FROM REPUBLICANISM TO LIBERALISM: CORRUPTION AND EMPIRE IN ENLIGHTENMENT POLITICAL THOUGHT.

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Abstract:

Debates about the relationship between empire and corruption were prominent in eighteenth century British political thought. Some of these debates were framed within classical Republican or Civic Humanist discourses, of which Charles-Louis Montesquieu and Adam Ferguson were emblematic exemplars. Within the terms of this discourse, corruption represented a collective moral failure, and was closely connected to a supposed cycle of imperial greatness and decline. Yet, similar fears of empire motivated the articulation of more modern, proto-liberal notions of corruption as forms of activity that blurred the boundaries between private interests and public responsibilities. In his analysis of the economic distortions and trading monopolies caused by empire (especially the East India Company), Adam Smith articulated and pioneered this proto-liberal concept of corruption. Between Smith's proto-liberal and Montesquieu/Ferguson's Republican concepts of corruption, however, stood the work of Edmund Burke. Motivated in part by concerns about empire, Burke shared Smith's strong opposition to the EIC, an organisation he considered to be corrupt and corrupting. Emerging from his work, then, was an understanding of corruption that shared the Republican emphasis on moral decay, but also anticipated a proto-liberal concern with keeping distinct the boundaries between public (political) and private (economic) activity. In the work of these four thinkers corruption thus emerges as a central concept in the transition from Republican to Liberal political thought in the late eighteenth century.

1. Introduction:

The meaning of the term 'corruption' is one of the most contested in the history of Western political thought (Philip 1997, 436-62). Scholars typically distinguish between 'classical 'and 'modern' senses. Originally used to indicate the dangers to the polity of any behaviours that weakened political virtue (of both rulers and subjects), in the late eighteenth century a more consistently narrow interpretation emerged, whereby corruption came to be associated with specific activities that threatened to subvert the integrity of public office (most notably bribery, graft, and electoral fraud).

It is largely within British public and political discourse that understandings of corruption became narrowed partly due to Britain's early achievement of comparatively high levels of democratic, bureaucratic and economic development in which struggles over 'corruption' played a key role. In particular, 'corruption' became a crucial concept in public, political and scholarly debates demarcating the boundaries of appropriate government vis-à-vis commerce and the market. And as we show here, corruption also featured heavily in debates over the appropriate mechanisms of imperial government and the regulation of commercial enterprise (notably the East India Company with its powerful, state-protected monopoly of British/Asian commerce).

Corruption, we are usually told, is a term that has always denoted some kind of financial irregularity, typically committed by public officials, usually for private gain. We suggest, however, that corruption has a far more varied conceptual history. We argue that tracking eighteenth century conceptions of corruption reveals a significant discursive shift effected, in part at least, by Adam Smith (1723-1790) and Edmund Burke (1729-1797) who were friends and mutual admirers 'of many years'

standing.¹ In breaking away from an earlier Republican discourse of corruption that we associate with the work of Montesquieu (1689-1755) and Adam Ferguson (1723-1816), the work of Smith and Burke suggests that corruption played a key role in the eighteenth century transition from what has variously been termed the neo-Roman, Civic Humanist, or Republican tradition of Western political thought to more modern, liberal thought.

2. Republican Echoes: Montesquieu and Ferguson

Among political thinkers of the eighteenth century, few expressed the Republican fears of corruption and empire more clearly than Montesquieu. In Book 8 of the *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu argued that all polities, whether democratic, aristocratic, monarchic or despotic, are prone to corruption. Corruption consisted in the decay of its original 'principles', the mores and values animating the regime and its people, and underpinning its laws (Montesquieu [1748] 1989, 112-19). Above all, Montesquieu identified conquests, military victories, and extent of territory as the chief sources of corruption.² In a democracy, Montesquieu argued, conquests gave rise to overweening pride among the people and to a desire to assume the powers of magistrates. In aristocracies, conquest led to greed and privilege among the ruling families, while in a monarchy, it led to the tyranny of the ruler and the slavery of the people. Only in a despotic government, described as 'corrupt by its nature' was corruption the normal state of affairs.

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See: Ross, I.S. 1995. *Life of Adam Smith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 252, 355-8; Bisset, Robert. 1800. *Life of Burke*. London: George Cawthorn, p. 429; William, C.D. 1941. 'Adam Smith and Edmund Burke: Complementary Contemporaries.' *Southern Economic Journal* 7(3): 341.

All following material taken from Montesquieu, Spirit, pp. 112-19.

Thus political greatness, and especially extent of territory, were the chief causes of corruption. Of all types of regime, Montesquieu saw republics as most virtuous because of their 'small territory', and if they remained small 'the public good is better felt, better known, lies nearer to each citizen; abuses are less extensive... [and] less protected' (Montesquieu 1989, 124). Montesquieu's conclusion was that:

If the natural property of small states is to be governed as republics, that of medium-sized ones, to be subject to a monarch, and that of large empires to be dominated by a despot, it follows that, in order to preserve the principles of the established government, the state must be maintained at the size it already has and that it will change its spirit to the degree to which its boundaries are narrowed or extended (Monstequieu 1989, 126).

Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) was a disciple of Montesquieu and in his close study of the variables leading up to the decline of nations he agreed with his idol that over-extension was a major cause. The growth of small-scale communities into impersonal and unwieldy empires inevitably led to bureaucratisation, over-centralisation, social disorientation and, worst of all, despotic or military rule (Ferguson [1767] 1996, 257; Forbes 1967, 43). Drawing inspiration from the 'Republican' or civic humanist tradition, Ferguson (1996, 257; 262) argued that militaristic imperialism in particular is the fastest and most destructive route to a nation's decline. Following Thucydides, he suggested that it is *hubris* that drives imperialism and since *hubris* results from overconfidence gained through past successes, it is successful, prosperous and technologically advanced nations like Britain that are most likely to propel themselves towards decay (de Romily 1979, 322-4).

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Ferguson also cites Thucydides as an authority on the subject of foreign conquests. See Ferguson, A. [1767] 1996. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, ed. Fania Oz-Salzberger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 142.

The worst effect of imperialistically induced over-extension is loss of political vigour and integrity and therefore civic virtue; as nations become larger and increase their territories, people become more and more alienated, both physically and psychologically, from the affairs of government. In addition, government itself becomes more centralised, bureaucratised, and therefore less 'democratic' (Ferguson 1996, 214-15). This is bad because history has repeatedly shown us that 'human nature' as well as civic virtue, excel in moderately sized states whereas in 'in states overgrown' they 'generally degenerat[e]' (Ferguson [1769] 1978, 243-4). Because people inhabiting a 'large and extensive territory' are 'disunited and lose sight of their community' they soon become politically apathetic and inactive. The business of governing falls to a few who 'withhold from the many every subject of public zeal or political occupation'. Eventually the people begin to suffer 'themselves to be governed at discretion' while the numbers who 'are consulted in legislation, or in other matters of government' become fewer and fewer (Ferguson 1978, 243). Ferguson (1996, 256-7) concurs with Montesquieu's (1989, 126) view that despotism (military government) is unavoidable in large empires because the unwieldy scale of empires necessitates centralised government, while promptness of resolutions and ruthless expediency are necessary in order to compensate for the problems of distance.

Ferguson also endorses Thucydides' argument that 'conquest' is ultimately 'no advantage to those who make it, any more than to those over whom it is made.' Wealth secured by conquest represents a 'symptom of misery rather than of happiness' since it is invariably 'productive of prodigality, licentiousness and brutal sensuality.' Rome is the signal example, the 'centre to which the wealth of nations

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was collected, and at which it was consumed in gross sensuality, or in cruel and idle ostentation of power' (Ferguson 1792, 500-1). The costs of imperialism are thus the loss of civic virtue and activism, social intimacy, 'national' cohesion, representativeness and moderation in government and the eventual collapse of empire.

3. Adam Smith: Liberal Corruption

Adam Smith also thought that British imperialism was intimately connected with the problem of corruption and, like Ferguson and Montesquieu, he disapproved of imperialism. But his reasons were very different ones. He agreed with Ferguson that it originated with and was perpetuated by *hubris* and that it was a sure path to national (i.e. British) ruin, but not because of its effect on virtue so much as its disastrous consequences for both the domestic and global economies, its impracticality and its implications for British sovereignty, good governance and the all-important distinction between government and economy. Smith's conception of imperialistically-induced corruption represents a sharp conceptual break with the classical or civic humanist tradition. In fact, it signposts the birth of the more modern conception that we are familiar with today.

Smith attacked what were the two great systems of monopoly governing the 'global connections of the mid-eighteenth century', namely, the colonial system 'by which each empire attempted to exclude the merchants of all other nations from its own colonies' and 'the system of exclusive companies' which was the primary mechanism of monopoly. Via the activities and special dispensations extended to the East India Company (EIC) Britain was able to exclude all other merchants from lucrative markets (Rothschild 2004, 4). Since he took a particular interest in Indian

affairs, Smith expended quite a lot of critical energy upon the activities of the EIC as a particularly destructive example of mercantile imperialism.

Smith agrees with Montesquieu and Ferguson that colonialism brought problems of centralisation and remoteness. The vast distances that separated colonies from the 'mother country' made their proper government difficult, if not impossible. The problems of distance and centralisation were exacerbated by the number, diversity and 'dispersed situation' of the various colonies and this made it very difficult to manage them in any uniform manner even if 'the sovereign had the same means of doing it', which, in Britain's case, it did not. Furthermore, 'the unavoidable ignorance of administration' about local mores and customs inevitably led to the commission of innumerable 'offences' and 'blunders' against subject states, thereby rendering 'such a system of management altogether impracticable with regard to them'. As for the colonies themselves, they could not possibly be expected to judge competently – much less care for – the interests of a 'whole empire' and their particular role in serving them (Smith [1776] 1979, IV.vii.c, 69-70, 619).

Aside from these practical considerations, Smith's most trenchant criticism of imperialism was closely bound up in his critique of mercantilism and its rapaciously monopolistic practices. The British monopoly of colonial trade, in both of its intimately connected forms (i.e. colonialism and exclusive companies), evinced many maladaptive evils. It caused a 'malallocation of resources'; discouraged investment; induced 'profligacy and prodigality among the favoured merchants' and provoked wars and therefore unconscionable levels of public debt (Kittrell 1965, 190). The cost

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⁴ 'His interest in Indian affairs as well as his professional ability, no doubt, led his friend William Pulteney, now an MP, to suggest his name to the East India Company Directors as someone whose advice would be useful in connection with reform'. (Ross, *Life of Smith*, p. 228).

Even though he describes British colonial policy as '[t] he best of them all' he adds that it 'is only somewhat less illiberal and oppressive than that of any of the rest.' (Smith 1979, IV. vii.b. 63, 590).

of maintaining the colonies could not be justified. It wasn't just the day-to-day administration of these colonies that bothered Smith. In fact, '[t]his constant expence in time of peace, though very great, is insignificant in comparison with what the defence of the colonies has cost us in time of war' (Smith 1979, V.iii.92, 946). This, in turn, led to an increasingly large public debt and, with it, rising taxes and an exacerbation of the system of patronage, ⁶ all of which contributed to the corruption of the British state (Hellmuth 1997, 19-21). Further, the monopoly of trade of the 'mother country' that went hand in hand with British imperialism, acted as a 'clog' that 'cramp[ed]' and depressed the 'the enjoyments and industry of all...nations' (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c.9, 592). Whereas under the system of natural liberty 'the private interests and passions of individuals naturally dispose them to turn their stock towards the employments which...are most advantageous' and 'agreeable to the interest of the whole society', mercantilism, whose 'sole engine' is monopoly, 'necessarily derange[s]...this natural and most advantageous distribution of stock' (Smith 1979, vii.c.89, 630). In order to ensure productivity, progress and plenty for all, there should be no limitations on the extent of the market because this limits the natural growth of the division of labour (labour being the source of all wealth and value). But, since empire and mercantilism went hand in hand, the mutually-enabling benefits of freetrade could not be unleashed.

The problem with mercantilism, as Smith saw it, was its perception and treatment of international trade as a competitive, zero sum game, 'in which one nation's gain is another's loss'. On this view 'the acquisition of colonies whose trade

Much of the national debt was offset by public credit that was seen to increase the crown's patronage powers (Pocock, J.G.A. 1972. 'Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (1):119-20. For further discussion of the problems of patronage in the seventeenth century see: Peck, L.L. 1979. *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart* England. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

the mother country can monopolize' is conceived as an 'economic bonanza' rather than an unjust imposition and a distortion of natural market forces (Minowitz 1993, 104). Mercantilism successfully indoctrinated 'nations' with that most destructive doctrine: 'that their interest consisted in beggaring all their neighbours' (Smith 1979, IV.iii.c.9, 493). Unlike the system of 'natural liberty', monopoly retards other countries' progress and yet, according to Smith, the irony is that it does not even enhance that of the 'mother country'. The colonies therefore yielded few benefits and great costs. 'Under the present system of management', Smith wrote, 'Great Britain derives nothing but loss from the dominion which she assumes over her colonies' (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c. 65, 616).

The colonial system is egregious because it is a violation of the natural laws of motion governing interactions between economic agents. Smith refers to the 'natural rights' of individuals to denote the liberty each person has to act in a way that is consistent with her self-regarding inclinations. People have a 'natural right' to 'free commerce' and to enjoy their 'liberty free from infringement (Smith 1978a, 12-13, 8; Smith 1978b, 11, 401; Smith 1978a, i. 24, 13). In a system of 'just liberty' agents should not be hindered in the use of '[t]he property which every man has in his own labour' and which is the 'most sacred and inviolable' of all forms of property (Smith 1979, I. x. c. 12, 138; IV. v. b. 43, 540). Since humans are psychologically disposed to specialise their economic effort, it is their 'natural' right to exchange any resulting vendibles with the products of the specialised effort of others. It follows, then, that, provided 'there is no injury to [ones] neighbours' there can be no legitimate interference with exchange either by private persons or public bodies (Smith 1979, I. x. c. 12, 138). Smith thus deplored regulations such as poor laws, corporation privileges, statutes of apprenticeship and restrictions on international trade.

Mercantilism enabled merchants to better their condition in a manner that did not contribute to the nation's economic welfare. As a result of the dispensation of monopoly grants and the arbitrary bestowal of 'extraordinary privileges' and 'restraints' upon different sectors of industry by government, the individual was able to enrich him/herself without at the same time enriching the nation. Smith (1979, IV. iii. c. 9, 493) insisted that private interests could be just as noxious to the system of natural liberty as an overbearing state and cautioned against 'the spirit of monopoly', berating the 'mean rapacity' and 'monopolising spirit of merchants and manufacturers'.

The impositions of monopoly are corruptions of natural social laws and violations of the personal rights of individuals. They are not only extremely 'hurt[ful to the natural state of commerce' but are usually obtained via corrupt (i.e. non-free market) means, namely through patronage, electoral and related forms of bribery (Smith 1978b, 306-7, 529). Specifically, 'stockholders of the competing Old and New East India companies' bid 'for the votes of small and corrupt boroughs in order to secure the controlling interest in Parliament' thereby enabling them to eliminate any rivals for the lucrative East Indies trade (Curtis 1979, 244).

The East India Company with its powerful, state-protected monopoly of British/Asian commerce was naturally a prime target for Smith who repeatedly inveighed against its exclusive position and the inordinate amount of power it wielded. Apart from the fact that the 'work' of 'monopolists' was 'seldom' any good what bothered Smith (1987, 174) even more was that the EIC's privileged position led to a situation whereby consumers not only 'paid' for the company's 'extraordinary profits' by their unjust exclusion from markets; they also paid for 'all the extraordinary waste which the fraud and abuse, inseparable from the management of

the affairs of so great a company, must necessarily have occasioned' (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c.91, 631).

Perhaps the most serious consequence of this dynamic was its effect on food security. Smith (1979, IV.v.b.6, 527) lamented that the company was powerful enough to impose such 'improper regulations' and 'injudicious restraints' as to induce a 'famine'. Smith's preoccupation with food security has not always been well appreciated as the primary inspiration for his dislike of monopoly and concomitant advocacy of free trade. It should be borne in mind that the major economic sector of his time was still agriculture and food was the major expenditure item for the vast bulk of the population. Yet this most vital sector was unavoidably subject to fluctuations in both output and price, therefore during the eighteenth century 'the achievement of a low and stable price for grain' was perhaps the most urgent political problem facing European governments. Smith thought that the best way to encourage domestic production while ensuring ready access to 'an international market in foodstuffs' – especially corn – was via free trade. He insisted that '[t]he unlimited. unrestrained freedom of the corn trade, as it is the only effectual preventative of the miseries of a famine, so it is the best palliative of the inconveniencies of a dearth' (Smith 1979, IV.v.b.6, 527; IV, v.b.39, 538-9). But the greed of merchants and corrupt unwisdom of sovereigns blocked the path to this solution, thereby occasioning misery and death for many. Companies like the EIC, Smith concluded, 'are nuisances in every respect; always more or less inconvenient to the countries in which they are

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⁷ 'Freedom of trade in grains moderated domestic prices and maximised production since producers with access to extensive markets would be confident of sales at reasonable prices' See Tribe, Keith. 'Natural Liberty and lassiez-faire: How Adam Smith became a free trade ideologue.' In *Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, eds Stephen Copley and Kathryn Sutherland. Manchester, Manchester University Press: 23-44; 25-6).

established, and destructive to those which have the misfortune to fall under their government' (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c. 107-8, 641).

Yet, Smith was by no means parochial; nor did he mourn (with Ferguson and Montesquieu) the passing of the intimate and virtuous community of other-regarding souls. He was all for internationalisation celebrating the 'discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope' as the 'two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind.' To Smith's mind, these discoveries should have been happy global events with their promise of 'uniting...the most distant parts of the world' and 'enabling them to relieve one another's wants, to increase one another's enjoyments, and to encourage one another's industry.' However, due to imperialism – and especially mercantilism – 'the natives', particularly of 'the East and West Indies' have received no 'commercial benefits' but 626-7).8 IV.vii.c. only 'dreadful misfortunes' (Smith 1979. 'commerce...ought naturally to be, among nations...a bond of union and friendship', under the pernicious influence of mercantilism it 'has become the most fertile source of discord and animosity' due to the fact that trading monopolies promoted national hostilities and even war (Smith 1979, IV.iii.c.9, 493; IV.ii.38, 467; V. ii.g.2, 852). And far from enriching 'the mother country' all imperialism had managed to achieve was to 'rais[e]' the destructive and corrupt 'mercantile system to a degree of splendour and glory which it could never otherwise have attained to' (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c.81, 627).

Smith anticipated that, in the long run, international free commerce would have an equalizing effect on the power asymmetries that had permitted militaristic

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⁸ Smith also mentions, with less regularity, the effects of colonialism on Canada (eg, Smith 1979, IV.vii.b.13, 571) and Senegal (Smith 1979, V.ii.k24, 881) but never on the original habitants of Australia.

imperialism to occur in the first place thereby giving rise to a system of global deterrence. Presumably, once the 'natives' of subject colonies had grown 'stronger' or 'those of Europe...weaker', the world's population would 'arrive at that equality of courage and force which, by inspiring mutual fear' could effectively 'overawe the injustice of independent nations into some sort of respect for the rights of one another'. The best means for achieving this balance was through free trade and its accompanying 'mutual communication of knowledge' and technology (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c.80, 626-7).

But when Smith wrote, that dream was far from a reality. Britain held on tenaciously to its colonies out of a combination of irrational *hubris* and pressure from those able to leverage such *hubris* for their own ends; these were the merchants, the only sector to benefit from the retention of the colonies (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c, 616-17). As Smith (1979, IV.vii.63, 613) noted sarcastically:

To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers, may at first sight appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers. It is, however, a project altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers; but extremely fit for a nation whose government is influenced by shopkeepers.

Another objection to the East India Company lay in its peculiar legal status and irregular manner of operation whereby the line between the public and private realms was perpetually blurred and insulted. Smith had no problem with commercial imperialism *per se* but he objected to it when it was carried out as a *de facto* form of political imperialism.

Lord Clive of Bengal noted in a Parliamentary debate of 1772 that '[b]y progressive steps the Company have become sovereigns of that empire'. The situation had become untenable because the EIC 'traded not only as merchants, but as

sovereigns' as well (Cited in Rothschild 2004, 5). After the Seven Years War, the EIC had become so important that it was 'considered to exercise an almost despotic power over the government itself'. Indeed, by the 1760s, the company was 'constructing forts...collecting taxes...paying the salaries of solders and civil servants and judges', coining money and organising municipal elections in Calcutta (Rothschild 2004, 5). John Burgoyne told the English Parliament in 1772 that the East India Company had become a 'chaos where every element and principle of government, and charters, and firmauns, and the rights of conquests, and the rights of subjects, and the different functions and interests of merchants, and statesmen, and lawyers, and kings, are huddled together into one promiscuous tumult and confusion' (cited in Rothschild 2004, 8).

Smith (1979, V.ii.a.7, 819) agreed that the EIC's servants now acted as both sovereigns and traders, two roles that couldn't be less compatible. As 'sovereigns' of their 'Indian dominions' it was in their interest to make imports as 'cheap as possible' and Indian exports 'as dear as possible' but in their role as 'merchants' their interest was 'directly opposite' (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c.103, 638). This intolerable tension made the EIC 'bad sovereigns' and 'equally bad traders.' As exclusive traders they had 'managed their trade successfully' and with 'moderate' profits but upon assuming their dual roles, the managers of the EIC had 'been obliged to beg the extraordinary assistance of government in order to avoid immediate bankruptcy' (Smith 1979,

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⁹ Debate of March 30, 1772, *Parliamentary History*, Vol 17, cols 355, 358, cited in Rothschild, 'Global Commerce', 5

^{&#}x27;In Turkey and some other Oriental countries, a decree or mandate issued by the sovereign; a royal order or grant; -- generally given for special objects, as to a traveller to insure him protection and assistance (http://dict.die.net/firmaun/).

Debate of April 13, 1772, *The Parliamentary History of England*. 1813. London: TC. Hansard Vol. 17, cols, 456-7, cited in Rothschild, 'Global Commerce', 8. Along similar lines, Edmund Burke declared that 'the spirit of an extensive and intricate trading interest pervades the whole, always qualifying and often controlling, every general idea of constitution and government' (Burke, E. [1769] 1981. *Observations on a Late State of the Nation*. In *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. P. Langford. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 176, 194.

V.ii.a.7, p. 819). An administration 'composed of a council of merchants' was 'incurably faulty'. Though Smith is polite enough to reassure his reader that, as a profession, merchants are 'no doubt extremely respectable', he insists that they are far from suitable as sovereigns, not only because of the obvious conflict of interest but also because merchants nowhere command 'that sort of authority which naturally over-awes the people, and without force commands their willing obedience.' Accordingly, mercantile rule is invariably and 'necessarily military and despotical'. (Smith 1979, V.ii.a.7, 819; See also Smith 1979, IV.vii.c, 641). Here again is a faint echo of the republican dread of military rule, the natural correlate of empire.

The EIC was not only inefficient, retarding, incompetent, unprofitable, corrupt, corrupting and despotic; it also impugned the sovereignty of the English state and in doing so, threatened to seriously damage the British economy (See, for example, Smith 1979, IV.vii.c.100, 634-5). The problem was not one of individual-level corruption to be solved by rooting out a few bad apples: It was systemic. Smith makes clear that by his protracted diatribe against the company he meant not 'to throw any odious imputation upon the general character of the servants of the East India company, and much less upon that of any particular persons.' Rather it 'is the system of government, the situation in which they are placed, that I mean to censure'. The individuals concerned merely 'acted as their situation naturally directed' as anyone in the same situation would have done (Smith 1979, IV.vii.c.c, 641). The situation arose due to arrangements that were officially sanctioned and regulated by law. Accordingly, the corrupt behaviour of the EIC could only be corrected at a systemic level. Edmund Burke understood this all too well and he drafted an India Bill 'which sought to establish a measure of parliamentary control over the Company'. The Bill

For a fuller discussion of this point, see Hill, L. 2006. 'Adam Smith and the Theme of Corruption.' *Review of Politics* 68 (4): 636-662.

passed through the Lower House, but Smith's prediction that it would pass just as easily through the Upper House was 'woefully' inaccurate (Ross 1995, 251).

Smith, for his part, strongly advocated, in the short term, tight parliamentary control over the EIC and in the long term, not only the dismantling of mercantilism but the complete emancipation of the colonies in order to deliver Great Britain 'from the great...expence' of 'maintaining her authority in the colonies...defending them in time of war' and the crippling burden 'of the naval establishment necessary for defending her monopoly of their trade' (Smith 1987, 382).

Smith's treatment of corruption bears faint traces of the classical perspective but in general it reveals his determination to think in modern (i.e. proto-liberal) terms about the problem. Whereas for Ferguson, civic virtue is the first cost of empire, for Smith the costs are either economic or relate to a concern for the achievement of two typically liberal goals: peace and good governance. On this view, corruption is seen to consist in deviations from a natural (broadly liberal) state. Moral corruption does not arise from selfishness or an inattention to the public sphere (as per classical accounts) but is a product of antiquated, restrictive, oppressive, inefficient, paternalistic, dependency-generating and unaccountable economic and political arrangements in which the vital distinction between the public and private realms of government and economy is badly compromised, the operations of the market are subverted, wasteful costs are incurred and prosperity is undermined.

Burke largely agreed with this analysis, but in his own work corruption was held to threaten more than the operations of the market. In Burke we can see both a proto-liberal notion of corruption as a blurring of the distinction between public responsibilities and private interests, but we can also detect echoes of an older Republican insistence that corruption indicated a moral failing of both individual

officials and the system of government. Unlike Republicans, however, that moral failing was held to have profound implications for the development of modern civilisation.

4. Edmund Burke: Empire and Corruption in India

Although generally known as a conservative thinker and politician, Edmund Burke was also an early convert to the social and political theories of the Scottish Enlightenment, and a strident critic (if not an outright opponent) of the British Empire in Ireland and America, and especially in India. In his parliamentary campaigns and extensive writings on India in particular, Burke reprises that most familiar theme in Western political thought – the danger that empire leads to corruption – but articulates alongside it more modern concerns about the process of civilisation, and its potential distortion by acts of corruption.

Burke's interest in India originated in the assistance he gave in the late 1770's to his brother, the London agent for the Nawab of the Carnatic. This interest really grew however, from his involvement in the parliamentary campaign to reform British East India Company (EIC) rule in India in the 1780's, and flourished during his extraordinary campaign to impeach Warren Hastings, the former East India Company Governor of Bengal, terminating in Hastings' acquittal in 1794 (Marshall 1997, 39-47; See also: Cannon 1957, 165-86). Throughout, Burke sought to use Britain's place as the pre-eminent European imperial power, and as a civilised, commercial society as a lever to mobilise popular opinion in favour of imperial reform. In doing so, he argued that the EIC was an agent of corruption that needed to be controlled in order

for Britain's Empire to become a truly benevolent and civilising force (Frohnen and Reid 1997, 28-29).

In his earliest writings on India, Burke relied in a fairly typical view of Indian barbarism in contrast to more 'civilised' British 'arts and discipline'. Such a contrast, Burke argued, meant that British imperial rule must 'meliorate the condition of the subject and the dependant' populace without succumbing to 'Asiatic avarice' (Burke [1779] 1981a, 113-14; See also: Raynal 1782, 215-23)). By the time he became involved in the campaign to regulate the affairs of the British East India Company, however, Burke adopted a more complex view of the danger of corruption raised by imperial rule. Like Smith, Burke argued for tighter parliamentary regulation of the EIC, which he came to see as an organization whose chief interest in maximising profits led them into extensive governmental power in India carried on in direct conflict with the British Constitution. The quest to bring the EIC under more effective parliamentary control was described by Burke in Ciceronian terms as being for the greater 'glory' of the 'whole British nation' (Burke 1981b, 381).

In this sense, Burke's concerns about corruption echoed the older republican notion voiced by Ferguson and Montesquieu, that corruption indicated a gross moral failure, a loss of virtue. Ferguson argued that this failure was made more likely by conquest of empire and extent of territory which weakened the commitment to virtue sustained by regular face-to-face interaction in the public sphere. For Burke, empire did indeed raise the spectre of this kind of problem, but he was no 'Enlightenment anti-imperialist' (Muthu 2003). For Burke, the problem of empire and corruption was rendered in terms not simply of eliminating private, individual moral failures, but of

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¹³ A similar view of 'Asiatic' corruption was developed by G.T.F. Raynal, in his monumental *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. See Raynal, G.T.F. 1782. *A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies*. Edinburgh: 215-223

reforming the very structures of public, imperial government. The template for Burke's campaign was Cicero's (106-43BC) prosecution of Verres, the former Governor of Sicily, in 68BC (Stockton 1971, 45-8). Cicero's charge against Verres was that he had allowed his private vices to determine his actions as Governor, but the charge was not simply one of undue personal interest in a public office, but of a lack of appropriate virtue in a Roman citizen appointed to high office' (Cicero 1959, 193 [26§67]; See also: [I.24§63-§70]). The point was that such conduct left the Sicilians unprotected 'by their own laws...by the decrees of the Roman Senate...[and] by the rights that belong to all nations alike' (Cicero 1959, 79 [I.24§63-§70]). For Burke (1981c, 380) also, imperial rule was conceptualised as a 'great superintending trust' that the British Parliament ought to conduct according to the law of nations and by holding its functionaries and representatives (especially the EIC) to strict account. Burke could be boldly critical of European assumptions about their own superiority. He insisted, for example, that the 'Laws and Institutions' of India had greater antiquity to those of Britain having reached their maturity 'prior to our insect origins' (Burke 1981c, 304). At other moments, Burke subverted the conventional distinction derived from Montesquieu between 'barbarism' and 'civilisation'. Comparing the history of Arabic, Mongol and Persian conquests, Burke noted that they were all much bloodier and crueller than the EIC's relatively bloodless conquest. But while the ferocity of 'Asiatic conquerors... soon abated', the EIC introduced a more systematic plunder and spoilation than India had ever seen (Burke 1981b, 401).¹⁴ By elevating profits over all other considerations, the EIC not only exploited India, but engaged in all kinds of subversions – substituting rulers with those regarded as more pliable,

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¹⁴ Adam Ferguson also wrote of the relative civilisation of India and China. See Ferguson, A. [1767] 1996. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*.

bank-rolling greedy local rulers and then using debt as a means of control, or conquering whole nations who dared to oppose the EIC's interests. In many cases, these actions were taken by ignorant young men sent out from England motivated by nothing more than a desire to make a quick fortune, who were the social inferiors of the nobles and rulers they used as pawns (Burke 1981c, 412). Burke's concerns here mirrored Smith's very closely. Like Smith, Burke saw the protection of private property as a foundation for social life and a key task of government (Burke 1793, 40, 79-84). By extorting monies from local rulers, or engaging in theft of Indian property, or manipulating loans and debt as instruments of government, the EIC abrogated one of the most profound responsibilities of government, to respect private property, and the laws that secured them.

Lying behind these concerns was a fear that what the EIC represented in India was a distortion or perversion of the process of civilisation. Burke was an avid supporter of Smith's political economy, and agreed with him that the emergence of commercial economies with pacified, law governed civil societies in Britain and Western Europe indicated a progressive historical trajectory, a process of civilisation (Pocock 1987, xxxii-xxxiii). Significantly, however, Burke saw the same process at work in India, though he believed its inhabitants had not developed as far as those of Europe. A key phase in the process of civilisation was the transformation of the rude virtues of savage life (based on simplicity, hardiness and a warrior ethos) into the more flexible and rational manners of civilised societies. Manners consisted in the widely accepted standards of conduct and self-regulation that made civil life possible by circumscribing violence and entrenching social virtues such as courtesy, probity, and industry. In contrast to Ferguson's concerns about the loss of virtue in commercial society, Smith argued that the development of commercial economies

brought people into greater contact and mutual dependence. The transition towards large-scale commercial society did not jeopardize civic virtue or the social fabric but rather displaced a stressful, conflict-riven, meagre, and insecure world with one rich in possibilities for civility, mutual enablement and human flourishing.

Crucially, however, the benefits of civilisation were to be secured by the prior development of sovereign states able to foster and protect commerce and thereby provide the space within which civilisation could emerge (Buchan 2006, 175-92). The key to this development, as both Smith and Burke insisted, was the gradual emergence of a separation of private financial interests (consigned to the economic sphere) and public duties and responsibilities of government. Thus, despite his 'Republican' concern to buttress virtue against corruption, Burke's own understanding of corruption displayed an equally modern, proto-liberal sensibility that corruption consisted in behaviours that elided the boundaries between private interests and public office.¹⁵

This sensibility is reflected in the character of the original 20 'Articles of Charge' against Hastings drawn up by Burke largely to sway public opinion in favour of the impeachment. As such, they included sweeping rhetorical denunciations of Hastings' purported extortions of native rulers, his theft of Indian property, his tyrannous rule, and misuse of public monies entrusted to his care (Burke 1981d, 135-253). Under the influence of Parliamentary lawyers and his fellow managers of the Impeachment, this list was eventually narrowed down to four charges, and of these Burke's attention was devoted to the original 'Sixth Article', that Hastings had accepted large bribes. The focus on bribery is a characteristic of emergent proto-

This view informed his critique of government corruption in Britain. See: Burke E. 1996. 'Speech on Economical Reform, 11 February 1780.' In *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. P. Langford. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford.

liberal norms of public administration, but Burke's concerns about corruption could not be divorced from the threats it posed to the wider system of imperial government and to the British Constitution. Hastings' corruption represented for Burke a degenerate system of government based on the denigration of Indian subjects, Hastings' arrogation of supreme powers well beyond those delegated to him by the Board of Governors, and the systematic use of those powers to extract illegal private revenues under the guise of public office. In this way, Burke's campaign of impeachment straddled an older language of corruption as a moral danger to the entire system of government, and an emergent proto-liberal language in which corruption represented misdemeanours (notably bribery) in public office, and the abrogation of appropriate rules of conduct for public officials.

This proto-liberal notion of corruption emerges also from Burke's insistent attack on the EIC's pursuit of private interests under the guise of political power (Whelan 1996, 64-122). Here Burke endorsed Smith's view that through its involvement in India, the EIC threatened to distort the operations of the market but in such a way that it threatened the process of civilisation, not only in Britain but in India also. The EIC, Burke argued, was a product of the 'improved state of Europe' with its highly developed 'arts... laws... [and] military discipline' and these qualities, as well as the decline of Asia, had allowed it to conquer and to assume the powers of sovereignty for the purpose of trade. The danger, Burke (1981c, 283) argued was that,

...in all other Countries, a political body that acts as a Commonwealth is first settled, and trade follows as a necessary consequence of the protection obtained by political power. But there [in India] the affair was reversed. The constitution of the Company began in commerce and ended in Empire... [becoming] that thing which was supposed by the Roman Law so unsuitable, the same power was a Trader, the same power was a Lord.

In other words, the EIC confused both the private interest of commerce with the public duty of political authority. It was, Burke asserted, 'a State in disguise of a Merchant, a great public office in disguise of a Countinghouse.'

Burke's campaign thus rested on the primary assumption that for all of India's antiquity and ancient civilisation, Europe, and Britain in particular was more advanced along the scale of civilisation, and therefore they had a greater responsibility to ensure that the benefits of civilisation be extended to those deemed less civilised (Burke 1981c, 281; See also: Burke 1981e, 109). The problem that a more civilised British government confronted in governing India was not only how to civilise the uncivilised, but how to prevent the corruption of British civilisation. This fear lay behind Burke's repeated warnings of the danger that EIC corruption in India, and its unwarranted assumption of despotic powers would destabilise Britain's Empire and corrode the principles of the British Constitution (Burke 1981f, 491; See also: Burke 1981g, 318-19, 322-23; Burke 1981d, 145). The problem that a property of the British Constitution (Burke 1981f, 491; See also: Burke 1981g, 318-19, 322-23; Burke 1981d, 145).

Unlike both Ferguson and Smith, Burke was an avowed (if not uncritical) defender of the British Empire in India and he called for more benevolent British rule, more attuned both to the virtues of the British Constitution and to the needs of India (Burke 1981h, 462; Burke 1981c, 302). This view clearly implied a relationship in which India was seen as a largely passive object for enlightened British benevolence, reinforced by Burke's repeated use of female imagery in describing India. Others have pointed to the link between Burke's use of the image of a lascivious Hastings ravishing the helpless, female India, and to his famously indignant passages in the

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¹⁶ See also: Davidson, J.F. 1959. 'Natural Law and International law in Edmund Burke.' *Review of Politics* 21 (1959): 487.

¹⁷ See also (Whelan 1996, 98-108).

¹⁸ Burke also castigated Hastings' harassment of the Begams of Oudh, elderly princesses from whom the EIC extorted large sums. See, for example, (Burke 1981b, 410-12; Burke 1981d, 215-24)

Reflections on the Revolution in France on the unchivalrous treatment of Marie Antoinette by the Jacobins (Burke 1793, 61).¹⁹ There is more at work here, however, than indignation at the 'sexually aggressive... defiling of feminine rank' (Kramnick 1977, 137). Burke's discussion of chivalry was a product, as Pocock suggests, of his interest in Scottish Enlightenment theories of civilisation in which the gradual replacement of barbarous mores by more polite codes of conduct was a crucial phase in the development of society (Pocock 1987, xxxii; See also: Ferguson [1767] 1995, 201-201). Burke's indictment of the insults offered by EIC functionaries to Indian women, flouting the values of all 'civilized nations' as well as the 'Manners of the East', thus links his critique of the EIC with his condemnation of the Jacobins. Both were responsible for what he saw as the demise of politeness, and thereby a perversion of the very process of civilisation that was supposed to lead toward the development of commercial societies based on the inculcation of sociable manners (Burke 1981d, 144; Whelan 1996, 168-69). Here, then, Burke's attack on the EIC, embodied in the person of Warren Hastings, linked his concerns about corruption to a broader concern about the process of civilisation, in both Britain and India.

5. Conclusion

Montesquieu, Ferguson, Smith and Burke were all actively engaged in reflecting on the problem of empire and corruption. What emerges from their work is a variety of attitudes to Britain's Empire, and of the implications of the imperial project for corruption. Together they offer us a window into the concept's transition from a classical to a modern category of political analysis.

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¹⁹ Furber sees this as another example of Burke's 'strong and unstable' emotional involvement with India. H. Furber, 'Burke and India', *Bengal: Past and Present*, 76, 1957: 18.

Harking back to an older Republican discourse, Ferguson portrayed empire as a source of inescapable moral corruption. Though Smith was also uneasy about empire, his own concept of corruption was much more modern. Divorced from its older Republican connotations of moral decay and loss of public virtue, Smith's concept of corruption anticipated later liberal emphases on economic distortion caused by blurring the boundaries between public political, and private economic interests. Hovering between these two approaches, Burke's view was that corruption was not so much a curse of empire as a burden on imperial responsibility.

Though closely aligned with Smith's proto-liberal concerns that corruption consisted in behaviour that blurred the distinction between public and private, Burke's understanding of corruption was imbued with a wider historical significance. Corruption was not simply a misdemeanour in public office, but a potential solvent of civilisation, and a significant problem of empire. The problem of empire consisted in the "extensive tribes, suffering nations, [and] infinite descriptions of men, different in language, in manners, and in rites..." throughout the empire who had now to be governed by Britain in a civilised and civilising manner (Burke 1981c, 277). For Burke, Hastings' and the EIC's corruption radically undermined that aspiration. Ultimately, the significance of Burke's failed impeachment campaign came to rest on this perception, and gave his analysis of corruption a continuing relevance. Burke's extraordinary anti-corruption campaign, though ultimately unsuccessful, became a turning point in the emergence in the nineteenth century of British self-perceptions of governmental rectitude and imperial benevolence (Marshall 2003, 90-1).

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