BURKE'S REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

F. P. Lock

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Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

Each volume in this series is devoted to a single major text. It is intended for serious students and teachers of literature, and for knowledgeable non-academic readers. It aims to provide a scholarly introduction and a stimulus to critical thought and discussion.

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C.J.R.
University of Warwick,
December 1979

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A NOTE ON REFERENCES

Quotations from, and references to, Burke's writings, speeches and letters are identified by the following abbreviated citations:

Corr. *Correspondence*, ed. Thomas W. Copeland and others, 10 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958–78).

Reflections *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Conor Cruise O'Brien (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968). This is the most widely available edition; its text is based on the 'Seventh Edition' (1790), the last revised by Burke. In Chapters 3 and 4, where there are numerous quotations from the *Reflections* and few from Burke's other works, page references not specifically identified refer to the *Reflections*.

W&S *Writings and Speeches*, ed. Paul Langford and others (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981–). To be completed in 12 volumes. The following have appeared so far: Vol. 2, *Party, Parliament, and the American Crisis, 1766–74*, ed. Paul Langford (1981); and Vol. 5, *India: Madras and Bengal, 1774–85*, ed. P. J. Marshall (1981).

Works *Works*, Bohn's British Classics, 8 vols (London, 1854–89). I have used this, the most readily accessible of the older editions, for works (other than the *Reflections*) which have not yet appeared in the Clarendon *Writings and Speeches*.

CHAPTER 1

Burke's World

Burke was not primarily a writer or a thinker, but a party politician. It was to party politics that he devoted his main talents and energies. He entered politics in 1765 as private secretary to the second Marquis of Rockingham, whom he would serve faithfully until Rockingham's death in 1782. To the end of his own life, Burke remained loyal to what he believed to be the political ideas and ideals that Rockingham had represented. In 1790 he published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* at least in part in order to recall the party to what he regarded as its true nature and direction. The book has been described as 'his apologia for his devotion to Rockingham'.[1] Yet the *Reflections* is much more than a party manifesto. For, besides being a politician, Burke was also an intellectual and a brilliant rhetorician. Strongly identifying his party with the general cause of political virtue and integrity, in defending its ideals he also took upon himself the defence of the aristocratic *ancien régime* of Europe, the old (and in Burke's view the 'natural') order of things which was threatened by the French Revolution. The *Reflections* remains as a memorial to that vanished order. Such was Burke's rhetorical genius that the book has survived the social structures it was written to defend. Such was his ability to generalize that it continues to be read as a classic of conservative political thought.

The 'world' which Burke sought to defend in the *Reflections* was more than the actual society in which he lived and its particular social and political structures. It was a system of beliefs (his 'ideology' or 'world picture') through which he apprehended and understood not only his own society but also the whole course of human civilization. A comprehensive picture of this 'world' would involve fuller accounts of Burke's own life, of eighteenth-century politics and society, and of the political ideas of the time than can be attempted here. The sketch which follows attempts only to illustrate some of the elements of Burke's thought most important for an understanding of the *Reflections*:

'property', which he regarded as the foundation of politics, society and civilization; 'the nature of things', through which he identified his own particular values with the order of the universe; and 'history', the accumulated wisdom of which added the force of prescription to the power of nature in his defence of property and its political preponderance.

I

A recurrent theme in Burke's writings from the *Tract on the Popery Laws* (written in 1761, though not published in Burke's lifetime) to the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (1796–7) is the social and political importance of property.[2] Burke might have defined man as a property-owning animal. 'The property of France does not govern it,' he wrote in the *Reflections*. 'Of course property is destroyed, and rational liberty has no existence' (pp. 141–2). The implied premiss is the foundation of Burke's political thought in general, and of his critique of the French Revolution in particular: that the 'property' (by which Burke means mainly landed property) of a nation ought to govern it. Only government by property could provide a secure basis for 'rational liberty' or constitutional government. Burke could count on most of his audience accepting these truths as axiomatic, for they were the basis of contemporary politics. The political world of later eighteenth-century England was conservative, oligarchic and dominated by the power of property, especially the power of the holders of hereditary, landed property. Burke did not regard this political system as perfect. He was prepared to accept that it might need occasional minor adjustments, but he opposed any proposals that involved making fundamental changes. Burke did not himself inherit substantial landed property (and therefore the political power and influence that went with it), and did not have a direct personal interest in the preservation of the system. One of the strengths of the old order in England was its ability to absorb into its ranks 'new' men of talent, men like Burke himself. In the *Reflections*, Burke regrets that the greater social exclusiveness of France deprived it of this necessary means of strengthening the ruling class (pp. 210–11).

Burke made his career in a social and political milieu composed largely of men of substantial independent property: in the House of Commons, which he entered in 1765 and of which he remained a Member until his retirement in 1794.[3] In 1765–6 he acted as private

secretary to the Marquis of Rockingham, then First Lord of the Treasury; and for two brief periods (from March to July 1782, and from April to December 1783) he held the non-Cabinet position of Paymaster-General of the Forces. For the rest of the time – that is, for most of his career – Burke was out of office, usually in opposition to the administration of the day. The primacy of the Commons in this period should not be exaggerated. The king was still the chief executive of the government. His wishes about personnel and policies had always to be taken into account and were often decisive. Most Cabinet ministers were still peers, and the House of Lords retained significant political influence. The Commons was usually in session for less than half the year; the business of government went on all the time. It was, nevertheless, a golden age for the House of Commons, and particularly for the rank-and-file MP, for the government had in practice to secure the approval of the Commons for its policies without having at its disposal the means of buying or coercing that support. The majority of ordinary MPs came from the landed gentry.[4] They were not deeply divided on ideological or religious issues, as they had been between 1680 and 1720. They were not disciplined by strong parties, as their modern counterparts are. They were accountable to 'public opinion' only in a very restricted sense. They prized their political independence. They were able to maintain this autonomy, either because they virtually owned their seats or because (as was particularly the case with Members who sat for the English and Welsh counties) they represented the class of country gentlemen on whose approval or acquiescence, in the last resort, the survival of every administration depended. It was therefore a golden age for parliamentary oratory. Votes were to be won, opinions to be influenced and a select audience impressed by speeches in Parliament. Although the attempt to prevent the publication of parliamentary proceedings collapsed in the early 1770s, and thereafter debates were more fully and more widely reported, in Burke's time the primary audience was still the Members in the chamber itself. Burke was one of the great speakers of his day, and he owed his position in politics primarily to this talent.

Burke, like his great predecessors in political oratory Demosthenes and Cicero, was a 'new man'. As such, he was unusual, though not exceptional, in eighteenth-century politics. Whereas the great majority of rank-and-file MPs came from the landed gentry, the 'new men' (often successful lawyers) were disproportionately represented among

the major politicians and 'men of business'.[5] The political ladder could always be climbed by men of ability. Burke never tried to conceal the fact that he was a 'new man', although he was sensitive on the subject and he disliked information about his family and origins becoming public (*Corr.*, 2:129–31). He thought that 'new men' had a particular kind of obligation to society, and it was one that he himself tried conscientiously to discharge. On 2 April 1770, Burke made a notable speech in the House of Commons, defending himself from an oblique attack by Sir William Bagot (a country Tory). In this speech he gloried in being a '*Novus Homo*', and valued himself 'only on his Industry, not his Abilities' (a typically Burkian ploy). He defended the social utility of 'rising merit stamp'd with Virtue' which would 'indeed seek to rise, but under the wings of establish'd Greatness'. Such merit should be encouraged, because if 'precluded the just and constitutional roads to Ambition, they will seek others' (reported by William Burke to William Dennis, letter of 3 and 6 April 1770: *Corr.*, 2:128). Here Burke's argument is that 'new men' (like himself) should be encouraged to join the establishment, to prevent their being tempted to subvert it. More than twenty years later, at a time when he thought his party (which had always been self-consciously an 'aristocratic' party, in the best sense of the word) was deserting its principles, he wrote an interesting letter to his fellow-Member for Malton, William Weddell, in which he outlined how he thought a 'new man' ought to behave in politics. Although he is speaking specifically of those who joined the Rockingham party, his remarks clearly reflect what he thought the best course of action for all such men to adopt. He distinguishes several kinds of 'new men'. Some have themselves made large fortunes. Others are younger sons of good families. A third group are like Burke himself, a man '*wholly* new in the Country', who 'aimed to illustrate himself and his family by the services he might have the fortune to render to the publick'. These 'new men', of whatever kind, should support 'aristocratick principles, and the aristocratick Interests connected with them' (31 January 1792: *Corr.*, 7:53).

Where Burke was exceptional was in his self-consciousness on the subject of his origins. This was, perhaps, because he never acquired the landed wealth that would have made him feel at home in a world of landed gentry. He acquired an estate, but it was always heavily mortgaged, and by 1795 his debts amounted to £30,000 (*Corr.*, 8:292). It was only in his last years, after the award of a pension in 1794, that

he enjoyed financial security. He could not easily forget that he was an outsider. Sometimes he was fiercely defiant about it, proud of the extent to which he owed his position to his abilities: the best example of this is in the *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796: *Works*, 5:110–51). Francis Russell, fifth Duke of Bedford, had succeeded to his dukedom in 1771 at the early age of 5. In the 1790s he was one of the most prominent of the Whig radicals who had followed Fox rather than Burke when the party split on the issue of the French Revolution. His vast family fortunes had been founded on large grants from the Crown in the reign of Henry VIII. Yet in November 1795 he had spoken in the House of Lords against the modest pension of £3,000 a year awarded to Burke at the close of a laborious political career. In a withering attack on the Duke as a parasite living off the 'derivative' merits of his ancestors, yet presuming to criticize a pension given for 'original and personal' services to the state (*Works*, 5:130), Burke seems to call into question the justice of hereditary honours with political influence. This was far from Burke's actual purpose in the pamphlet. The Duke's real sin, in Burke's view, was not his inherited wealth, derived as it was from the dubious merit of his ancestor's toadying to Henry VIII, but his radical politics. Burke has no objection to vast and undeserved inheritances, provided that the inheritors behave with a proper sense of responsibility towards the defence of the system that has given them their wealth. Such Burke believed the aristocratic members of his own party to be. He was not blind to their faults and limitations. They often appeared strangely indifferent to their own best interests. They were difficult to rouse into action. Yet their well-being was vital to the interests of society at large.

Burke expresses his aristocratic ideal in a letter written in November 1772 to the Duke of Richmond, a descendant of one of Charles II's natural sons. Richmond would later espouse radical politics, but at this time he was a respectable member of Rockingham's party. In this letter Burke contrasts men of 'great families and hereditary Trusts', who (if they do their duty) are 'the great Oaks that shade a Country', with people like himself, who 'creep on the Ground' and 'belly into melons that are exquisite for size and flavour' yet are 'but annual plants that will perish with our Season and leave no sort of Traces behind us' (*Corr.*, 2:377). Burke was writing to Richmond to remind him of his political responsibilities as a great lord, a burden which the Duke was inclined to neglect. Tactfully, Burke finds an excuse for the indolence of the aristocratic heads of his

party and explains his own eagerness: as a 'new man' he has only a season to prove himself before he disappears into oblivion. Although the letter to Richmond and the *Letter to a Noble Lord* appear to present opposing attitudes to the status of the 'new man' and the principle of inheritance, behind their different rhetorical stances both letters really support the same aristocratic principle. The 'new man' should know his own place and duties, and the man of inherited position should know and respect his. A duke's dabbling in radical politics is as unnatural and absurd as an upstart's boasting of his forebears. As so often with Burke's writings, it can be misleading to isolate particular statements from their specific historical and rhetorical contexts.

Burke had an unusually clear and specific sense of his audience. Though an effective if not a prolific pamphleteer, he was primarily a speaker in the House of Commons; until the publication of the *Reflections* in 1790, this was his most important forum. There he was used to speaking directly to his audience, not through the disembodied *persona* of a pamphleteer. Burke's major set speeches were published, of course, and they were intended to reach a much wider public. However, his ordinary contributions to debate (which were frequent) were addressed primarily to the Members present, not to the public which might read more or less garbled accounts of them in the press. His characteristic rhetorical stance was determined by his sense of this audience. As a speaker in the Commons, he would inevitably have been conscious of his lack of independent weight. In 1792, even one of Pitt's Cabinet ministers could lament that the government needed to have 'some acres added to our abilities'.[6] Independence, based on 'acres' or substantial landed property, was a quality much prized in the Commons. Burke never enjoyed it. He entered Parliament as Member for Wendover, a constituency of about 150 electors (the inhabitant householders) controlled by Lord Verney.[7] In 1774, Burke was elected as Member for Bristol, which (with about five thousand voters) was the third largest urban constituency in the country. Although this was a personal triumph for Burke, the circumstances of his election were peculiar and (as he soon came to realize) would not be repeated at the next election. For six years, however, Burke did sit as a Member for a genuinely 'open' or popular constituency. In the event, this proved in many ways an embarrassment; Burke had not one but many political masters. He disliked the burden of purely local constituency business but, more important, he

disliked the pressure to take a narrowly local view of national political issues. In popular constituencies Members were too much at the mercy of their electors. In 1780 he withdrew from the contest in Bristol when it became clear that he had no chance of being elected. He was returned instead for Lord Rockingham's (later Lord Fitzwilliam's) pocket borough, Malton in Yorkshire, for which he sat until his retirement from Parliament in 1794. For most of his career, then, if what Burke said in Parliament carried weight, it was not because of his own standing but because he was known to speak on behalf of Lord Rockingham. Burke was not, of course, simply a hired servant; but he did receive financial assistance from Rockingham. It was therefore seemly for him to adopt a deferential rhetoric, sometimes as a defence mechanism, designed to anticipate aspersions on his integrity. But it was more than this, for it also suited Burke's social position as an outsider and as a modest defender of the old order, and also his typical rhetorical stance of intellectual humility. The superiority of ancient wisdom is a recurrent theme in the *Reflections*. Burke restates it at the very end of the book (pp. 375–6). He returned to it in his next published work, the *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), where he contrasts the wisdom that comes from reading 'authors of sound antiquity' with the pernicious influence of Rousseau, 'the great professor and founder of *the philosophy of vanity*' (*Works*, 2:541, 536).

Burke's major talents, and therefore his usefulness to his party and his political patrons, were rhetorical rather than administrative. His first positions were as private secretary to William Gerard Hamilton, MP and minor office-holder, for whom Burke worked from about 1758 or 1759 to 1765, and subsequently to Lord Rockingham. These posts involved research assistance as well as more purely administrative tasks. Burke's extensive reading, and the years which he devoted mainly to writing (about 1756 to 1765) made him a formidably well-informed man when he entered seriously into politics in 1765. He had written, or attempted to write, books on subjects as diverse as aesthetics, history, law and religion. He had contributed articles on contemporary history, as well as a wide range of book reviews, to the *Annual Register*.[8] While his entry into public life must have reduced the time he had available for general reading, he would always be exceptionally well briefed on the questions of the day and on the background issues that they raised. When he entered Parliament his talents as a debater and (especially) as an orator were more fully

revealed; and he also proved an able pamphleteer. His subordinate position in his party meant that he was rarely consulted in the formulation of policy; his primary role was to defend it. His entry into politics from the world of literature and ideas gave him an unusual (and, again, an outsider's) perspective on politics. Burke's speeches excelled in combining the general and the particular: in appealing both to principle and to expediency, in illustrating the general statement with detailed information. His rhetoric was always practical, for in eighteenth-century politics rhetoric had an immediate utility. In the House of Commons there was a large body of independent opinion to be won. These independents would tend to support any reasonably competent government. For most of his career, Burke spoke for the opposition. This had some obvious disadvantages. It meant that he expected to lose, and consolation would come from the size of the minority vote that had been mustered. In the long run, as Burke's correspondence shows, this was disheartening. It also meant that he was rarely able to choose his own ground. But there were compensating advantages. The government, being responsible for the execution of policy, would make most of the mistakes. The opposition could often take a lofty stand, confident that it would not be called upon to translate its policies into actions.

Speaking in Parliament was important, yet only a small minority of Members possessed the talents and temperament necessary to make any figure there. About half the Members never spoke at all. The number of regular contributors to debate was about forty. In debates on major issues there were usually between twenty and thirty speeches. Between 1766 and 1784, Burke is recorded as having made over six hundred speeches.[9] Almost as soon as he entered Parliament, he became a major speaker. Burke's great speeches are certainly self-consciously rhetorical in a grand manner. The effect that Burke typically aimed at, however, was neither the sense of effortless mastery of the younger Pitt, nor the impassioned emotional appeal of Charles Fox. Burke's rhetoric was deferential. He claimed attention either as the spokesman of more important friends and interests or because his researches had given him information which might help to enlighten the House. The *persona* he adopted was that of a well-informed man of principle. High-sounding generalizations supported by a wealth of detailed illustration are characteristic of Burke's great speeches. His rhetorical strategy in the *Reflections* follows the same pattern.

At this period the parliamentary opposition comprised a number of

distinct parties and groups, as well as many independent Members. Burke was a member of one of the most closely knit of these groups, the party led by the Marquis of Rockingham. His attachment to this particular group was certainly a more important factor in determining the course of his political career than the simple fact of his being for most of the time in opposition. Burke's joining Rockingham's party was initially a matter of chance. After his break with Hamilton in 1765 he had sought a position as a colonial agent (*Corr.*, 1:177), as well as the patronage of other politicians, such as the brilliant but erratic Charles Townshend (*Corr.*, 1:204). Burke was not personally known to Rockingham when his name was proposed to the Marquis, who (as incoming First Lord of the Treasury) was in need of a private secretary. But, whatever the initial element of chance, there is no doubt that Burke was soon at home (politically if not socially) in the Rockingham party. Rockingham and his followers were essentially a group of amateurs, mostly large landowners, who came together more as opponents of the system of court 'favouritism' associated with the Earl of Bute than as proponents of any very positive policies of their own.[10] From the start, they were convinced that men were as important as measures. Although Rockingham's first ministry lasted just a year, Burke's association with it and with Rockingham proved the decisive turning-point in his career. It gave him his cause: the politics of virtue and property. Burke had proved himself a useful 'man of business' and an accomplished speaker, and after the Rockingham ministry had been dismissed he was offered (in November 1766) a position in the new administration headed by the elder Pitt, now Earl of Chatham (*Corr.*, 1:279). He declined, partly as a result of loyalty and gratitude to Rockingham himself, but also from a more general sympathy with the ideals of the Rockingham group. In practice, this meant that Burke condemned himself to a career largely in opposition, for Rockingham was determined not to accept office again except under stringent (and therefore improbable) conditions. Rockingham, indeed, and his party were more interested in demonstrating their own political purity and integrity than in returning to office. In the event, it took the defeat of Lord North's government in the American war to bring them back to power in 1782. Burke, as he admitted at a meeting of the Literary Club, saw himself as a natural 'minority' man. 'I believe in any body of men in England I should have been in the Minority; I have always been in the Minority.'[11] The Rockingham party was a spiritual home for such a mind.

As a result of his experience with the Rockingham party, and of his long years in opposition, Burke developed an almost paranoid distrust of the political power and the more sinister 'influence' of the Crown. During the earlier part of his career, opposition to royal policies led him to support some apparently 'liberal' causes, such as a conciliatory policy towards America and 'economical reform' (a series of proposals aimed at reducing the influence of the Crown through such means as the retrenchment of obsolete sinecures). Burke also tended to explain his party's failures as the result of the hostility of the king and the so-called 'king's friends'. His distrust of the Crown was reinforced by the party's experience on its return to power, briefly in 1782 and for a longer period in 1783. In neither term of office did it enjoy the confidence of George III, and on both occasions the king was responsible for its ejection from office. Burke thought that George III acted unconstitutionally in preferring Shelburne to Portland as First Lord of the Treasury in July 1782, on Rockingham's death; and, again, in dismissing the Fox–North coalition in December 1783. Thus far the chief villain was George III, as he had been for Burke since the 1760s; but worse was to come when the younger Pitt, after coming to power through the malign exercise of royal influence, and after remaining in office without the confidence of the House of Commons, actually won the general election of 1784. Burke was bitterly disappointed at this popular endorsement of the actions of George III and Pitt. He described the House of Commons as 'something worse than extinguished'; after his party had been 'labouring for near twenty years to make it independent' (of the Crown, that is), they found that 'the people did not like our work; and they joined the Court to pull it down' (to William Baker, 22 June 1784; *Corr.*, 5:154). Burke had to develop a new myth, to explain the popular support for Pitt and the king and the popular rejection of the coalition and its policies. Burke had been a good deal disillusioned with 'popular' politics since his unpleasant experience in Bristol before the 1780 election. The 1784 election reinforced his distrust of the political judgement of the people, leaving him more than ever convinced that the safety of the constitution could only be entrusted to a group of high-minded aristocrats determined to oppose the baleful alliance of the king and 'people'.

After the death of Rockingham in 1782, Burke's importance in the party declined. By 1790 he had drifted almost entirely away from it. The *Reflections* and his later works on the French Revolution thus

from the New to the Old Whigs (1791), he reiterated his praise of Montesquieu as 'a genius not born in every country, or every time' (*Works*, 3:113). A fundamental idea that links Burke with Montesquieu against Rousseau and the French revolutionaries is expressed in the phrase 'the nature of things'. 'Je n'ai point tiré mes principes de mes préjugés,' claimed Montesquieu, 'mais de la nature des choses'; the laws that were the object of his great study were themselves 'les rapports nécessaires qui derivent de la nature des choses'.[16] For Burke, too, 'the nature of things' was an unalterable framework into which political and, indeed, all human decisions had to be fitted. Thus Burke believed that 'the residence of the supreme power' of the Empire was settled in England 'not by force, or tyranny, or even by mere long usage, but by the very nature of things, and the joint consent of the whole body' (*Corr.*, 2:475: to Sir Charles Bingham, 30 October 1773; the context is the proposal to tax Irish absentees). But this supremacy must be modified in practice; the same 'reason and nature of things, and the growth of the Colonies ought to have taught Parliament to have set bounds to the exercise of its own power. I never ask what Government may do in *Theory*, except *Theory* be the *Object*; When one talks of *Practice* they must act according to circumstances' (*Corr.*, 3:181–2: to Charles O'Hara, 26 July 1775, describing this as the 'Key' to his *Speech on Conciliation*).

Burke followed Montesquieu in regarding society as an aggregation of separate interests which could, however, be made to work harmoniously together. Each society had its own *esprit général* which provided a framework for its politics. For Rousseau, on the other hand (as later for Thomas Paine), sectional interests were obstacles to be suppressed in favour of the *volonté générale*, which was something independent of, rather than collected from, individual wills and desires; so that in seeking the moral regeneration of society the politician need not be respectful of existing vested interests.[17] To Burke, Rousseau's idea was unnatural. He thought that family feelings and local prejudices were rooted in 'the nature of things', and that the wise statesman or legislator should take them into account and build on them. Rousseau turned things upside down by destroying the best foundations for the building of society. In his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), which contains a bitter attack on Rousseau and his followers, Burke exposed particularly the paradox of 'benevolence to the whole species, and want of feeling for every individual with whom the professors come in contact' (*Works*, 2:537).

Burke characterized Rousseau as a 'lover of his kind, but a hater of his kindred', and his doctrines as 'inapplicable to real life and manners' (*Works*, 3:538, 540). Only fools or madmen would want to put them into practice.

Although he believed that policies and politics must be subordinated to what in the circumstances was practicable, Burke was no strict determinist. 'The nature of things' left sufficient scope for human action. Reform itself was permissible, although it would be foolish to expect too much from it; social and economic conditions could be improved, if only slightly and gradually. In England, at least, personal social mobility was relatively easy. An individual could accumulate wealth, and thereby eventually acquire an enhanced social standing for his family, or (like Burke himself) could make his way by his own talents. Societies, too, developed. America had grown up, and could no longer be treated like a fractious child: 'Your children do not grow faster from infancy to manhood, than they spread from families to communities, and from villages to nations' (*Speech on Conciliation*: *Works*, 1:456). The metaphor from human development illustrates Burke's belief that whatever improvements were possible would happen naturally. They could not be artificially induced. He thought that government could 'prevent much evil', but could 'do very little positive good' (*Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*: *Works*, 5:83). In his *Speech on Conciliation*, Burke attributed the prosperity of the colonies not to 'the constraints of watchful and suspicious government' but to 'a wise and salutary neglect' which had allowed 'generous nature' to 'take her own way to perfection' (*Works*, 1:462). Yet, for all his belief in the possibility – indeed, the inevitability – of progress, Burke thought it likely to be slower and smaller than the radical reformers and revolutionaries imagined. God had determined 'the nature of things', and any attempt to evade this necessity would lead to disaster and failure. It was much wiser to recognise the order of nature and to work within it than to attempt to defy or circumvent it.

The appeal to 'the nature of things' had the advantage for Burke of creating a strong presumption in favour of the present social and political order, when (as was usually the case) that was what he was defending. Though for most of his political career Burke was in opposition, in the sense that he was opposed to the government of the day, he was always a strong supporter of the existing European order, its religion, its social hierarchy and its inequalities. Burke often used 'the nature of things' as a convenient means of summarily disposing of