

Republicanism Revisited: The Case of James Burgh

ISAAC KRAMNICK

IN 1774 James Burgh, a dissenting schoolmaster in London, published three volumes of what he called *Political Disquisitions*. Caroline Robbins has called Burgh's book, 'The most important political treatise to appear in English in the first half of the reign of George III.' For Bernard Bailyn, Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* was 'the key book of this generation.' Reprinted almost immediately in Philadelphia, *Political Disquisitions* had as its sponsors George Washington, Samuel Chase, John Dickinson, Silas Deane, John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, and James Wilson.¹

Burgh's importance for scholars consists for the most part in this transmittal role. He represents the proof positive of the great influence on the revolutionary mind in America of English republicanism and opposition ideology. No surprise, then, that in 1790, when Jefferson advised Thomas Mann Randolph on the proper reading for a young man going into law, he listed Adam Smith, Montesquieu, Locke's 'little book on government,' *The Federalist*, and Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*, and that in 1774 John Adams 'set himself to make the *Disquisitions* more known and attended to in several parts of America,' since they were 'held in as high estimation by all.' Adams wrote that reading the *Political Disquisitions* was

1. Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), p. 365; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), p. 41; for the sponsors, see Oscar and Mary Handlin, 'James Burgh and American Revolutionary Theory' in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 73 (1963): 51.

ISAAC KRAMNICK is professor of government at Cornell University.

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'the best service that a citizen could render to his country at this great and dangerous crisis.'²

In addition to the consensus on Burgh's transatlantic preeminence, the secondary literature on Burgh is in agreement on two other themes. His writing is depicted as part of a single continuous country or opposition discourse, which at different times might include Whigs or Tories, but which, even in its reformist incarnation in the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s, has the corrupt court and king's ministers as its enemy, just as it did in the era of Walpole. A second assumption of writers on Burgh is that this continuous opposition tradition was always more interested in political than economic questions, or, at most, was defensive of the social *status quo* against the inroads of commercial society. This social and economic defensiveness is accompanied by a reformist political preoccupation with the independence of Parliament and the restoration of the balanced constitution. Both opposition crusades, social nostalgia and political reform, have as their enemy corruption, be it the role of luxury and money in society in general, or the ministerial purchase of parliamentary majorities in particular.

The consensus of contemporary scholarship is clear, then; there is firstly an unbroken continuity in the eighteenth-century opposition. As Forrest McDonald writes: 'without exception,' opposition writers in the entire century were 'writing in fierce opposition to the new financial order.'

Davenant . . . warned of the evils to come. . . . *Cato's Letters* . . . the most quoted book in all the American's pre-revolutionary writings was published in 1721, in the wake of the financial corruption of the South Sea Bubble, and prophesied that doom was at hand. Bolingbroke's works . . . codified the thinking of the opposition. . . . Burgh, in a series of works of which the most influential was his *Political Disquisitions*, penned and published a popularized version of the *Cato* cum Bolingbroke gospel.³

2. Handlin, 'James Burgh,' pp. 38, 52; John Adams, 'Novanglus,' C. F. Adams, ed. *The Works of John Adams*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1850-1856), 4: 21.

3. Forrest McDonald, 'A Founding Father's Library,' *Literature of Liberty*, 1 (Jan. 1978), 13.

Lance Banning, like Forrest McDonald, links Burgh to Cato and Bolingbroke, suggesting that:

Cato, Bolingbroke and Burgh were the most eloquent proponents of an ideology that occupied a central place in eighteenth century British thought, headmasters of a school in which five generations of less able advocates were trained. From the Restoration to the French Revolution, English arguments were bound by a constitutional consensus. Through all those years, all loyal oppositions justified their presence by starting with the charge that men in power were conspiring to subvert the balanced constitution.⁴

Finally, the consensus has it that this continuous opposition was socially and politically wedded to the past. In her *James Burgh, Spokesman for Reform in Hanoverian England*, Carla Hay concludes by describing:

the fundamentally conservative aspiration of English radicals, like Burgh, to restore some mythic yesteryear when virtue flourished and an harmonious equilibrium governed men's social and political relationships. . . . Burgh aspired not to destroy the existing order and create anew. Instead he advocated radical reforms to achieve a conservative goal—the restoration of the ancient constitution.⁵

Let me pose, however, an interesting question. If this is all true, if this scholarly consensus is correct, then why when he re-read Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* thirteen years later in 1787 did John Adams find it so disturbing? Writing in 1789 to Richard Price, Adams explained why he penned his *Defence of the Constitutions* in 1787. He wrote:

It appeared to me that my countrymen were running wild, and into danger, from a too ardent and inconsiderate pursuit of erroneous opinions of government, which had been propagated among them by some of their ill-informed favorites, and by some writings which were very popular among them, such as the pamphlet called *Common Sense*, for one example, among many others; particularly Mrs. Macaulay's *History*, Mr. Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*, Mr. Turgot's *Letters*. These

4. Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion* (Ithaca, 1978), p. 61.

5. Carla H. Hay, *James Burgh, Spokesman for Reform in Hanoverian England* (Washington, D.C., 1979), 104-5.

writings are all excellent in some respects, and very useful, but extremely mistaken in the true conception of a free government.⁶

The reason John Adams changed his mind about Burgh's *Political Disquisitions* is that in his second reading he found a different Burgh than he thought was there in 1774, and in this second reading Adams found a Burgh very different from the republican writer depicted by contemporary republican scholarship. I will argue that, in fact, not only is the conventional reading of Burgh inaccurate but that the republican reading of the larger corpus of opposition ideology itself is also flawed.

My reading of both Burgh and opposition ideology, in general, suggests that the English reformers of the American Revolutionary Era were, in fact, committed partisans of modernity, of liberal individualism, and of market society. The break in opposition history, in this reading, occurs in the 1750s and 1760s with Cato and Viscount Bolingbroke falling on one side of the divide and Richard Price and Joseph Priestley on the other. Burgh is, in fact, the crucial figure for this reading. His writings from the 1740s through 1774 span the all-important transition from the nostalgic opposition to the progressive opposition. In his writings, opposition ideology moved from its republican, country concerns with lost civic virtue, encroaching luxury and commercialism, independent commons, and fear of placemen, stock jobbers, and standing armies to a self-consciously more urban, more middle class, more definitively individualist Protestant orientation. In the context of this shift, Lockean influence will revive and from the 1760s on the opposition more enthusiastically embraces commercial values and commercial society. The nostalgic politics of the Bolingbroke opposition, in other words, would be replaced by the bourgeois radicalism of Price's and Priestley's opposition. The Bolingbroke opposition based on 'country' and 'city' against 'court' was transformed later in the century to an opposition based on 'city' against 'court' and 'country.' It is Burgh, as we shall see, in whom this

6. John Adams to Richard Price, May 20, 1789, *Works of John Adams*, 9: 558-559.

transition from a country to a middle-class opposition can best be seen, as befits a career which straddles the two periods.

To be sure, Burgh will often read like Bolingbroke. He is, after all, a transitional figure still steeped in country and civic humanist perspectives. My reading of Burgh suggests, however, that even when he articulates the very concerns Bolingbroke did, such as fear of paper credit and the national debt or parliamentary corruption via placemen, the grounds of Burgh's argument were often very different from Bolingbroke's. Burgh's principal objection, for example, to the role of the national debt and 'money men' in politics was less informed by country revulsion at new men replacing traditional elites in public life, than by middle class and Protestant arguments about work and talent triumphant over idleness. Burgh may sound like Bolingbroke in his quest for legislation against placemen in Parliament, but his concern will not be that placemen are pushing out leisured country gentlemen but rather that they are useless parasitic drones who exclude the more deserving and talented middle class.

Burgh's achievement would be to develop the city side of Bolingbroke's country-city opposition to the court. He also appropriated Defoe's ideological defense of the new political economy, which he would turn against both the court and Bolingbroke's country gentry. He did this by reviving the radical Protestant lexicon of Richard Baxter and John Bunyan. Opposition ideology would never be quite the same again. Moral transcendence of the self through a *vita activa* in pursuit of the public good would be replaced by the realization of the self in a *vita activa* of work. The self was on its own in a lonely, solitary pilgrimage that was the true test of virtue. An ancient and Renaissance ideology of leisured men expressing their personal virtue through civic participation was being replaced by one which envisioned individuals practicing virtue through actualization of God-given talents in individual hard work and achievement.

Like so many others who would make their mark in the politi-

cal, scientific, and intellectual life of eighteenth-century England, Burgh was not English. He was born in rural Scotland in 1714. His father was a Presbyterian minister and his mother the aunt of the Scottish historian William Robertson. Burgh enrolled at St. Andrew's with the intention of studying for the ministry. An illness prevented him from completing his degree and he entered the linen trade. Failure at that sent him to seek his fortune in England in the early 1740s. A short period as a printer's helper was followed by a job as assistant in the Great Marlow, Buckinghamshire, free grammar school. In 1746 Burgh became assistant master of the dissenting academy in Enfield, north of London. He became master of his own academy in 1747 in Stoke Newington, which in 1750 he moved to Newington Green. There he would remain for the rest of his life, and there he would educate hundreds of middle-class dissenter youth for professional careers in the ministry, business, or public life.

The book that, in fact, earned Burgh his permanent reputation in the dissenting community appeared in 1754. *The Dignity of Human Nature* is a central work for properly understanding both Burgh's own social theory and the transformation occurring in opposition ideology in the latter half of the century. Written after he had become master of his own academy in Newington, the book appears to be utterly at odds with the discourse of civic humanism or country ideology. There is no trace in it of either Gothic nostalgia or the ancient constitution. *The Dignity of Human Nature* is written in a different language, a language of Protestantism wedded to a clearly articulated middle-class consciousness. Burgh offers an elaborate psychological and cultural world view basic to emerging bourgeois radicalism in England. Its sources are less overtly Lockean than generalized Protestant ideals, but its flavor is equally individualistic and non-civic. It is a text not only at ease with market society, but, in fact, offering an unabashed endorsement of modernity. Had Max Weber not found Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac*, he could have used Franklin's friend's *Dignity of Human Nature*, for it is essentially the Protestant ethic

rendered in maxims for the English middle class. Burgh's essay preceded Franklin's by two years, and the similarities are striking.

The book's theme is trumpeted in its subtitle: 'A Brief Account of the Certain and Established Means for Attaining the True End of Our Existence.' That true end is neither citizenship nor civic commitment; it is 'success and credit in life.'⁷ The text, some 430 pages long, provides 'a series of directions' for young readers structured around numerous maxims or homilies, making it, indeed, read like an English *Poor Richard*. The focus is completely apolitical. The successful man is not enjoined to commit himself to public service. Far from offering a life of civic virtue, Burgh prescribes a thoroughly Protestant regimen of individual improvement and achievement through rigorous management of the self. The keys to 'success and credit' are self-control, economy, frugality, method, regularity, trusting no one, knowing how to deal with superiors and inferiors, and the proper management of time.

Idleness is, indeed, the grand temptation to be overcome by the virtuous self, that self which 'employs his peculiar talent or advantage for the most extensive usefulness.' Virtuous man for Burgh is not a political man, but he who fulfills God's intention that he be useful in the improvement of this life. 'Idle people make no improvements'; they 'are dead before their time.' Governments, therefore, 'should see to it, that there be no encouragement given to idleness.' They should give 'encouragement to anyone who enriches or adorns his country by any valuable discovery, or noble production in arts and science.' Burgh describes with great precision the corrupt man who lacks virtue.

The character of a sluggard must, I think, be owned to be one of the most contemptible. . . . And if all idle people in a nation were to die in one year, the loss would be inconsiderable, in comparison of what the community must suffer by being deprived of a very few of the active and industrious.⁸

7. Burgh, *The Dignity of Human Nature* (London, 1754), p. 94.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 276, 23, 77, 270, 34.

To improve one's self is the only way 'to have credit among mankind.' (Burgh consistently uses 'credit' in this ambiguous way.) Pursuing knowledge, being useful, and seeking improvements 'raise us above vice, and confirm us in a steady course of virtue.' This Protestant transformation of virtue from its civic humanist sense is best exemplified in Burgh's insistence that the useful man who 'expects to raise himself in the world,' who seeks to arrive at 'the safety and success of business,' must live a life of 'method and regularity.' No classical *telos* here, no transcendence of self as 'civic being.' This is the world of Poor Richard, where the ideal is man as 'working being.' What man must do is live a life 'of constant and unwearied application to the main pursuit.' It is only 'by dint of indefatigable diligence that a fortune is to be got in business.' Methodical and regular man is moral man, for he is useful man. Burgh offers a striking picture of the new cultural ideal—a day in the life of moral man.

Let a man set down in his memorandum-book every morning, the several articles of business he has to do through the day; and beginning with the first person he is to call upon, or the first place he is to go to, finish that affair [if he is to be done at all] before he begins another; and so on to the rest. A man of business who observes this method, will hardly ever find himself hurried or disconcerted by forgetfulness. And, he who sets down all his transactions in writing, and keeps his accounts and the whole state of his affairs in a distinct and accurate order, so that he can at any time, by looking into his books presently see in what condition his business is, and whether he is in a thriving or declining way; such a one I say, deserves properly the character of a man of business, and has a fair prospect of carrying his schemes to an happy issue. But such exactness as this will be no means suit the man of pleasure, who has other things in his head than industry, or frugality, or affecting a useful part in society.⁹

Throughout *The Dignity of Human Nature* Burgh attacks those pleasures of life which cost the most, such as balls, plays, elaborate coaches, and powdered footmen. Such spending is 'a waste of

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 101, 33, 32.

money.' Better 'improving barren land, raising buildings, encouraging manufacturing,' than 'keeping an open house and blood sucking servants.' There will come a time when all are 'called to give an account of the use he has made of his time.' Better, in fact, Burgh suggests, to have been a miser, 'to save and hoard,' than to have been 'a spendthrift.' He is quite specific on how much one should save. Saving 3 or 4 shillings a day, he reckons, will amount to 60 or 80 pounds a year, 'which sum saved up yearly over 30 years, the ordinary time a man carries on business, would amount to nearly 2000 pounds, reckoning interest, and still more if you supposed it laid out in an advantageous trade.' Parents, in fact, should encourage their children

to save a piece of money some little time, on the promise of doubling it, and, which, is to the same purpose, lessening his allowances in case of misconduct, obliging him to give an exact account of his manner of laying out his money, by memory at first, and afterwards in a written account, regularly kept; putting in a purse by itself a penny or six pence for every penny or six pence given him, and showing him from time to time the sum and so forth. . . . Keeping the account he will thereby acquire a habit of frugality, attention and prudence.¹⁰

There should be no surprise, then, that Burgh, so frugal with money, is also preoccupied with time. Here Burgh most perfectly plays the English Franklin. Time should not be squandered, for 'it is to you of inestimable worth.' Burgh has his priorities straight about the proper uses of time. Conspicuous by its absence is time devoted to civic duties.

Every moment of time ought to be put to its proper use, either in business, improving the mind, in the innocent and necessary relaxations and entertainments of life, or in the care of souls . . . and as we ought to be much more frugal of our time than of our money, the one being infinitely more valuable than the other; so ought we to be particularly watchful of opportunity . . . the thorough knowledge of the probable rise and fall of merchandise, the favorable seasons for importing and exporting, a quick eye to see, and a nimble hand to seize

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 9, 37, 59.

advantages as they turn up. These are talents which raise a man from low to affluent circumstances.¹¹

The Burgh of *The Dignity of Human Nature* is not the Burgh described by recent republican scholarship. There is nothing in this primer for youth commending classical conceptions of a virtuous polity with active, public-spirited, leisured citizens seeking the common good. By no means disdainful of modernity and commercial life, Burgh champions in this text business and middle-class values.

The next work of Burgh I would draw attention to is his two-volume *Crito, or Essays on Various Subjects*, published in 1766 and 1767. Volume two is dedicated 'to the good people of Britain of the twentieth century.' In this dedication, 120 pages long, Burgh offers advice 'from my age to yours, since I am not much heeded in my own.' *Crito* is the first of Burgh's writings to concern itself primarily and overtly with reform and British politics, which makes it the clear forerunner of *Political Disquisitions*. Here, too, Burgh finds many of the same problems that had troubled Bolingbroke and the authors of *Cato's Letters*. But much of this apparent continuity is only on the surface. Alongside his use of commonwealth or country rhetoric, Burgh subverts its nostalgic anti-modernist connotations and redefines its vocabulary. In his *Crito*, Burgh joins his Protestant concerns to Lockean liberal ideals, which gives it an orientation quite different from Bolingbroke's writings, one which in the 1770s will be picked up by other radical dissenters in the opposition camp like Price and Priestley.

In this work it is clear that Burgh has absorbed the Lockean voluntaristic and contractual theory of the state. What states do, Burgh contends, is merely serve the interests of those who consent to their creation. They protect well-being and property. Governors are but trustees for the governed and as such are revocable agents should they violate their trust. In a wonderfully revealing passage, with which he opens volume one of the *Crito*, Burgh

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 38, 26, 34.

expresses this liberal idea of the state, again with an analogy to business. This is not language suggestive of a classical view of politics.

The subjects in a free country have a right to consider themselves on the same foot with the stockholders in a trading company. If a proprietor of East India stock sees the directors pursuing measures detrimental to the interest of the company, he will not, I believe, hesitate long about his being a competent or incompetent judge of directorial politics. He will soon make ENGLAND ring with his complaints. The same every subject has a right to do, whenever the conduct of the ministry becomes justly suspicious.¹²

Despite its dedication to readers of the twentieth century, it is not by his *Crito* that Burgh is known to this century. It is, of course, his magnum opus, the three-volume *Political Disquisitions* that has made Burgh's reputation among recent readers, just as it did in his own era. There is, to be sure, a good deal of material in the *Disquisitions* to justify a reading of Burgh as a nostalgic country theorist operating in the same continuous republican discourse begun by Bolingbroke earlier in the century. Knowing what we now know about Burgh's earlier writings, we should be surprised, however, if this civic humanist dimension is all there was in the *Disquisitions*. That, indeed, is not all there is.

Burgh did rely heavily in the text on simply reprinting earlier writers. Their enemies, after all, were the same: a corrupt court, placemen, an ineffectual Commons, the national debt. Since there was at hand an extensive discourse produced by distinguished authorities attacking the common enemy, Burgh enlisted the help of earlier opposition writers in his indictment of corrupt England in 1774. Beneath the rhetorical attack on the common enemy there was even a common vocabulary centering on corruption and virtue. But these very same core concepts that structured the deeper world views of early and late eighteenth-century oppositions had, as we have seen, changed meaning and been redefined.

12. Burgh, *Crito, or Essays on Various Subjects*, 2 vols. (London, 1766, 1767), 1: 2.

Alongside, indeed overshadowing republican Burgh in the *Disquisitions*, there is Burgh the theorist of individualism, of rights, and of market society. His Protestant discourse is self-consciously linked in the *Disquisitions* to older arguments of the juridical rights school, to Locke, and to middle-class economic and social interests. In each of the *Political Disquisitions*' lengthy expositions of Bolingbrokean themes, the earlier ideological reading is, in fact, subverted, and beneath the common vocabulary a quite different opposition ideology emerges.

There is, for example, the issue to which Burgh devotes almost the entire first volume, the unrepresentative nature of the House of Commons. He is perfectly willing to quote Bolingbroke at great length on this, but far from sharing Bolingbroke's plea for greater representation of independent landed gentry, or Christopher Wyvill's later demand for greater county representation, Burgh's argument anticipates the middle-class arguments for reform in 1832. The sense of the people, he writes, is grossly misrepresented because no one represents in Parliament 'the multitudes who swarm in the cities and great towns of Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham.' The main problem of representation is less a question of personal independence and lack of civic virtue than of class. This passage is far from sounding like Bolingbroke.

The landed interest was too much represented to the detriment [in our times] of the mercantile and monied. This is an occasion of various evils, for many of our country gentlemen are but bad judges of the importance of the mercantile interest and do not wisely consult it in their bills and acts. . . . Is not our House of Peers wholly and our House of Commons chiefly filled with men, whose property is land? Is not, therefore, the government of this mercantile and manufacturing country in the hands of the landed interest to the exclusion of the mercantile and manufactural?¹³

When Burgh specifies his plan for reforming the representation in Parliament, his concern has nothing to do with moral or civic

13. Burgh, *Political Disquisitions*, 3 vols. (London, 1774, 1775), 1: 27, 50, 51.

qualifications, but class. This leads him to suggestions that would have appalled Bolingbroke. The interests, he writes,

of merchants is so much the interest of the nation, that there can hardly be too many merchants in Parliament. The London members almost always vote on the side of liberty. It is proper that the monied interest be in the House, too, or else what security have we that a profligate Court will not shut up the Exchequer, as Charles II did?¹⁴

The present system, grossly underrepresenting 'the mercantile, manufactural and monied interests,' has disastrous policy implications, quite familiar to anyone who has read Burgh's earlier works. 'It is,' he writes, 'the overbalance of the power in the hands of the landed men, that has produced the bounty on exportation of corn which increases the manufacturer's expense of living, and discourages the exportation of our manufactures.'¹⁵

Significantly, Burgh turns to Locke as an authority in arguing this case for parliamentary reform, to Locke, the allegedly irrelevant influence on English reform. Two years before John Wilkes would invoke Locke as the distinguished authority to legitimize his motion of March 21, 1776 to bring about 'a just and equal representation of the people in England in Parliament,' Burgh in his *Political Disquisitions* quoted Locke's paragraph 157 from the *Second Treatise* on the people's 'interest as well as intention . . . to have a fair and equal representation.' If Burgh in his *Disquisitions* is, as is often claimed, the father of parliamentary reform, then hovering in the background is the influence of John Locke, quite alive and well in the late eighteenth century.

The influence of Locke on Burgh's *Disquisitions* is much more profound than this one textual citation, however. It is seen most vividly in the discussion of annual Parliaments. Where Burgh strikes out into new territory is in going beyond a simple institutional concern with restoring balance in the forms of government to a discussion of annual Parliaments in the more basic theoretical

14. *Ibid.*, 1: 52-3.

15. *Ibid.*, 1: 54.

context of the origin and purpose of government, an area of little interest to the traditional opposition.

Volume one of the *Disquisitions* begins with a short theoretical description of the origin of government. It is Locke's contractual image complete even to the notion of governors as trustees subject to dismissal if they betray their trust. Behind the principle of annual Parliaments for Burgh is the even more basic radical principle of legislators as mere agents or delegates of the people, which Burgh also attributes to Locke. When legislators do not strictly serve their constituents' interests, Burgh writes, 'Locke sees it a breach of trust that dissolves government.'¹⁶

Burgh agrees with Locke in suggesting that 'the people may take the power out of the hands of a king, or government when they abuse it.' Kings and governments 'are in all cases responsible to the people. . . . A majority of the people can at any time change the government.' All of this is undermined 'if members of Parliament are not obliged to regard instructions from their constituents.'¹⁷ Burgh's concern is clearly less Bolingbroke's, that of the relationship of the Commons to king and court, than it is with the relationship of the Commons to the people. While Bolingbroke criticized the Commons for its sycophantic subservience to the court, Burgh attacks the Commons for its lack of deference to its popular masters.

What is important to note here is the dramatic radical turn that Burgh gives to opposition thought in 1774. The idealized House of Commons is no longer envisioned as a free and independent deliberative branch of a marvelously balanced constitutional edifice; it is now nothing more than an assembly of agents and stewards doing the bidding of their popular masters. Behind Burgh's radical turn is Locke.

Burgh, in fact, rejects completely the notion of separation of powers and calls for only a unicameral legislature:

I cannot see the solidity of that reasoning, which lays so much stress

16. *Ibid.*, 1: 279.

17. *Ibid.*, 1: 200.

on the necessity of a balance, or equality of power among the three estates, or indeed [speculatively or theoretically speaking] of a necessity of any more estates than one, viz. an adequate representation of the people, unchecked and uninfluenced by anything, but the common interest; and that they appoint responsible men for the execution of the laws made by them with the general approbation. . . .¹⁸

There is, then, a much more radical Burgh to be found in the *Disquisitions* than contemporary republican scholarship has described. One can easily imagine passages like this being of great interest to the drafters of the Pennsylvania Constitution in 1776 or to the host of other state constitution writers in America's first decade who were busily eliminating or seriously limiting the powers of senates and governors. As I noted at the outset, there is the evidence of at least one distinguished American in the post-independence period, John Adams, who had clearly re-read his Burgh and found it full of suggestions he had not seen in 1774 and 1775 when he was so fulsome in his praise of the *Disquisitions*.

It is in the *Political Disquisitions*' discussion of placemen, however, that we see most dramatically Burgh's departure from earlier opposition writers. It is epitomized in the very title he gives to Chapter IV of Volume II: 'Places and Pensions are not given according to Merit.'¹⁹ For Bolingbroke, Walpole's placemen represented the triumph of new, upstart, monied men in politics replacing men of breeding and privilege whose natural responsibility it was to govern. For Burgh, placemen were symbols of a corrupt society in which public office and public rewards went to the rich and privileged instead of the industrious and talented.

Burgh used the image of a virtuous middle between two corrupt extremes. Why do we deny the right of voting to alms receivers, he asks? Is it not because we assume they 'being needy, will of course be dependent, and under undue influence?' Then why do we let men sit in Commons, Burgh asks, who 'receive alms,' that is, pensions and places. They too, 'are upon the parish, that is the

18. *Ibid.*, 1: 116-117.

19. *Ibid.*, 2: 401.

nation.' 'Half our nobility' is 'upon the parish, I mean the nation,' and they cost hundreds of thousands, 'while we are sinking in a bottomless sea of debt.' By his calculations these 'over drenched Court sponges' cost the nation two million pounds a year. All the while, of course, the real business of the nation, he suggests, is being done by lesser clerks in the offices of the placemen who receive 'but 50 pounds a year.'²⁰

Burgh's concern is the violation of the principle of equal opportunity. 'If the nation is to be plundered,' he writes, 'it would be some comfort to think that the spoil was divided among the deserving,' but, alas, 'modest merit gets no reward.' The present system inhibits ambition as the talented know full well that they will be excluded. Public service should be a public reward for talent, merit, and hard work, Burgh insists. As Figaro charged that Almadiva had received all he had merely by having taken the trouble to be born, so Burgh complains in the *Disquisitions* that public offices in Britain go to the 'worthless blockheads' who just 'take care to be the son of a Duke.' Burgh quotes his friend Benjamin Franklin on how irrelevant merit seems to be in England compared to the ability to 'second views of the Court.' Pensions and places go to 'men of family and fortune,' who, instead of offering their services to the public, act as 'greedy sordid hirelings.' The 'nobility and gentry . . . scramble for the profitable places.' They serve their country only for hire. Burgh offers an alternative to corrupt placemen and pensioners and it is a far cry from Bolingbroke's.

If the nobility and gentry decline serving their country in the great offices of the state, without sordid hire, let the honest bourgeoisie be employed. They will think themselves sufficiently rewarded by the honour done them.²¹

These men of the hard-working middle class would not demand great salaries and thus public expenditures would decline dramatically. They would replace the overpaid 'lord who has no necessary

20. *Ibid.*, 2: 60, 97, 99.

21. *Ibid.*, 2: 80, 85, 87, 89, 90, 96, 97.

business to fatigue him but drinking, whoreing, masquerading and New Marketing.' Why shouldn't 'the honest bourgeoisie' be employed in the offices of state? Burgh cannot resist the dissenter's urge to demystify the state. 'Public business being all a mere routine,' all its offices, even the Secretary of State, the Lord Chamberlain, or the Lord Steward, are 'places which any man of common sense and common honesty can fill.'²²

Corruption for Burgh is quite different from the Machiavellian concept that informed earlier opposition writers like Bolingbroke. A corrupt system for Burgh involved gross unfairness in the principles of distributive justice. It was, as we have seen, a system in which worthless drones held important public offices, one in which privilege, not merit, distributed the prizes in the race of life, and one in which patronage insured the rule of unproductive, that is corrupt, men of no ability (Tom Paine's later definition of nobility) instead of that of deserving men of talent. 'In a corrupt state,' Burgh wrote, 'that which should give a man the greatest consequences . . . gives him the least.'²³

Behind the radical Burgh, so worrisome in 1787 to John Adams, was not civic humanism but John Locke. Burgh ends his three-volume *Political Disquisitions*, 'the most important treatise to appear in English in the first half of the reign of George III,' 'the key book of this generation,' by again calling upon Mr. Locke, who far from being irrelevant to the radical opposition is invoked by name in both the opening and closing pages of this veritable bible of radicalism.

But Mr. Locke, who is never at rest till the subject he is treating of is exhausted, and whose comprehension and precision can never enough be admired, though he sees and acknowledges the danger, distress, and wretchedness of such a case, yet he carries his reader a step farther. Suppose the Parliament do so abuse their trust, exceed their power, and are so many tyrants and leechworms to the people; what then is

22. *Ibid.*, 2: 97-98.

23. *Ibid.*, 3: 57.

there no remedy? Yes, saith he, there remains still inherent in the people, a supreme power to remove or alter the legislature. . . . The power in such cases devolves to the people, who may make such alterations as to them seem meet. Begin again, saith Mr. Locke, according to the original design of government, as instituted by God.²⁴

This is a very different Burgh than we have been given by the republican school. No wonder when John Adams re-read Burgh he was upset. We, too, like Adams, would do well to re-read Burgh.

24. *Ibid.*, 3: 439, 446-47.

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