immediately it sought to refute

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, II, p. 49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, I, p. 65; II, 4–5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, II, p. 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, II, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Edmund Burke, *Observations on a Late State of the Nation* (1769) in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke II: Party, Parliament and the American Crisis, 1766–1774*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 151. For subsequent anticipations of ‘convulsion’ in Burke, see Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 25–6.

⁴⁵ Burke, *Observations on a Late State of the Nation*, p. 208.

The State of the Nation by William Knox.⁴⁶ Knox had set out to defend both the Peace of Paris and the Stamp Act while at the same time arguing that the chief advantages of the ‘late war’ had been subsequently reaped by the Family Compact. In response, Burke launched a blistering assault both on Knox’s principles and his command of the facts. He also jibed at his opponent’s basic purpose – to recommend his own ‘connexion’ for the role of government of the country, with Grenville ministering as the Duc de Sully to a conciliatory George III. But, as Burke argued, it was plain ridiculous to compare the unrest of the British public under George III with the divisiveness of French factionalism overcome by Henri IV. The ‘monstrous and overcharged picture of the distresses of our situation’, he proposed, ought not to be confused with the sorry condition of France after her emergence from ‘the most cruel and desolating civil war that perhaps was ever known’.⁴⁷

Less than a year before the appearance of the *Observations* Burke had conceded in a lengthy Speech on Address that the power of France was still greatly to be feared. The context for this sentiment was the recent Genoese cession of Corsica to the French. ‘Corsica naked I dread not’, he admitted, ‘but Corsica a Province of France is terrible to me’.⁴⁸ However, this seeming terror was considerably more muted when Burke came to report on the state of the nation in response to Knox’s alarm at the apparent revival of French fortunes in the immediate aftermath of the Seven Years War. Knox was charged with having resorted to a host of ‘common-place lamentations’ in order to advance the implausible claim that while Britain had been well-served by the terms of the Peace of Paris, it was the French who had principally benefited from the consequences of the war itself.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ William Knox, *The Present State of the Nation, particularly with Respect to its Trade, Finances, &c.; Addressed to the King and Both Houses of Parliament* (London: 1768). Among the other productions that Burke had in his sights were John Almon, *The History of the Late Minority, Exhibiting the Conduct, Principles of that Party, During the Years 1762, 1763, 1764 and 1765* (London: 1766); [James Scott?], *A Short History of the Conduct of the Present Ministry, with Regard to the American Stamp Act* (London: 1766); Thomas Whately, *Considerations on the Trade and Finances of this Kingdom, and on the Measures of the Administration with Respect to those Great National Objects* (London: 1766).

⁴⁷ Burke, *Observations on a Late State of the Nation*, p. 207.

⁴⁸ Edmund Burke, ‘Speech on Address’ (8 November 1768) in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke Volume II: Party, Parliament and the American Crisis, 1766–1774*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) p. 98. For Burke’s further contributions to the Corsican debate, see *Sir Henry Cavendish’s Debates of the House of Commons during the Thirteenth Parliament of Great Britain*, ed. J. Wright (London: 1841–1843), 2 vols., I, pp. 59–60. For the wider context, see Nicholas Tracy, ‘The Administration of the Duke of Grafton and the French Invasion of Corsica’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 8:2 (1974–1975), pp. 169–82. See also H. M. Scott, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 115–22.

⁴⁹ Burke, *Observations on a Late State of the Nation*, p. 112.

Burke's argument was that, on the contrary, the Treaty had betrayed British interests by failing to negotiate any credible protection against the new threat to the European balance represented by the Bourbon alliance. But while this failure dictated that Britain ought now to develop a fresh understanding with Prussia, the war itself represented an unequivocal British triumph.⁵⁰ To continue to reap the rewards of victory, it was necessary but not sufficient to project a potent image abroad with a view to attracting allies in opposition to the Franco-Spanish axis. But a further condition of international stability was the security of established constitutional arrangements against the ambition of innovating 'physicians' of state.⁵¹ That meant admitting the necessity of public men concerting to form 'parties' as the only sure protection against political corruption. Party, in Burke's new sense, was to be carefully distinguished from 'faction'. It was founded on the notion of a principled 'combination' whose adherents were immune to the temptations of court favour. As such, they served the common welfare and attracted public trust.⁵²

Burke returned to the ideal of a party of principle in the letter he wrote to the Earl of Charlemont on 9 August 1789 containing his earliest reflections on the Revolution in France. 'Party is absolutely necessary', he affirmed; 'I thought it always so in this Country ever since I have had any thing to do in publick Business'.⁵³ At that early point in his career, and throughout the 1760s, Burke had been keen to refute the claims of a rising 'school' of politics that he associated with John Douglas and John Brown.⁵⁴ Brown's notorious *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* had appeared after the loss of Minorca to the French at the outset of the Seven Years War and sought to pin the decline in national honour on an 'effeminacy' in public morals that had attended the growth of aristocratic wealth and power. The spread of luxury among the landed gentry in 'mixed' commercial polities like the British bred factions of a kind that sapped the unity of the nation, leaving the country prey to the cohesive power of the French monarchy.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 113. On Rockinghamite foreign policy in response to the Treaty of Paris, see Paul Langford, *The First Rockingham Administration, 1765–1766* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 83–02.

⁵¹ Burke, *Observations on a Late State of the Nation*, p. 114.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 208–15. Cf. Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on the Present Discontents* (1770) in *Writings and Speeches II*, p. 321.

⁵³ Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, pp. 9–10.

⁵⁴ As recounted in *ibid.*, p. 267.

⁵⁵ John Brown, *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London: 1757), pp. 29, 170, 205. Cf. John Douglas, *Seasonable Hints from an Honest Man on the Present Important Crisis of a New Reign and a New Parliament* (London: 1761).

By 1770, Burke's retrospective verdict on Brown's diagnosis was that it had served to advance the cause of court favouritism in British politics, severing the people out of doors from their natural leadership in parliament.⁵⁶ That leadership was supplied by the 'great Whig connexions' whose power had traditionally been 'rooted in the country', supported by the esteem in which they were held by the public at large.⁵⁷ By comparison with this established security to the common interest, it was government by court favouritism that could be seen to constitute a 'faction' in the state. Such divisiveness could only be offset by the united action of 'good men'. Good men had to combine out of a sense of duty to the commonwealth, thereby forming patriotic parties of principle.⁵⁸

The Roman connotation of 'good men' (*boni*) was deliberate on Burke's part: it implied an association of political 'friends' committed to the defence of the propertied interest.⁵⁹ Without that commitment, political parties deteriorated into factions, as Burke began to insist after the outbreak of the Revolution in France. The history of Roman *populares* exemplified that process of deterioration. In his earliest considered analysis of the Revolution, Burke castigated demotic combinations as a cause of division in any commonwealth, demonstrating his case by reference to Cinna, Marius and Saturninus.⁶⁰ However democracy in France, unlike Roman populism, had been able to prosper in the absence of all political restraint, giving vent to an inexhaustible fury without precedent in the past. It seemed to Burke to infuse French politics with a blend of energy and malice.

IV MALUS ANIMUS

On 18 February 1793, in a debate on Fox's resolutions against war with France, Burke confirmed that he supported the resort to military action on two distinct but related grounds. First of all he aligned himself with the majority view in the House of Commons that war had become necessary in order to counteract the manifest aggression of France. Since the declaration of war against Austria on 20 April 1792, the progress of French arms had been relentless. Victory at Valmy on 20 September was followed within two days by the invasion of Savoy. Soon this southwards thrust

⁵⁶ Burke, *Thoughts on the Present Discontents*, pp. 274–7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁵⁹ For Burke's reliance on the Ciceronian ideal of *amicitia*, see *ibid.*, p. 316.

⁶⁰ Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, p. 47 (Letter to Charles-Jean-François Depont, n.d. November 1790).

into Italy was complemented by the capture of Mainz and Frankfurt along the Rhine, and then by the invasion of the Netherlands in November. The success of General Dumouriez at Jemappes enabled the French forces to overrun the Austrian Netherlands, leaving Holland vulnerable to attack. The stark reality of these conquests had spurred the British government into action, winning Burke's unequivocal approval: it was on the evening of 15 December 1792 that he took his seat on the treasury bench for the first time.⁶¹

However, Burke further insisted that a military response was called for on yet more fundamental grounds. While he agreed with Pitt, Grenville and Hawkesbury that French expansion would have to be met by force, he also contended that war was justified by the 'disposition' of the enemy country.⁶² In saying this he was accepting the characterisation of his position recently proposed by Fox: he embraced the idea, as Fox had suggested, that the power of France was possessed by what he termed a '*malus animus*'.⁶³ The radicalism of Burke's proposals for dealing with France is a product of his assessment of this malign spirit. It was as a consequence of the operation of this unprecedented genius that he considered balance of power politics to be under severe threat, presaging the transformation of European warfare and diplomacy.

It was the existence of this alleged *malus animus* that constituted Burke's primary objection to France. Internal disarray was matched by external malevolence – indeed, the two were intimately connected with one another. The momentous *journée* of 10 August 1792, soon followed by the September massacres and the abolition of the monarchy, were indicative of a devouring fury that Burke had long ascribed to the basic principles of the Revolution. Events had now made clear the extent to which the domestic distemper would affect French foreign affairs. This outcome, Burke contended, had long been obvious. It had recently been confirmed by the decree of 19 November 1792, extending the promise of fraternal assistance to the oppressed peoples of Europe. The danger lurking in this pronouncement would be exposed within a month with the promulgation of a supplementary decree committing France

⁶¹ This is recorded in *The Parliamentary History of England from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803* (London: 1806–20), 36 vols, XXX, p. 119n.

⁶² For ministerial thinking at the time, see Jeremy Black, *British Foreign Policy in the Age of Revolutions, 1783–1793* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Chapt. 9.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 435. Fox employs the phrase to describe one of the 'two principles' used to defend a resort to war in *ibid.*, XXX, p. 424.

to the establishment of Revolutionary regimes in the territories she had conquered.⁶⁴ This, Burke declared, not only constituted a direct belligerent threat, it ‘went to subvert the whole state of mankind’.⁶⁵ On this basis, war would not be employed as a mere instrument of dominion but as a method of philosophical conversion. This arrangement told against any prospect of future peace since the new philosophy was itself a recipe for war.

The advent of Revolutionary belligerence marked the end in Burke’s mind of a politics of prudence guiding the conduct of international affairs. Prudence served to safeguard interests rather than to promote principles, and it looked to concrete advantage rather than to habitual attachments: it calculated profit irrespective of established alliances and without regard to prevailing political doctrines.⁶⁶ However, the Revolution had put paid to any commitment to this rigorous calculus, not least because it hinged on philosophical principles: it was primarily an event in the world of opinion, secondarily an occurrence in the world of power. Opinion ultimately depended upon the support of political power but the Revolution had nonetheless recast a fundamental relationship. It had realigned the terms of exchange between governments and their legitimating principles.⁶⁷ Revolutionary opinion encouraged power to disregard calculations of interest in favour of conformity to doctrine. At the same time, it did so whilst cloaking national ambition in the guise of cosmopolitan intent.

From Burke’s perspective, the Revolution was fundamentally ‘cosmopolitan’ in orientation, but its cosmopolitanism had three alarming characteristics: in the first place it was expansionist, secondly it was implacable, and finally it was subtly

⁶⁴ For the contents of the first and second propagandist decrees of 19 November and 15 December 1792, see *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises* (Paris: 1879–1913), 12 vols., 53, 4724. For discussion, see M. Bouloiseau, ‘L’Organisation de l’Europe selon Brissot et les Girondins, à la fin de 1792’, *Annales historiques de la révolution française*, 57 (1985), pp. 290–94. For the wider context, see T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London and New York: Longman, 1986), pp. 73–80; T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolutionary Wars, 1787–1802* (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 71–105.

⁶⁵ *Parliamentary History*, XXX, p. 436.

⁶⁶ On the ‘prudent views of modern politics’ as best suited to the maintenance of the European balance of power, see David Hume, ‘Of the Balance of Power’ (1754) in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), p. 339. Part of Hume’s point was that the treaties of Ryswick (1697), Utrecht (1713) and Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) betrayed a factious disregard on Britain’s part for the spirit of cautious calculation.

⁶⁷ On the general theme, see Richard Bourke, ‘Sovereignty, Opinion and Revolution in Edmund Burke’, *History of European Ideas*, 25:3 (1999), pp. 99–120.

deceptive.⁶⁸ On 22 March 1793, in the debate on the traitorous correspondence bill, Burke set about exposing the bogus fraternalism of France: ‘France had endeavoured under the specious pretext of an enlarged benevolence’, he claimed, ‘to sow the seeds of enmity among nations, and destroy all local attachments’.⁶⁹ Its goal was to subvert all patriotic allegiance in the name of delusive international charity. The reality underlying this fraudulent cosmopolitanism was a self-regarding proselytising zeal. The net result was a form of expansionism that was militant and malevolent in equal measure.

It is a remarkable feature of Burke’s career that he had formulated most of the premises that made up this conclusion by January 1791. A year and a half earlier, however, things were somewhat different. Writing to Lord Fitzwilliam in November 1789 about the prospect of salvation for France, he reckoned that ‘civil war’ represented the ‘only chance for producing order in their Government’.⁷⁰ It was Burke’s earliest flirtation with the idea of counter-revolution, but no sooner was this possibility considered than it was practically discounted for the foreseeable future. The country was ‘undone’, as Burke put it, and ‘irretrievable’ by any means available: the monarchy lacked all energy, royal authority had been sapped, the clergy were no longer respected, and the nobility were without support.⁷¹ As a result, there was no faction, division or order in the state that might be galvanised into conducting a civil war. Two months later, a matter of weeks before he delivered his Speech on the army estimates, he remained doubtful that the option of counter-revolution existed: ‘I see no way, by which a second revolution can be accomplished’, he admitted to an unknown correspondent.⁷²

While the chances of launching an internal counter-revolutionary strike seemed highly unlikely to Burke down to the close of 1789, he did not embrace the idea of outside intervention until the winter of 1790–91 either. Writing on 29 March 1790 to Adrien Duport, who had taken a prominent part in advancing the cause of judicial reform in the National Assembly, Burke was clearly apprehensive about the potential

⁶⁸ Burke’s characterisation of the Revolution as a cosmopolitan masquerade dates back to his original response to Richard Price’s *Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789). On this, see Richard Bourke, ‘Theory and Practice: the Revolution in Political Judgement’ in Bourke and Geuss eds. *Political Judgement*.

⁶⁹ *Parliamentary History*, XXX, p. 645.

⁷⁰ Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, p. 36 (12 November 1789).

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 79 (? January 1790).

collapse of France. The decree of 22 December the previous year establishing electoral and administrative assemblies across the monarchy, together with the division of the country into departments by the decree of 26 February, had rendered the dismemberment of the polity a probability. This was expected to entail the drastic humiliation of a great power. But while some of his colleagues were in the process of bringing to bear against France the attitude of Cato the Elder towards his Carthaginian foe – *Carthago delenda est* – Burke professed to find that prospect more dangerous than it might appear. He then conveyed the extent to which it had been widely observed that the elimination of France would upset ‘the total balance of Europe’ – a result of considerable concern to the ‘welfare’ of Britain. But this was, he concluded, a complicated subject on which he had not yet been able to form a complete ‘Judgment’.⁷³

A decisive judgement crystallised in early 1791. Writing to the Comtesse de Montrond during her exile at Neuchâtel on 25 January, he declined her invitation to him to contribute further to the pamphlet war on France, indicating that just one week earlier he had drafted a letter explaining his position on recent developments in response to inquiries made by a concerned member of the National Assembly. The letter in question, addressed to François-Louis-Thibault de Menonville, elected to the Estates General from Mirecourt in Lorraine, was duly published in May in London as a *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*. But for the moment Burke protested the ‘utter inutility’ of any new statement on the situation in France. Since Cazalès, Lally-Tollendal, Mounier, and Calonne had all failed to make an impact with their public pronouncements, how could an isolated Englishman be expected to succeed?⁷⁴ Then came the crucial point: France was commanded by a determined power before which the court of reason could only lose its credit if obliged to plead its case on such unequal terms: opponents of the Revolution faced an ‘armed Tyranny’, Burke asserted, ‘and nothing but arms can pull it down’.⁷⁵

In the absence of armed counter-revolutionary capacity inside France, the challenge would have to be launched from outside the jurisdiction. In his *Letter to a*

⁷³ Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, p. 106.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 211–12. In addition to these figures, Burke also mentions the failed but admirable efforts of the Abbé Jean Sifrein Maury; Jean de Dieu-Raymond de Cucé de Boisgelin, Archbishop of Aix; François de Bonal, Bishop of Clermont-Ferrand; and Anne-Louis-Henri de La Fare, Bishop of Nancy. Cf. Edmund Burke, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791) in *Writings and Speeches VIII*, pp. 324–5, where his earlier criticism of Mounier and Lally-Tollendal is explained and qualified.

⁷⁵ Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, p. 211.

Member of the National Assembly, Burke spelled this out: the appropriate ‘power’, he proclaimed, ‘must come from *without*’.⁷⁶ Writing in March to the Chevalier de la Bintinaye, just before the *Letter* was due to appear in French translation, Burke emphasised that his response to Menonville had been composed in part precisely to demonstrate ‘the utter impossibility of a counter revolution from any internal Cause’. This was in large measure a legacy of the monarchy itself – to enhance its own strength it had weakened ‘every other force’ under its supervision. France’s sole remaining hope therefore resided in the possibility of intervention by one of the major states of Europe. However, with Prussia, Austria and Russia currently distracted by comparatively trivial disputes, a highly precarious situation – one which the ‘ancient Maxims’ of policy were poorly adapted to remedy – was being allowed to pursue its catastrophic course.⁷⁷ In the face of this improvidence, Burke built his case for meeting the current predicament with ‘force’, justified on the grounds of ‘policy’.⁷⁸

It was still the case that Burke did not regard French might with alarm in 1791 – she remained a diminished power from his perspective – but he nonetheless feared the cast of her underlying *animus*. As a brooding presence in Europe waiting for her ‘moment’, fortune would ultimately serve her fundamental tendency. This tendency, he implied, was one of militant ambition, as his references to the ‘spirit’ of conquering Islam were designed to insinuate.⁷⁹ All the same, as he went on to elaborate, French fanaticism had a character all its own. It destroyed the domestic affections, perverted the passion of love, and uprooted every ‘aristocratic’ sentiment from the mind.⁸⁰ It had a definite, primordial and all-encompassing objective, which it pursued with unexampled application: namely, the elimination of the figure of the propertied gentleman from politics.⁸¹ In order to achieve this it had to transform the moral character of the population so as to prepare it for the work of militant destruction.

Burke argued in the *Letter* that the fabrication of a new national genius adequate to this task was enabled, as he had already claimed in his army estimates Speech and

⁷⁶ Burke, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 305.

⁷⁷ Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, pp. 241–2 (? March 1791).

⁷⁸ Burke, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, pp. 297, 307, 308. Burke’s examples of recent ‘policy’ illustrating the contemporary currency of intervention are the Prussian restoration of William V of Holland in 1787–8; the restoration of imperial authority in the Netherlands in 1790; the restoration of the Prince-Bishop of Liège in 1790; and the intervention of Prussia on behalf of Turkey in 1790.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 315–19.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 296, 298, 309.

in the *Reflections*, by the seductions of democratic ambition: the deluded expectation among the mass of the population of acquiring power was intoxicating in the extreme, inspiring the credulous conviction that ‘a people of princes’ was in the making.⁸² But while the hunger for popular dominion was easily awoken, the morals of the *demos* would still have to be corrupted in order to inure them to the methods of violent revolution. The violence in question was unleashed in the form of terror – by ‘assassination’ together with the threat of assassination.⁸³ But to accustom a population to such means of enforcement and coercion required the antecedent re-education of moral habits and dispositions. Burke famously singled out the ‘paradoxes’ of Rousseau – ‘the insane *Socrates* of the National Assembly’ – as having facilitated this process of indoctrination.⁸⁴

According to Burke, Rousseau had originated and perfected in his fiction and his *Confessions* the method of artificially deranging natural human dispositions.⁸⁵ This was achieved by systematically substituting vanity for humility as a spring of action: first taste was corrupted, then morals perverted, and finally immorality was hypocritically justified as necessitated by the demands of a higher ethical calling. In this way, the pretence of universal benevolence could mask the obliteration of social sympathy, and thereby vindicate the most ruthless means of advancing subversion in the name of ‘égalité’.⁸⁶ In Burke’s mind it was ‘atheism’ – the arguments in particular of Helvétius and Voltaire – that enabled the completion of this system of belief by eradicating the restraints imposed by ‘the tribunal of conscience’.⁸⁷ Since the disease had spread so far, only the most radical surgery stood a chance of reversing the decline. That meant rebuilding France, not on the model of the British constitution so much as on the basis of the ‘*principles*’ that informed it.⁸⁸ These principles, Burke

⁸² Ibid., pp. 301, 305.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 319.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 314, 318. A year earlier, in a letter sent to an unknown correspondent, Burke had singled out the paradoxes of the *Contrat social* for critical comment: ‘little did I conceive that it could ever make revolutions, and give law to nations’. See Burke, *Correspondence*, VI, p. 81. Anarcharsis Cloots, in a letter sent to Burke on 12 May 1790, had himself identified the design of enlightenment philosophy with the ancient moralists: ‘On se croiroit en vérité, au centre de l’Attique; et nos Antisthenes, nos Crates, nos Diogenes, nos Zénon, nos Socrate, ne sont pas moins dignes du pinceau de Raphaël, que la fameuse Ecole d’Athenes’. See *ibid.*, p. 114.

⁸⁵ For discussion of Burke’s engagement with Rousseau, see Iain Hampsher-Monk, ‘Rousseau, Burke’s *Vindication of Natural Society*, and Revolutionary Ideology’, *European Journal of Political Theory* (Forthcoming).

⁸⁶ Burke, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, pp. 311–18.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 319.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 329.

recognised, would have to assume a wider European currency if they were to halt the universal ambition of Revolutionary sectarianism.

From December 1791 through to October 1793, Burke argued for the development of a European coalition of forces capable of counteracting popular party rage. ‘*It is a religious war*’, he exclaimed in his despairing *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies*. However, it was ‘religious’ in the sense of constituting an anti-religion bent on the establishment of a secular ideology. It did not operate by pitting sect against sect in the style of past religious conflicts. Instead it mobilised a new fanaticism against religion with the purpose of extending the rights of man at the expense of the rights of property.⁸⁹ Before the actual opening of the Revolutionary wars in Europe, during the aftermath of the flight to Varennes of 20 June 1791, Burke was pressing for British leadership of a concerted effort against France to gain advantage in the ongoing war of principles.⁹⁰ The Revolution, he remarked, represented a new era of factional strife that was doctrinal and political at the same time. Under these conditions, the empire of ‘opinions’ dominated the calculation of ‘interests’. As a consequence, the democratic spirit of party expunged the sentiments necessary for the support of ‘party’ in Burke’s original sense of a combination populated by ‘good men’.⁹¹

The party of philosophy would have to be made to yield to a party of aristocratic principle. This was the ultimate objective of the counter-revolutionary ‘restoration’ sought by Burke from 1791 down through the closing years of his life. But the reconstruction of France could only be secured by means of a war of partisanship: Burke rejected the goal of conquest aimed at the destruction of a rival power, proposing instead to extirpate the Revolution. He was very clear that the rejuvenation of the French state in accordance with British principles was to be conducted in defence of the common law of Europe and not with a view to annexing a defeated dependent.⁹² The final terminus of this programme of international action was not the

⁸⁹ Edmund Burke, *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies* (1793) in *Writings and Speeches VIII*, p. 485.

⁹⁰ In this he committed himself to the view that the Revolution unleashed a new species of *Prinzipienkrieg*. For the absorption of this thesis into historiography, see the classic study of Leopold von Ranke, *Ursprung und Beginn der Revolutionskriege, 1791 und 1792* (Leipzig: 1879).

⁹¹ For Burke’s intention of resuscitating the European balance, see *Thoughts on French Affairs*, p. 343. For the persistence of Burke’s commitment to ‘party’ on the Rockinghamite model of amicable ‘connexion’ see above n. 52.

⁹² Burke, *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies*, pp. 488–91. For his earliest remarks on the ‘old common law of Europe’, see *Reflections*, p. 32; for a development of the thesis, see Edmund Burke, *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796) in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke Volume IX: The*

achievement of an everlasting peace among nations, but the revitalisation of the principle of European balance. A new, menacing and fractious power had been germinated by the events of 1789 in France. It represented an unprecedented and implacable breed of imperialism, driven towards militant self-aggrandisement on account of its pathological nature. Burke's response to this spectacle of expanding power was to seek a reversion to the established forms of 'civilised' conflict as the best means of curtailing modern belligerence inclined to total war.⁹³

V CONCLUSION

Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the Revolution* is haunted by Burke's writings on France. It carefully absorbs its precursor's insights whilst interposing revisions and objections of its own. '[L]ike Islam', Tocqueville remarked in the closely argued Chapter Three of Book One of his 1856 work, the Revolution 'flooded the earth with its soldiers, apostles and martyrs'.⁹⁴ It had no territory of its own but took the whole world for its object, in the process making enemies of fellow citizens and discovering compatriots in enemy jurisdictions. As a result, 'all foreign wars took on something of the character of civil wars; in all civil wars foreigners appeared'.⁹⁵ Traditional European *raison d'état* yielded to the empire of opinion. But since opinion is fashioned by preaching and propaganda, the Revolution 'took on the appearance of a religions revolution'. 'Or rather', he went on, 'it itself became a new kind of religion, an incomplete religion it is true, without God, without ritual, and without a life after death'.⁹⁶ Tocqueville's debt to Burke in all this is conspicuous. But are their arguments actually the same?

The equation between religion and political extremism was so pervasively revived in the period surrounding the Second World War that Raymond Aron could meditate on 'L'avenir des religions séculières' without the paradox risking the appearance of

Revolutionary War (1794–1797) and Ireland, ed. R. B. McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 248.

⁹³ On 'civilized' war in contrast with total war, see Burke, *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, p. 320.

⁹⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution. Volume One: The Complete Text*, eds. François Furet and Françoise Mélonio, trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 101.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

contradiction.⁹⁷ In post-War explorations of political radicalisation, Tocqueville's precise identification of the cult of ideological fundamentalism as at best an 'incomplete' religion has tended to be quietly elided. But his careful formulation was itself a modification of Burke. In *The Old Regime* the enthusiasm for revolutionary regeneration is associated with the 'passion' of religious conviction. However for Burke religious sentiment is naturally expressed in the form piety unless corrupted by the introduction of alien passions. It might well happen that religion could come to be infected by enthusiasm. But of course opinion in the most general sense is exposed to the corrupting influence of the passions.

Burke developed this argument in the spring of 1796, publishing it in his *Second Letter on a Regicide* in October. There he argued that those 'who have made but superficial studies in the Natural History of the human mind, have been taught to look on religious opinions as the only cause of enthusiastick zeal'.⁹⁸ Both Hume and Voltaire might have been offered as examples of the kind of superficiality Burke had in mind, although he declined to mention any person in particular. Instead he set about expounding his own thesis that while enthusiasm did not lie at the root of fanaticism, fanaticism could certainly take the form of enthusiasm. The atheistical fanaticism of Jacobin philosophy was enthusiastic only in a metaphorical sense.⁹⁹ It derived from a perversion of sentiment against religion rather than a perversion of religious sentiment. Its chief practical consequence was to fortify the intellect in holding fast to its depraved convictions. By destroying 'the image' of God in man, atheism prepared the mind for a revolution in morals.¹⁰⁰

Burke believed that the atrocities of the Revolution had been made possible by an assault on morality based on irreligion. It followed from this that moral enormities were founded on a betrayal of humanity. This depended on the Christian assumption that humanity was a resource against depravity rather than the cause of its occurrence.

⁹⁷ Raymond Aron, 'L'avenir des religions séculières' (1944), *Commentaire*, 8:28–29 (1985), pp. 369–83. In the discourse of the time, 'paganism', 'superstition' and 'metaphysics' were often substituted for plain 'religion'. See, for example, Aurel Kolnai, *The War Against the West* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1938); R. G. Collingwood, 'Fascism and Nazism' (1940) in *Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. David Boucher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945, 1966), 2 vols.

⁹⁸ Edmund Burke, *Second Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796) in *Writings and Speeches IX*, p. 278.

⁹⁹ Here I depart from the seminal argument set out in J. G. A. Pocock, 'Edmund Burke and the Redefinition of Enthusiasm: The Context as Counter-Revolution' in François Furet and Mona Ozouf eds., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture: The Transformation of Political Culture 1789–1848* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989).

¹⁰⁰ Burke, *Second Letter on a Regicide Peace*, p. 278.

However, while Burke's analysis of moral corruption is based on this assumption, his account of radicalisation is not. The process of re-educating morality carried out by the Revolution was conducted in Burke's view with the intention of uncoupling authority and property. That enterprise was advanced in the name of democracy with the goal of extending absolute dominion. Two core ingredients made up this vision, and they constitute Burke's contribution to understanding modern conflict. His principal insight lay in his grasp of equality as source of social and political conflict. He recognised egalitarian aspiration as relentless in its ambition. This relentlessness apparently gave democracy an unquenchable appetite for power. Its objective was nothing other than the achievement of 'universal empire'.¹⁰¹

This claim constitutes Burke's second main contribution to understanding modern conflict, but it amounts less to an insight than to a polemical assertion. In arguing that democratic republicanism was possessed by a peculiar lust for power, Burke constructed an early image of modern imperialism. The French state, he argued, was driven by the logic of its own principles towards aggrandisement through conquest. 'Every thing', Burke wrote, 'is referred to the production of force'. Democracy, in other words, inspired modern Machiavellism. It was militant in its 'principles', its 'maxims' and its 'spirit'.¹⁰² The concept of an unstoppable, expansive power compelled by its inner workings to extend its reach resurfaced with the theory of economic imperialism espoused by Hobson and Hilferding around a century ago. It depended on the idea of a peculiarly modern drive for dominion, and the idea originated with Burke.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 267.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 288.