EDMUND BURKE ON THE ORIGINS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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I

The origins of the French Revolution have always perplexed the understanding of historians.[1] To Edmund Burke (1729-1797), its contemporary British critic, the Revolution at first sight looked 'paradoxical and Mysterious'.[2] What puzzled him most, however, was the quick and almost effortless passing of the ancien regime in France. 'The absolute monarchy was at an end,' he mourned. 'It breathed its last, without a groan, without struggle, without convulsion.'[3] Perhaps few people had expected the sudden fall of the French monarchy; that government, Burke claimed, had been attacked 'by surprise':

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

1. For recent surveys of the scholarship on this topic, see: William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2nd ed., 1988), pp.7-40; T.W.C. Blanning, *The French Revolution: Aristocrats versus Bourgeois?* (London, 1987).
2. *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke* (hereafter, *Corr.*), ed. T.W. Copeland et al (10 vols., Cambridge, 1958-70), vi, 10. 'To Lord Charlemont - 9 August 1789'.
3. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France' (1790), *The Works of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke* (hereafter, *Burk's Works*) (6 vols., Bohn's Standard Library, 1877-1885), ii, 406.

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by Invalids.[4]

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

The state of the old order in France in Burke's opinion had by no means presaged the storm of a fatal revolution. The fall of the French monarchy was not preceded by exterior symptoms of decline; on the contrary, shortly before this fiasco there had been a kind of 'exterior splendour' in the Crown, which had usually helped to strengthen the authority of government at home. He claimed that the national power of France, generally speaking, had been ever on the increase and it was continuing 'not only powerful but formidable' right up to the moment of the Revolution. The monarchy had succeeded in achieving some of the most splendid objects of the nation's ambition; for some time, no country on the continent was her serious rival and even Britain had been once humbled. The prestige which the French monarchy had acquired in the international arena was high.[7] Domestically, the kingdom approached the state of prosperity and improvement. On the one hand, Burke pointed out, the population of France had grown substantially: it was estimated to have, in the last sixty years, increased from 22 millions to around 30 millions. On the other hand, the economy of France was thriving. The wealth which she had amassed, though unable perhaps to

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

5. 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs' (1791), *Burke's Works*, iii, 99.

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

7. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace' (1796), *Burke's Works*, v, 154-5.

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compete with the riches of Britain, could still constitute a 'very respectable degree of opulence'[8]

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

Notwithstanding, in this acme of prosperity and greatness the monarchy fell to the ground 'without a struggle', and it fell, Burke emphasised, 'without any of those vices in the monarch, which have sometimes been the causes of the fall of kingdoms'.[11] What then had happened? If the ancien regime in France had been so eminent, why this sudden fall?

It has been widely held that Burke explained the origins of the French Revolution simply in terms of a 'plot' or 'conspiracy' theory.[12]

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

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

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

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

12. See: Alfred Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century*

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This is a judgment which has done much injustice to Burke, for, because of this, his interpretation of the French Revolution has seldom been taken seriously. Alfred Cobban, for instance, had commented that

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

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

This, however, is not itself a fair reading resulting from careful or sympathetic study. Recent studies have effectively confuted this conclusion. On the one hand, it has been suggested that though obviously biased against the Revolution, Burke was by no means ignorant of his subject;[16] on the other hand, and more important, it has also been pointed out that Burke's views on the origins of the Revolution were as a

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(London, 1929. AMS rep., 1978), p. 120; Francis P. Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, North Carolina, 1960), p. 71; B. T. Wilkins, *The Problem of Burke's Political Philosophy* (Oxford, 1967), p.167.

13. Cobban, 'Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution', in his *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London, 1968), pp. 32-3.
14. Cobban, *Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century*, p.120.
15. Cobban, 'Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution', *op. cit.*, p. 32; 'Introduction' to vol. vi of *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, eds. Alfred Cobban and R. A. Smith, p. xv.
16. F. P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 43-6, 101-3.

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

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

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

Thus, not only had a 'plot' existed, but it had been long planned. The important thing here however is to understand what the nature of this long-contrived plot was. The volume of Barruel's *Memoirs* which impressed Burke is a work devoted to exposing the 'anti-Christian conspiracy' of the Jacobins, which the author defined as the 'philosophers conspired against the God of the Gospel', or, 'the conspiracy of

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

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

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

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

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the Sophisters of Impiety'.[21] This is unmistakably that kind of dark design which Burke had referred to in his own *Reflections on the Revolution in France:*

> The literary cabal had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion. This object they pursued with a degree of zeal ... What was not to be done towards their great end by any direct or immediate act, might be wrought by a longer process through the medium of opinion.[22]

The notorious 'conspiracy' which Burke claimed to have detected here is obviously not a common plot. He seemed to refer to some kind of intellectual movement for he associated it with a 'literary cabal', with the attack on the 'Christian religion', and with the 'medium of opinion'. In reality, it may not be unreasonable to infer that what the 'conspiracy' theory in Burke's language amounts to is, in academic terms, an intellectual or ideological revolution.

'What has happened in France teaches us, with many other things, that there are more causes than have commonly been taken into our consideration, by which government may be subverted.'[23] To Burke, the fall of the ancien regime in France was unusual. It was not simply occasioned by political grivances: the French had not destroyed their monarchy 'from any dread of arbitrary power that lay heavily on the minds of the people'. Their case was 'wholly foreign to the question of monarchy or aristocracy'.[24] Indeed, the ancien regime of France, in his opinion, was 'what was next to freedom, a mild paternal monarchy'.[25] Though an

21. *Memoirs, illustrating the History of Jacobinism. A Translation From the French of the Abbe Barruel* (London, 1797), i, xxii.
22. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 382.
23. 'Thoughts on French Affairs' (1791), *Burke's Works*, iii, 354.
24. 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 35.
25. 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 555.

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unqualified or ill qualified government, it had been long mitigated by religion, laws, manners, and opinions, so as to become a 'despotism rather in appearance than in reality'.[26] Nor could the Revolution be, as it has so often been in later scholarship, imputed to social or economic stress, for Burke was convinced that the condition of the country, as indicated above, was basically sound. Even the notorious financial difficulties, which have so often been blamed for the disaster, were, to him, 'only pretexts and instruments of those who accomplished the ruin of that monarchy'. 'They were not the causes of it,' he insisted.[27] A fuller and profounder explanation, therefore, must be looked for somewhere else.

An ancient edifice such as the French monarchy, it can be readily asserted, could not have collapsed suddenly without some profound reasons; and part of the explanation, in Burke's opinion, could be traced to the defect which existed inside the socio-political structure of the ancien regime. According to Burke, the monarchy of France, in spite of its apparent magnificence, had in reality stood in want of sound support: 'Its chief supports, the Nobility and the Clergy, are extinguished.'[28] And this had resulted from the jealousies and conflicts that had long existed between the crown and its aristocracy. Kings were always suspicious of the higher orders of thier subjects, since, Burke explained,

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

The king of France, being absolute monarch, had ever nursed 'a strong

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

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

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

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

> To strengthen itself the Monarchy had weakend every other force: To unite the Nation to itself, it had dissolved all other ties. When the chain, which held the people to the Prince was once broken, the whole frame of the commonwealth was found in a State of disconnection. There was neither force nor union any where to sustain, the Monarchy, or the Nobility, or the Church.[32]

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

Burke's approach to the French Revolution, however, was principally cultural. He had acutely detected a profound moral dimension behind this apparent political change: the Revolution in France was, he declared,

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29. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 380-1.
30. *Ibid.*, 374; 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 408-9.
31. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 381-2.
32. *Corr.*, vi, 242. 'To the Chevalier de la Bintinaye - (March 1791)'.

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a '*complete* revolution' which seemed to have 'extended even to the constitution of the mind of man'.[33] Everything in it, he added, supposed 'a total revolution in all the principles of reason, prudence, and moral feeling'.[34] This concept of an essential 'moral' revolution is a key category of analysis in Burke's account of the French Revolution.

The revolutionary movement did not emerge in France overnight, though the fall of its monarchy was a surprise. Long before the outburst of 1789, Burke observed, profound changes had already been taking place quietly in French society: 'A silent revolution in the moral world preceded the political, and prepared it.'[35] Paradoxically, this moral revolution had happened in the affluence, rather than the distress, of pre-revolutionary society. The state of France appeared august and spectacular before the Revolution, but, Burke noted,

> this prosperity contained in itself the seeds of its own danger. In one part of the society it caused laxity and debility; in the other it produced bold spirits and dark designs. A false philosophy passed from academies into courts; and the great themselves were infected with theories which conducted to their ruin. Knowledge, which in the two last centuries either did not exist at all, or existed solidly on right principles and in chosen hands, was now diffused, weakened, and perverted. General wealth loosened morals, relaxed vigilance, and increased presumption.

It turned out to be an intellectual movement revitalised as a result of the relaxation of moral discipline which was itself effected by the opulence of French society. In this intellectual movement, Burke noticed, religion had borne the first brunt: 'Religion, that held the materials of the fabric together, was first systematically loosened. All other

33. 'A Letter to a Noble Lord' (1796), *Burke's Works*, v, 111.

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

35. *Ibid.*, 258.

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opinions, under the name of prejudices, must fall along with it.'[36] Here can be discerned the relevance of Burke's 'conspiracy' theory.

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

Burke regarded the revolution in 'sentiments, manners, and moral opinions' as the most important of all revolutions.[41] Indeed, a profound cultural revolution had, in his opinion, underlain the whole course of the French Revolution. He discovered that a moral revolution had not only paved the way for the political changes, but was continued as a policy of the Revolution in order to resturcture the moral constitution of the French people. Its goal was twofold. On the one hand, it was intend-

36. 'Letter to William Elliot, Esq.', *Burke's Works*, v, 76-7.
37. *Corr.*, vi, 459. 'To the Archbishop of Nisibis - 14 Dec. 1791'.
38. *Corr.*, vi, 267. 'To Claude-Francois de Rivarol - 1 June 1791'.
39. 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 106.
40. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 421.
41. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 352.

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ed that by means of a moral revolution those old values could be wiped out which had attached the French people to the old order:

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

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

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

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

Several measures had been taken to carry out this work of moral renovation. First of all, Burke noted, a new scheme of moral education

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42. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies' (1793), *Burke's Works*, iii, 420.
43. 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 536-7.
44. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 337.
45. *Ibid.*, 424.

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was planned for the instruction of the rising generation. For this, however, books by authors of 'mixed or ambiguous morality', or by writers of 'deranged understanding', were recommended for study. It was certain that by means like this young minds would imbibe no real virtue. Instead, dubious morals such as the 'ethics of vanity' taught by Rousseau had been cultivated, which would but foment the evil dispositions of pride, petulance and self-conceit:

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

In Burke's eyes, vanity was the worst of vices and would pervert the nature of man: 'It makes the whole man false. It leaves nothing sincere or trustworthy about him. His best qualities are poisoned and perverted by it.'[46] Indeed, it would totally change the national character of Frenchmen.[47]

Secondly, efforts had been made to transform the social manners of the French society. The Revolution had, for example, undermined those ancient manners which encouraged the 'Chivalrous Spirit which dictated a veneration for Women of condition and of Beauty, without any consideration whatsoever of enjoying them'.[48] In its place, new manners were introduced, which taught a love without gallantry, a love without that 'fine flower of youthfulness and gentility'. Those passions which usually had been allied to grace and manners were discarded in favour of an indelicate medley of pedantry and lewdness, of 'metaphysical speculations blended with the coarsest sensuality'.[49] Further, Burke claimed, the state

46. 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 534-7.
47. *Corr.*, vi, 213. 'To the Comtesse de Montrond - 25 Jan. 1791'.
48. *Corr.*, vi, 90-1. 'To Philip Francis - 20 Feb. (1790)'.
49. 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 539-40.

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had even made it its policy to increase every means of seduction in order to corrupt young minds through pleasure. 'Every idea of corporal gratification is carried to the highest excess, and wooed with all the elegance that belongs to the senses. All elegance of mind and manners is banished.'[50] To the revolutionaries, all refinements had an aristocratic character, and therefore had to be destroyed.[51]

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

> as contrary to liberty; as not founded in the social compact; and not binding according to the rights of men; because the relation is not, of course, the result of *free-election*, never so on the side of the children, not always on the part of the parents.[52]

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

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

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

52. *Ibid.*, 538-9.

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

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Finally, Burke further noticed that the new authority of France even instituted a public church of 'avowed atheism' in every part of the country, in order to provide these novel values and eccentric manners with a new and suitable religious justification. But Burke believed that after every effort had been made to prepare the body to debauch and the mind to crime, this new atheistic religion would only prevent the French people from seeking any amendment or from having any remorse.[54] To him, atheism was a foul and unnatural vice and would be certain to corrupt 'all the dignity and consolation of mankind'.[55] It could never become a proper foundation for any sound moral system. For the French revolutionaries, however, with atheism established as its religious basis, their whole work of moral reorientation would be complete.

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

> All other nations have begun the fabric of a new government, or the reformation of an old, by establishing originally or by enforcing with greater exactness, some rites or other of religion. All other people have laid the foundations of civil freedom in severer manners, and a system of a more austere and masculine morality. France, when she let loose the reins of regal authority, doubled the licence of a ferocious dissoluteness in manners, and of an insolent irreligion in opinions and practices; and has extended through all ranks of life ... all the unhappy corruptions that usually were

54. *Ibid.*, 429.

55. 'Substance on the Army Estimates' (1790), *Burke's Works*, iii, 273.

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the disease of wealth and power.[56]

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

In the last analysis, Burke concluded that the new order of France was in reality founded upon 'moral paradoxes' which tended to distort the whole drift of its proclaimed principles. Thus, he claimed: 'Their liberty is not liberal. Their science is presumptuous ignorance. Their humanity is savage and brutal.' In that system, all those familiar virtues seemed to have suddenly become inverted:

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

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

II

It has been pointed out above that Burke regarded the revitalised intellectual movement as the driving force behind the French Revolution.

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56. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 311.
57. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 209.
58. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 322.
59. *Ibid.*, 341, 352.
60. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 208, 213.

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Indeed, he had more than once called, in a vein satiric, the French Revolution a 'philosophic revolution'.[61] *'It is'*, he claimed, *'a revolution of doctrine and theoretic dogmas.'*[62] And the doctrine, or to couch it in modern language, the ideology, which he believed played a major role in this Revolution was generally referred to as 'Jacobinism'.

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

> to eradicate prejudice out of the minds of men, for the purpose of putting all power and authority into the hands of the persons capable of occasionally enlightening the minds of the people. For this purpose the Jacobins have resolved to destroy the whole frame and fabrick of the old Societies of the world, and to regenerate them after their fashion: To obtain an army for this purpose, they every where engage the poor by holding out to them as a bribe, the spoils of the Rich ... [63]

According to Burke, therefore, the prominent nature of Jacobinism was to root out ancient values in order to clear the ground for a visionary new order. But to accomplish this, the Jacobins had managed to undermine those institutions which had usually embodied these values: they included, as Burke pointed out to Sir Hercules Langrishe, the religion, the property, and the traditional constitution, of the old society. [64] These themes constituted the main subjects in Burke's interpretation of the French Revolution.

The foremost feature of Jacobinism, and indeed of the French Revolution, was its persistent war against religion. 'Look at all the proceed-

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61. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 403; 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works*, v, 138.
62. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 350.
63. *Corr.*, viii, 129-30. 'To William Smith - 29 Jan. 1795'.
64. *Corr.*, x, 33-4. 'To Sir Hercules Langrishe - 26 May 1795'.

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ings of the National Assembly,' Burke wrote in 1793, 'and you will find full half of their business to be directly on this subject.' This anti-clerical bias, he claimed, formed the spirit of the whole revloution politics:

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

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

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

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

In Burke's opinion, Jacobinism carried both the sentiments of intolerance and of indifference. It declared not against a variety in conscience,

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65. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 442-3.
66. *Corr.*, vi, 103. 'To John Noble - 14 March 1790'.
67. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 371.
68. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 419.
69. *Corr.*, viii, 248. 'To the Rev. Thomas Hussey - 18 May 1795'.
70. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 443.
71. *Corr.*, vii, 220. 'To Walker King - (ante 20 Sept. 1792)'.

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but against all conscience; under that system, he insisted, people would be driven from their religion without being provided with another in which 'men might take refuge and expect consolation'.[72]

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

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

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

Burke was convinced that the seizure of church property had in fact been prompted rather by the essentially anti-clerical spirit of the Revolution than by the financial difficulties of the state. '[W]as the state of France so wretched and undone, that no other resource but rapine remained to preserve its existence?' He claimed that an examination of its financial situation could by no means warrant this necessity. According to the former French minister, M. Necker, the late financial crisis of

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

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

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France could in reality have been solved by some measures of 'savings and improvements of revenues', and by a plan of 'very moderate and proportioned assessment on the citizens without distinction'. Even supposing that the situation might have necessitated the seizure, still, Burke continued, a deficit of 2,200,000 pounds sterling would not have justified a confiscation of 'five millions'. To force the Church to bear the whole burden would have been partial, oppressive, and unjust, but it would not have totally ruined the order of clergy. Their openly declared reason for the confiscation therefore was suspect: 'There was no desire,' Burke believed, 'that the church should be brought to serve the state. The service of the state was made a pretext to destroy the church.'[74]

Indeed, according to Burke, the whole religious policy of the Revolution had been deliberately contrived in order to discredit the church and thus to prepare for its utter destruction. The proposal to reorganize the Gallican Church in terms of the newly legislated *Civil Constitution of the Clergy*, the spirit of which was to bring the Church back to its primitive condition, was, in Burke's opinion, a wilful attempt to sink the clergy into a miserable state of poverty and persecution.[75] In particular, the plan to salary all the clerics as the paid officials of the state would impoverish virtually all the higher clergy who had been maintained before by their own landed property. It would drive the clergy from independence to live on alms, bringing them down from the highest situation in the country to a 'state of indigence, depression, and contempt'.[76] A long-standing consequence of such a policy to impoverish the clergy would be the utter vulgarization of the Church. Once the church was turned into a 'degrading pensionary establishment', Burke's argument ran, men of liberal ideas and liberal condition would be reluc-

74. *Ibid.*, 389-92.

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

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

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tant to destine their children for a career in the Church, which would, as a result, be serviced by the lowest classes of the people. If this should happen, he added, 'as you have left no middle classes of clergy at their ease, in future nothing of science or erudition can exist in the Gallican church.'[77]

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

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

77. *Ibid.*, 418.

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

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

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

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complained, were allowed to preach at their discretion any mode of religion or irreligion that they would please.[81] Moreover, people could be made bishops for no other merits than

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

The constitutional clergy, in fact, seemed to act not as the ministers of any religion, but as the agents and instruments of the Jacobin conspiracy against all morals. Indeed, Burke was convinced that this new church had been founded for nothing but a mere temporary amusement to the people before it should be able to cast off the very appearance of all religion whatsoever.[83] It was intended 'to be temporary, and preparatory to the utter abolition, under any of its forms, of the Christian religion, whenever the minds of men are prepared for this last stroke against it'. And this, Burke insisted, had been the long entertained design of the French Jacobins.[84]

The assault on property was the second major feature of the Jacobin politics. 'Jacobinism,' wrote Burke, 'is the revolt of the enterprising talents of a country against its property.'[85] He observed that the National Assembly, in order to shatter the foundation of property, had openly denounced the doctrine of 'prescription' which had conventionally established the title to property on a long and uninterrupted possession. With the Jacobins, he complained, 'possession is nothing, law and usage

81. 'Reflections on the Revolution on France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 419.
82. 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 528.
83. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 443.
84. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 419.
85. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 207.

are nothing'.[86] For them, an 'immemorial possession' amounted to no more than a 'long-continued, and therefore an aggravated injustice'; they accordingly regarded prescription not as 'a title to bar all claim, set up against all possession', but as itself 'a bar against the possessor and proprietor'.[87] However, Burke argued, property could never be secure without the rule of prescription, which in his view was the very 'rule and maxim which can give it stablitity'.[88] He insisted that property, when left undefended by such principles, would become but a repository of spoils to tempt cupidity, not a magazine to furnish arms for defence.[89] 'It is a vain conceit', he believed, 'that property can stand against it, alone and unsupported, under any general popular discontent. Part of the property will be debauched; a part frightend; the rest subdued.'[90]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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principle of injustice it had established, rather than in the description of persons robbed.[93]

Burke discerned that a general crisis of property had been implied in the attack on church land, which he believed could not be dispersed without 'leaving the Monarchy and aristocracy nothing upon which they can stand'.[94] Its reason was clear: once confiscation became a standing policy, no property could be guaranteed. 'I see the confiscators begin with bishops, and chapters, and monasteries; but I do not see them end there.'[95] And he beheld:

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

All kinds of properties in France had fallen like dominoes, without the smallest degree of safety.[96] The Revolution had started as a revolt against landed property, but ended ironically with the ultimate subversion of the monied interest, whose actions, Burke pointed out, had been of absolute necessity at the beginning of this Revolution.[97] As a matter of fact, even the plunderers themselves in the end were also to have their own fingers burned. When the disposition to pillage prevailed, those who had just robbed others would themselves be vulnerable to still newer waves of robbers. It was from the apprehensions of

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

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

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

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

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

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this threat, he believed, that the new regime was before long forced to declare itself in favour of property, promising to 'secure all their brother plunderers in their share of the common plunder':

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

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

This attack on property also had its social connotations. If the French Revolution, as Burke insisted, had been a struggle mainly against the owners of 'landed property',[99] it would inevitably mean a war on the aristocratic classes of nobility and gentry, for the possession of land was particularly associated with them under the old order. Burke was convinced that the Jacobins had made it their great object to destroy the gentry of France: it was the 'condition of a Gentleman', he claimed, which was under attack. For this, they had shattered 'all the effect of those relations which may render considerable men powerful, or even safe'. [100]

Moreover, it appeared that a potential class conflict was being incited. Burke pointed out that the Jacobins had appealed to the weak and indigent part of society against their superiors. Discord had been sown among different social interests and the lowest description of the people had been stirred up to pillage the more eminent orders and

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

99. *Ibid.*, 342.

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

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classes of the community.[101] The Jacobins were accused of having bribed the lower class to form a body of 'Janizaries' to 'over-rule and awe property': [102] they had, wrote Burke, secured to themselves a force by dividing among the people of no property the estates of the ancient and lawful proprietors.[103] The French Revolution in his view was the first time in history that the frame and order of a well-constructed state had been overturned by corrupting the common people with the spoil of the superior classes.[104]

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

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

The Jacobins were extremely hostile to the order of aristocracy; and this animosity had driven them to crush 'everything respectable and virtuous in their nation', disgracing 'almost every name, by which we formerly knew there was such a country in the world as France'.[107] Indeed, the

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101. 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority' (1793), *Burke's Works*, iii, 493-4.
102. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 419.
103. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 207.
104. *Corr.*, vii, 388. 'To Florimond-Claude, Comte de Mercy-Argenteau - (circa 6 Aug. 1793)'; *Corr.*, vii, 383. 'To Lieutenant General Edward, Count Dalton - 6 Aug. 1793'.
105. *Corr.*, vi, 451. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 21 Nov. 1791'.
106. *Corr.*, vii, 60. 'To William Weddell - 31 Jan. 1792'.
107. 'Substance on the Army Estimates', *Burkes Works*, iii, 277.

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French Revolution had witnessed the complete destruction of 'all the Gentlemen of a great Country, the utter ruin of their property, and the servitude of their persons'.[108]

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

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

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

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

108. *Corr.*, vi, 179. 'To Sir Gilbert Elliot - 29 Nov. 1790'.
109. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 256.
110. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 372.
111. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 416.
112. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 353.

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

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

The ancient polity of France, according to Burke, was an historical entity which had developed over a long period through various accidents at different times, and the ebb and flow of various property and jurisdiction.[116] 'It grew out of the habitual conditions, relations, and reciprocal claims of men. It grew out of the circumstances of the country, and out

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

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

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

116. *Ibid.*, 448.

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of the state of property.'[117] To break this complicated ancient edifice, the Jacobins appealed to simple abstract principles. They, Burke discovered, cleared away as rubbish whatever they found, intending to reduce everything into an 'exact level'. Mathematic mensuration was then adopted to make old feudal provinces 'regularly square', thus transforming the historical map of ancient France into a 'new pavement of square within square'.[118] The intention behind this abstract policy of geometrical distribution was but too clear. It was meant, Burke believed,

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

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

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

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117. 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 554.
118. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 443-4.
119. *Ibid.*, 453.
120. *Ibid.*, 466-7.
121. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 416; 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 353.

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

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

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

> as if they were of opinion that there is a singular species of compact between them and their magistrates, which binds the magistrate, but which has nothing reciprocal in it, but that the majesty of the people has a right to dissolve it without any reason, but its will.[123]

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

Two features were prominent in this popular democracy. On the one

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

123. *Ibid.*, 360.

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

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

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

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

To the Jacobins, there was no other natural government than this.[127]

In fine, Burke concluded that these anti-traditionalistic Jacobins were merely speculative theorists who tried to built their politics, 'not on convenince, but on truth'.[128] Their new system was to be established upon the abstract system of 'Empedocles and Buffon', rather than on any political principle. 'It is remarkable,' Burke was surprised to find, 'that, in a great arrangement of mankind, not one reference whatsoever is to be found to anything moral or anything politic; nothing that relates to the concerns, the actions, the passions, the interests of men.'[129] In Jacobin politics, there seemed no scheme ever devised to fit the constitution to the situation of the people; on the contrary, Burke lamented, every effort had been deliberately made 'to destroy conditions, to dissolve relations, to change the state of the nation, and to subvert property, in order to fit their country to their theory of a constitution'.[130]

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126. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 416.
127. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 352.
128. 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 109.
129. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 444, 452.
130. 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 554-5.

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III

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

Burke never concealed his deep contempt for the origins of those who made the French Revolution. 'The Jacobin Revolution,' he declared, 'is carried on by men of no rank, of no consideration, of wild, savage minds.'[131] The revolutionary politics of France was completely dominated by *'the refuse of its chicane'*.[132] It placed the highest powers of the state

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

Most of the revolutionaries in his eyes were merely a desperate set of obscure adventurers,[134] who were drawn out of the dregs of society, exalted to their evil eminence by their enormities, and wholly destitute of any distinguished qualifications able to command respect.[135]

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

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131. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 437.
132. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 372-3.
133. 'A Letter to a Member of the National Assembly', *Burke's Works*, ii, 520.
134. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 417.
135. *Corr.*, vi, 443. 'To the Empress of Russia - 1 Nov. 1791'.

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suppressed his good opinion of the general abilities of the Jacobins: 'It is a dreadful truth, but it is a truth that cannot be concealed; in ability, in dexterity, in the distinctness of their views, the Jacobins are our superiors.'[136] He believed that Jacobinism was a vice belonging especially to men of parts.[137] Talents, he emphasised, naturally gravitated to Jacobinism: 'Whatever ill Humours are afloat in the State, they will be sure to discharge themselves in a mingled Torrent in the Cloaca maxima of Jacobinism.' [138]

Further, the Jacobins were found to be possessed of enormous energy. What had made the Jacobins 'terrible even to the firmest minds'? Burke answered: '*One* thing, and *one* thing only - but that one thing is worth a thousand - they have *energy*.' It was, he added, a dreadful and portentous energy which was not restrained by any consideration of God or man and which was 'always vigilant, always on the attack'. This distempered energy had been brewed out of the anarchical situation created when the Revolution engulfed France. 'In France, all things being put into a universal ferment, in the decomposition of society, no man comes forward but by his spirit of enterprise and the vigour of his mind.'[139] This spirit of adventure animated the Jacobins to the full use of all their native energies.[140]

It was noted, in addition, that the Jacobins were, generally speaking, young and inexperienced. In the new government of France, or in its army officers, Burke was surprised to find, there was not a man who was above five and thirty.[141] He also pointed out that among the delegates of the Third Estate no one could be found to have any practical experience

136. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 191, 233.
137. *Corr.*, viii, 242-3. 'To Earl Fitzwilliam - 15 May 1795'.
138. *Corr.*, x, 32. 'To Sir Hercules Langrishe - 26 May 1795'.
139. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 437-8.
140. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 191.
141. *Corr.*, viii, 149. 'To John Wilmot - 12 Feb. 1795'.

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in the state: the best of them were but men of theory.[142] Young and inexperienced men could not be expected to cherish those virtues of caution and self-distrust. They, guided by heated imagination and the wild spirit of adventure, had always entertained a dangerous vision, imagining themselves as having been chosen to 'new-model the state, and even the whole order of civil society itself'.[143] It would then be hazardous to trust the public good to such visionaries, because they, Burke feared, would commit the whole to the mercy of their untried speculation:

> they abandon the dearest interests of the public to those loose theories, to which none of them would choose to trust the slightest of his private concerns ... The public interests, because about them they have no real solicitude, they abandon wholly to chance.

There was nothing in experience which would prove their schemes beneficial.[144]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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ously betrayed not only the Crown but their own order.[147]

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

In this account, Burke obviously intended rather to besmirch the leaders of the Revolution, but he was not unaware of their true social implication. He had hit upon an important point when he completed his analysis of the representation of the Third Estate: among its delegates, he was impressed to find, there 'was scarcely to be perceived the slightest

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

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

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traces of what we call the natural landed interest of the country'.[149] This is a significant comment, which reflects Burke's view that the French Revolution was basically anti-aristocratic. Indeed, he later pointed out that the revolutionaries were mostly men without property. The National Assembly, according to his estimation,

> has not fifty men in it ... who are possessed of an hundred pound a year in any description of property whatsoever. About six individuals of enormous wealth, and thereby sworn Enemies to the prejudice which affixes a dignity to virtuous well born poverty, are in the Number of the fifty. The rest are, what might be supposed, men whose names never were before heard of beyond their Market Town.[150]

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

With regard to its social origins, Burke admitted that the French Revolution was unprecedented. It was not made as was usually the case by the ambitious aristocracy or by the indigent populace, both of which, he claimed, had been feared in the past as 'instruments in revolutions'.[151] This conclusion implied that a new social force had been at work in this great change. To explain the rise of this new force, Burke related the whole event back to a broad historical context.

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

149. *Ibid.*, 317.

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

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

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explained,

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

As men acquired great fortunes, they would tend to 'compare in the partition of the common stock of public prosperity, the proportions of the dividends with the merits of the claimants'. These *nouveaux riches* were frustrated when they found that their social standing was not commensurate with their own estimate of their worth.[153] They hated being barred from the status which wealth, in reason and good policy, ought to bestow, and they felt 'with resentment an inferiority, the grounds of which they did not acknowledge'.[154] Thus was the awakening, and the ultimate alienation, of this new social force.

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

> The middle classes had swelled far beyond their former proportion. Like whatever is the most effectively rich and great in society,

152. *Ibid.*, 354.

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

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

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> these classes became the seat of all the active politics; and the preponderating weight to decide on them. There were all the energies by which fortune is acquired; there the consequence of their success. There were all the talents which assert their pretensions, and are impatient of the place which settled society prescribes to them ... The spirit of ambition had taken possession of this class as violently as ever it had done of any other. They felt the importance of this situation.[155]

The Revolution in Fance thus emerged as a socio-political movement of the ambitious middle classes striving for social recognition. It was, that is, a typical middle-class revolution.

Several types of men were found to lead the way in this great change; and among them, the 'monied interest' and the 'men of letters' were ranked among the most active.[156] 'The monied men, merchants, principal tradesmen, and men of letters,' Burke noted, 'are the chief actors in the French Revolution.' This was an outcome ensuing from the expansion of wealth and the diffusion of information in the pre-revolutionary society: 'as money increases and circulates, and as the circulation of news, in politics, and letters, becomes more and more diffused, the persons who diffuse this money, and this intelligence, become more and more important.'[157] Their aminated activities had made a stirring impact: 'The correspondence of the monied and the mercantile world, the literary intercourse of academies, but, above all, the press, of which they had in a manner entire possession, made a kind of electric communication everywhere.'[158]

The growth of the monied interest in France was closely connected

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155. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works,* v, 258-9.
156. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works,* ii, 382-4.
157. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works,* iii, 354.
158. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works,* v, 259.

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

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

The superiority of the monied interest in riches and of the landed interest in social status therefore caused jealousy and conflict between them. On the one hand, the old landed interest hated the monied men, not being able to bear that their 'unendowed pedigrees and naked titles' were eclipsed by the splendour of 'an ostentatious luxury', while, on the other hand, the pride of the monied men swelled with their wealth, ready to take revenge on the 'outrages of this rival pride, and to exalt their wealth to what they considered as its natural rank and estimation'. From this angle, the French Revolution, Burke asserted, turned out to be a real warfare between the ancient landed class and the new monied interest.[159]

The monied interest had carried the day and the Revolution had been directed clearly in their favour. This could be told, Burke noted, from the mere fact that the financial contracts which the monied men

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

had made with the old government had been the only acts which the new regime had observed:

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

Similarly, the decision to confiscate the property of the church also reflected their special interest. In Burke's opinion, if anyone should be responsible for the debt of the old government, it must be those who had managed the agreement; so he asked: 'Why therefore are not the estates of all the comptrollers-general confiscated? Why not those of the long succession of ministers, financiers, and bankers who have been enriched whilst the nation was impoverished by their dealings and their counsels?' Instead, it was the innocent church which became the scape-goat. The tendency of the Revolution was hence unmistakable.[160]

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

Next, Burke discovered that the monied men were chiefly townsfolk,

160. *Ibid.*, 379, 385.

161. *Ibid.*, 462, 382.

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not interested in the innocent and unprofitable delights of a pastoral life. Their gathering together in cities had given them great geographical advantages for establishing associations. 'In towns combination is natural. The habits of burghers, their occupations, their diversion, their business, their idleness, continually bring them into mutual contact. Their virtues and their vices are sociable; they are always in garrison.' This aspect of city life enabled the monied men to develop a kind of *esprit de corps*. In contrast, among the country gentlemen, anything in the nature of incorporation was almost impracticable. The nature of country life and of landed property, Burke wrote, was not suitable for combination. 'Combine them by all the art you can, and all the industry, they are always dissolving into individuality.' Without the capacity of acting in concert, the country gentlemen would unavoidably be overwhelmed by the united force of the monied men. In cities, as he claimed, everything which conspired against the country gentlemen would combine in favour of the 'money manager and director'. And the Revolution was destined to favour the demands of the insolent burghers rather than the desires of the laborious husbandman.[162] Here again, the Revolution in France turned out to be a conflict between the interests of the cities and the conerns of the countryside. It aimed, Burke insisted, to reduce the permanent landed interest to a mere peasantry for the sustenance of the towns, and to 'place the true effective government in cites'.[163]

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

> A paper circulation, not founded on any real money deposited or engaged for, amounting already to four-and-forty millions of English money, and this currency by force substituted in the place

162. *Ibid.*, 462, 464-5, 494.

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

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> of the coin of the kingdom, becoming thereby the substance of its revenue, as well as the medium of all its commercial and civil intercourse, must put the whole of what power, authority, and influence is left, in any form whatsoever it may assume, into the hands of the managers and conductors of this circulation.

The management of money could always bring forth enormous power; and its influence in revolutionary France was even more extensive, for there the operation of money, Burke noted, was entangled with the sale of confiscated property. The money dealers were keen to speculate as 'the market of paper, or of money, or of land, shall present an advantage'. They were therefore able to buy or sell portions of confiscated land at opportune moments, thus carrying on a continual process of 'transmutation of paper into land, and land into paper'. By such operations, the spirit of speculation would steal from money into the mass of land, thus rendering volatilised the function of money itself. It would then assume an unnatural and monstrous activity, thereby throwing into the hands of its managers all the representative of money and perhaps a 'full tenth part of all the land in France'. But, Burke warned:'Those, whose operations can take from, or add ten per cent. to, the possessions of every man in France, must be the masters of every man in France.' Thus, the Revolution would most certainly settle all the powers obtained in the towns among the burghers and the monied directors who led them. At length, France would be governed completely by an 'ignoble oligarchy' formed of 'the directors of assignats, and trustees for the sale of church lands, attornies, agents, money-jobbers, speculators, and adventurers'.[164]

Another group of revolutionary force in France was the men of letters who had grown up along with the monied interest and who had,

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

with them, formed a close union.[165] This radical intelligentsia is referred to in Burke's writings variously as 'men of letters', 'political men of letters', 'philosophers', 'literary cabals', or 'sophisters'. The literary men were active internal agitators whose principal task was to provide 'spirit and principles' for the Revolution.[166] 'I hear on all hands,' Burke claimed, 'that a cabal, calling itself philosophic, receives the glory of many of the late proceedings; and that their opinions and systems are the true actuating spirit of the whole of them.'[167] The men of letters had in the past usually been regarded as a peaceable and even timid part of society;[168] and their rise in France as the leaders of the Revolution was a surprise: 'How many,' Burke asked, 'could have thought, that the most complete and formidable revloution in a great empire should be made by men of letters, not as subordinate instruments and trumpeters of sedition, but as the chief contrivers and managers, and in a short time as the open administrators and sovereign rulers?'[169]

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

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

Aggrieved at the loss of their social prestige, these men of letters, typical of the middle classes, had strived for a recovery by combining them-

165. *Ibid.*, 382.

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

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

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

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

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selves into an incorporation which was to produce great effect. 'Writers, especially when they act in a body, and with one direction,' Burke contended, 'have great influence on the public mind.'[170] He was persuaded that once the literary men came to fraternize and act in a corps, 'a more dreadful calamity cannot arise out of hell to scourge mankind'.[171]

The men of letters had exerted their influence chiefly through their control of the press, particularly the newspapers. The impact the newspapers could make was tremendous, because information could thereby be circulated much more efficaciously and extensively: 'They are a part of the reading of all, they are the whole of the reading of the far greater number.'[172] In reality, Burke pointed out, the press had virtually made every government in its spirit 'almost democratic'. Without the agitation of the press, the first movements in this Revolution perhaps could not have been given.[173] He compared the writers of the newspapers to a battery, in which 'the stroke of any one ball produces no great effect, but the amount of continual repetition is decisive'.[174] Indeed, with their pens and tongues, these writers had by every exaggeration rendered hateful all the faults of courts, of nobility, and of priesthood.[175]

The principal object of the radical men of letters was to harass religion: 'They worked themsevles up to a perfect phrenzy against religion and all its professors,' wrote Burke. 'They tore the reputation of the clergy to pieces by their infuriated declamations and invectives, before they lacerated their bodies by their massacres.' In opposition to religion, a system of 'fanatical atheism' was spread.[176] In Burke's eyes, these literary

170. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works,* ii, 382, 384.
171. 'A Letter to a Noble Lord', *Burke's Works,* v, 141.
172. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works,* iii, 356.
173. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works,* v, 259.
174. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works,* iii, 356.
175. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works,* ii, 384.
176. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works,* v, 245-6.

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men were all warm, hot-heated and zealous atheists.[177] Their minds were intoxicated with a violent zeal, and their thoughts and actions were pervaded by a spirit of 'cabal, intrigue, and proselytism'. These atheistical fathers, he contended, had their own bigotry, inclining 'to talk against monks with the spirit of a monk'; and it was a spirit of proselytism in the most fanatical degree.[178] Here, what was extraordinary was that atheism, which professed against religion, should have nursed up the 'most violently operative principles of fanaticism', discovered so far only in the propagators of religious opinions.[179] Of this, Burke gave an illuminating explanation, based on considerable knowledge of social psychology. It would be, he wrote, only a rather superficial understanding of the human mind to regard religious opinions as the only cause of enthusiastic zeal and sectarian propagation. In fact,

> there is no doctrine whatever, on which men can warm, that is not capable of the very same effect. The social nature of man impels him to propagate his principles, as much as physical impulses urge him to propagate his kind. The passions give zeal and vehemence. The understanding bestows design and system. The whole man moves under the discipline of his opinions.[180]

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

In the last analysis, Burke stressed that the men of letters, fond of

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177. 'Thoughts on French Affairs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 377.
178. 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 382-3.
179. 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies', *Burke's Works*, iii, 457; 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', *Burke's Works*, ii, 382.
180. 'Letters on a Regicide Peace', *Burke's Works*, v, 245.
181. 'An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs', *Burke's Works*, iii, 98.

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distinguishing themselves, were rarely averse to innovation.[182] These people were undoubtedly the 'first gifts of Providence to the world', but they chiefly depended for their fame and fortune on their knowledge and talent. To him, they were all metaphysicians of callous hearts. Like geometricians or chemists, they would treat men in their political experiments as they did 'mice in an air pump', without the least regard to the feelings and habitudes of a moral man. Thus, Burke concluded: 'These philosophers are fanatics; independent of any interest, which if it operated alone would make them much more tractable, they are carried with such a headlong rage towards every desperate trial, that they would sacrifice the whole human race to the slightest of their experiments.'[183]

Apart from the monied interest and the men of letters, Burke also paid attention to a further corps of dissidents: this was a group of discontented politicians, whose role in the French Revolution, he claimed, was to give it a 'character and determination'. These politicians shared with the radical literary men all the objects of ambition and irreligion, and all the means of promoting these ends. Indeed, while the literary men provided theories for the Revolution, it was these politicans who actually gave it a practical direction.[184] These gentlemen, Burke thus ridiculed them, took up naively those speculative paradoxes which eloquent writers brought forth purely as 'a sport of fancy' to try their talents and to excite surprise: 'These paradoxes become with them serious grounds of action, upon which they proceed in regulating the most important concerns of the state.'[185]

According to Burke, these discontented politicans existed extensively throughout the official ranks of the government and particularly in the

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

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

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

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

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

It was this natioal failure which frustrated these patriotic politicians and which utterly alienated them from the government. They were hence always at odds with the government, and for this reason they were continually 'going from their function to the Bastile, and from the Bastile to employment, and favour again'. In this way, the number of frustrated politicians increased considerably and the whole, Burke noted, 'formed a body of active, adventuring, ambitious, discontented people, despising the regular ministry, despising the courts at which they were

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

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employed, despising the court which employed them'. From their disappointment at France's performance in international politics, they soon started to criticise their government and they were even driven to question the suitability of a monarchy for their imperial dream:

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

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

> the vicissitudes produced by the succession of princes of a different character, and even the vicissitudes produced in the same man, by the different views and inclinations belonging to youth, manhood, and age, disturbed and distracted the policy of a country made by nature for extensive empire ...

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

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

> cure for the radical weakness of the French monarchy, to which all the means which wit could devise, or nature and fortune could

187. *Ibid.*, 248-50.

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> bestow towards universal empire, was not of force to give life, or vigour, or consistency.

'Out the word came; and it never went back.' Republicanism in their hands was turned into an active principle ready to operate when opportunities should offer. It was this republican imperialism, Burke believed, which not long before had prompted this diplomatic corps to contrive the revival in Holland of an old republican party and to make a revolution there. Even the late intervention of France in the American Revolution had also proceeded from the working of their republican zeal. Unfortunately, this American alliance produced ominous consequences: 'This new relation undoubtedly did much,' Burke contended,

> The discourses and cabals that it produced, the intercourse that it established, and, above all, the example, which made it seem practicable to establish a republic in a great extent of country, finished the work, and gave to that part of the revolutionary faction a degree of strength, which required other energies than the late king possessed, to resist, of even to restrain.

Through their efforts, republicanism spread everywhere; and it had even quietly stolen into the heart of the court: 'The palace of Versailles, by its lauguage, seemed a forum of democracy.' A revolutionary climate was thus created gradually. This had been the contribution which the discontented politicians had given to the Revolution. In that great turmoil, Burke lamented, they had succeeded not only in destroying their monarchy, but in 'all the objects of ambition that they proposed from that destruction'.[188]

The interpretation which Burke had given of the origins, the dynamics, and the nature of the French Revolution, it becomes now clear, has

188. *Ibid.*, 251-3.

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been much more complicated, and much profounder still, than historians have been so far prepared to acknowledge. Generally speaking, Burke properly placed his interpretation in an historical context of social change which had occurred long before 1789, as a result of economic progress within French society. This change, according to him, had its influence on the development of the French Revolution in two prominent aspects. There is, on the one hand, a profound cultural dimension. The growing affluence of French society prior to the Revolution had gradually led to the relaxation of its moral vigilance and had thus supplied an appropriate environment for the French to reanimate their intellectual life. Owing to this intellectual revival, a cultural revolution took place silently, challenging and then undermining the system of ancient values which used to shield the old order. In Burke's view, it was this moral shake-up that was ultimately to account for the seemingly sudden collapse of the ancien regime in France. Meanwhile, the social and economic advance had also given rise to a new social force, the middle classes. This new social class became discontented because their wealth had not received the proper social recognition they thought it deserved. They were for this reason driven determinedly to attack the anachronistic aristocratic ascendancy under the ancien regime. From this angle, the French Revolution was deemed as a typical middle-class revolution. There is, above all, a broad historical significance in Burke's view of the French Revolution. It is clear that in his interpretation particular emphasis was laid on the moral and intellectual dynamics of the Revolution. Here, it seems unmistakable that Burke was inclined utterly to link the happening of the French Revolution to the ideological ferment of the Enlightenment. In other words, to him, the breakdown of the old order in France could be seen as the natural and inevitable result of that great eighteenth-century intellectual movement.

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