

# interpretation

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# interpretation

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THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE:  
AN INTERPRETATION OF BOLINGBROKE'S POLITICAL THEORY

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*Introduction*

A mural monument at St. Mary's Church, Battersea, records what was probably Bolingbroke's last composition:

Here lies  
HENRY S<sup>t</sup> IOHN.  
In the reign of queen Anne,  
secretary of war, secretary of state,  
and viscount Bolingbroke:  
In the days of King George I. and King George II.  
something more and better.  
His attachment to queen Anne  
exposed him to a long and severe persecution:  
he bore it with firmness of mind.  
He passed the latter part of his time at home,  
the enemy of no national party;  
the friend of no faction:  
distinguished under the cloud of a proscription  
which has not yet been entirely taken off,  
by zeal to maintain the liberty,  
and to restore the ancient prosperity,  
OF GREAT BRITAIN.  
he dyed the 12 of december  
1751 aged 73.

Generations of scholars and other interested parties have taken issue with Bolingbroke's estimation of his career, his firmness of mind, his political intentions, and his political principles. Professor Plumb's recent judgment that "there was a fatal lack of integration between his personal life and his political attitude," was a gentle reminder of Bagehot's more severe verdict a century earlier: "Three years of eager unwise power, and thirty-five of sickly longing and impotent regret,—such, or something like it, will ever be in this cold modern world the fate of an Alcibiades."<sup>1</sup> Contemporary opinions a century earlier were equally elegant and equally damaging.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1976 meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association. I would like to thank Sidney Jackman, J. G. A. Pocock, J. A. W. Gunn, and John Shingler for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup>J. H. Plumb, *Sir Robert Walpole*, Vol. I, *The Making of a Statesman* (London, 1956), p. 130; Walter Bagehot, "Bolingbroke as Statesman," in *Works*, ed. F. Morgan (Hartford, 1889), III, 221.

Yet Bolingbroke inspired much affection as well, and has never suffered for lack of a biographer's adulation. Whether he was something more and better during the days of the Hanoverians we need not decide. He was something different: following his flight to France he was never again able to act directly in politics but had to be content with writing and reflecting upon the actions of others. Historians have rightly been skeptical of Bolingbroke's sincerity when he claimed to have no regrets at leaving active politics. In his letters to Swift, from exile, he praised Seneca, whom he claimed to take as a model, even while seeking to reverse his attainder that he might return to Parliament. In his published writings he maintained that while great pleasure was to be gained from forming a "political scheme" and meditating upon its beauty and harmony, greater pleasure awaits the man "who speculates in order to act, goes on and carries his scheme into execution" (II:360; cf. Cicero, *Rep.* III:46).\*

In this essay the analysis is confined to the activity that brought Bolingbroke lesser pleasures, his political writings. That is, we are concerned primarily with the events of his later life. Even within this narrower compass, there is no agreement on such specific matters as his relationship to Machiavelli, on his significance for British political thought, or his consistency. A modest consensus holds that his political writings were bound to a specific set of circumstances and are best understood in terms of their author's motives, which are assumed to be clear and distinct. Thus it is widely maintained that his political opinions are of no particular importance today, being at once time-bound and the product of prejudice, resentment, and a bad character. Supposing, however, that we consider Bolingbroke's opinions as proceeding from deliberate choice, then we may learn from his deliberations something more than that he was a propagandist hungry for office and an enemy of Walpole.

Bolingbroke sought to persuade his readers in part by an intelligible argument and not just, as has often been alleged, by the use of lofty phrases. Rhetoric was important for Bolingbroke, but his was not empty. To the extent that the substance and dialectic of his writing are coherent, it may bring to light something permanent, or at least something that transcends the contingencies of its composition. In order to see these features of Bolingbroke's political opinions, one must grasp, as far as one can, Bolingbroke's experience and estimation of political events, and the peculiarities of his idiom. We begin, therefore, with his reflections on the nature and history of the British constitution, for Bolingbroke argued that the British constitution was the most perfect artifice yet devised to enable men such as himself to appear as actors upon the political stage.

\*References to Bolingbroke included in the text use the following abbreviations: *P.K.*, *The Idea of Patriot King*, ed. S. W. Jackman, Indianapolis, 1965; *H.W.*, *Historical Writings*, ed. I. Kramnick, Chicago, 1972; Roman numerals, *The Works of Lord Bolingbroke*, 4 vols., reprint of the London edition of 1844.

*Constitutional and Political History*

Bolingbroke's thoughts on the constitution, as well as his religious opinions, were guided by this Ciceronian maxim: "Opinionum commenta delet dies, naturae judicia confirmat" (Groundless opinions are destroyed, but rational judgments of nature are confirmed by time) (II:42). That is, Bolingbroke assumed that the rationality of a political order is demonstrated by its substantial sameness through the centuries. Its substantial sameness, in turn, may be discovered by the assiduous application of rational first principles to the historical evidence. Bolingbroke was untroubled by the circularity of his interpretative principle and felt no need to inquire deeply into the nature of reason. Nevertheless, as Douglas and more recently Pocock have argued, Bolingbroke's approach brought an end to the purely historiogenetic debates on the nature of the constitution (*De nat. deor.* 50.1).<sup>2</sup>

Praise for the British constitution in terms of limited monarchy and balanced or mixed government was a commonplace among Augustan political writers. Aristotle, Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus provided the ancient texts, Machiavelli and Harrington the modern ones. A mixed regime, reflecting the Newtonian aesthetic of balance, was a means of impeding, if not arresting, the endless cycles of political change. From traditional observations on the tendency of "simple forms of government," comprised of one person, a few, or many, to slide toward arbitrary rule,

it hath been concluded very reasonably, that the best form of government must be one compounded of these three, and in which they are all so tempered, that each may produce the good effects, and be restrained by the counter workings of the other two, from producing the bad effects that are natural to it. Thus much is evident (II:120).

By institutionalizing moderation, the supreme political virtue, the mixed regime was held to have overcome the unreliability that attaches to a dependence upon statesmanship and personal excellence even while allowing scope for superior individuals should they chance to appear.

The intrinsic reasonableness of the mixed regime was tied directly to the special excellence of British practice, the creation and preservation of what came to be called the Gothic constitution. Tacitus despaired over the inability of the Roman commonwealth to live in accord with the harmony of a mixed regime: "But what the refinements of Roman policy could not do, hath been done in this island, upon foundations laid by the rough simplicity of our northern ancestors" (II:121). Because of the balance achieved by the mixed regime, "our free constitution of government hath been preserved so long inviolate, or hath been brought back, after having suffered violations, to its

<sup>2</sup>David C. Douglas, *English Scholars* (London, 1939), pp. 356ff.; J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 237ff. Herbert Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History*, (n.p., Archon, 1970), pp. 2, 69, emphasized the continuity of Bolingbroke with his common law predecessors and the later whig historians.

original principles, and been renewed and improved too, by frequent and salutary revolutions" (II:119). Thus were combined in the Gothic constitution the effectiveness of simple regimes and the harmony of mixed ones, while the abuses and inconveniences of either were avoided.

The convergence of reasonableness and historical continuity in the constitution allowed Bolingbroke to vary his treatment of its constituent parts, arguing sometimes on purely speculative grounds, sometimes on the evidence of history, and sometimes by combining the two. He devoted most of his attention to monarchy because, he said, "when monarchy is the essential form, it may be more easily and more usefully tempered with aristocracy or democracy, or both, than either of them, when they are the essentials, can be tempered with monarchy" (*P.K.*:17). Thus, for example, in an essay on the power of the prince and the freedom of the people, first published in *The Craftsman* in 1733, Bolingbroke began with an argument from historical origins. "The original state of monarchy," he declared, "is justly described very different from what is now in all arbitrary governments. Kings were then no more than chiefs, or principal magistrates, in states republican and free" (I:511). In the *Patriot King*, however, he abandoned "any nice inquiry into the original" of kingship in favor of "something better, and more worthy to be known," namely, "what this institution ought to have been, whenever it began, according to the rule of reason" (*P.K.*:9).

Whatever the approach, the result was bound to be the same: There was "no foundation in fact or reason" for any belief that contemporary or original kings were absolute or governed by divine right. Such opinions and institutions were errors, arising wholly from historical accident and inevitably resulting in comic absurdities (*P.K.*:11–12). The duties of subjects and the right of kings may both be shown "by the constitution of human nature" imprinted by the mind of God, "the same to all, and obligatory alike on all" and also by the laws given by man to man, "founded indeed on the same principles, but varied by different applications of them to times, to characters, and to a number, which may be reckoned infinite, of other circumstances" (*P.K.*:13). By the law of reason, "a divine right in kings is to be deduced," namely, to govern well. Good government is conducive to happiness, and "God has made us to desire happiness"; thus, the office of king is "of divine right," which is to say ordained of God, and the persons of kings "are to be reputed sacred." The "person" of a king is his legal title and demands "legal reverence," but the man deserves no special respect since the source of reverence is "national not personal" (*P.K.*:14–15). Bolingbroke's notion of a divine right *in* kings, or rather, in the office of king, is therefore far removed from the "absurd" notions of "that annointed pedant" James I (II:30ff.). The rational essence of kingship thus coincided with the ancient image of chiefs and principal magistrates in states republican and free. The king owed his throne to the people, was raised to it in order to maintain the constitution, and would keep it by good government.

The aristocracy in a mixed regime was the locus of the men of splendor, and its origins, according to Bolingbroke, were in nature itself. Society, he said, began with families, not “savage individuals” or “solitary vagabonds”:

If there was a first man and a first woman, they and their children (for these could not nurse and educate themselves) must have constituted the first society. If numbers of men and women sprang out of the earth at once, there might be some contests among the men about these primitive ladies, and some violence might be employed, and some confusion might arise in the immediate hurry of copulation. But after that the same instinct which had caused variance would have formed societies (IV:146).

Nature immediately by instinct instructed humanity in the way of society. Political order, however, was not directed by instinct. It was the consequence of agreement, not perhaps by single individuals, but by families, or at least by heads of families. “Like the philosopher of Malmesbury’s wild men, they act as if they had a right to all they can acquire by fraud or force” (IV:187).<sup>3</sup> A passionate nature, it seems, drove mankind first to procreation and then to war. By postulating natural sociability in the form of family, Bolingbroke, unlike the philosopher of Malmesbury, could justify the orders that emerged from the conflict of families for preeminence (II:90). Equally significant was that the unit of action was the family, for it meant that aristocratic display could be endowed with the index of nature and nature’s reason. But by confining nature to families and aristocratic competition, Bolingbroke introduced what Mansfield has called the grandfather problem,<sup>4</sup> which has the greatest importance for the stability of the entire regime. The father, as head of a family, has entirely too much power if he diminishes the power of his son who is also a father. But he has too little power if he is unable to control the affairs of his son, including the son of his son. The grandfather problem and its most obvious political consequence in Bolingbroke’s day, the conflict of generations within the royal family, are but special instances of the general political problem of stability and generation, to which we shall return.

In considering the role of the commons, Bolingbroke resorted almost wholly to historical evidence. “The ancient Britons are to us the Aborigines of our island. We discover little of them through the gloom of antiquity, and we see nothing beyond them. This, however, we know, they were freemen” (II:108). However savage they may have appeared to the already corrupted Romans, “Caesar himself acknowledges they fought boldly for their liberties” (H.W.:178). They continued to resist the Saxons and ended by converting them to democratic principles. “The Danes conquered the crown, but they wore it little; and the liberties of Saxon freemen they never conquered” (H.W.:179). In

<sup>3</sup>Not only did Hobbes’s wild men rely on their own strength and art, but also, “in all places, where men have lived by small families, to rob and spoil one another has been a trade, and so far from being reputed against the law of nature, that the greater spoils they gained, the greater was their honour. . . .” *Leviathan*, XVII, 2, ed. M. Oakeshott (Oxford, n.d.), p. 109 (emphasis added).

<sup>4</sup>Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., *Statesmanship and Party Government* (Chicago, 1965), p. 57.

short, “as far as we can look back, a lawless power, a government by will, never prevailed in Britain” (II:109).

Even if it be admitted that William the Norman held the power of a tyrant, was indeed a conqueror, and not that he simply asserted a legitimate claim to a disputed crown by trial of arms, “unlimited or absolute monarchy never existed in Britain; no, not even by conquest. The rights of the people were soon re-asserted” (II:110). There was, therefore, no British feudalism as distinct legal innovation; parliaments were never interrupted nor the rights of any estate disturbed. Bolingbroke ended this fabulous story of medieval England with a striking image:

Though the branches were lopped, and the tree lost its beauty for a time; yet the root remained untouched, was set in good soil and had taken strong hold in it; so that care and culture, and time were indeed required, and our ancestors were forced to water it, if I may use such an expression, with their blood; but with this care, and culture, and time, and blood, it shot up again with greater strength than ever, that we might sit quiet and happy under the shade of it; for if the same form was not exactly restored in every part, a tree of the same kind, and as beautiful, and as luxuriant as the former, grew up from the same root (II:141).

Like the root, out of sight beneath the ground, the history of the Gothic constitution was hidden. Yet it could be brought to light by Bolingbroke’s interpretative principles to serve as evidence for the reasonableness of those principles and confirm the superiority of British to Roman policy.

If continuity was preserved through the events of 1066, one could hardly anticipate any problems with more recent upheavals. Thus the “salutary revolution” of 1688 had as its first objective to reverse the trend by which Parliament had been increasingly subordinated to the crown and to restore the old balance (II:9). The Declaration of Rights, which settled the crown upon William and Mary, was regarded in this respect, Bolingbroke assured his readers, “as a new Magna Carta” (II:27). But more than the traditional myth of the Gothic constitution was confirmed by the Glorious Revolution. The conflict that precipitated it was over “first principles,” specifically, religious principles. The later Stuarts had moved against the constitution by asserting “extravagant principles of ecclesiastical and civil government” (II:30), which led to civil war and, in reaction to it, the religious intolerance of the Restoration. The nation was divided into the “great parties,” whig and tory, “not so much by overt acts committed, as by the apprehensions which each of them entertained of the intentions of the other” (II:54). They were divided, that is, over first principles, even though they did not or could not translate those principles wholeheartedly into action. In the crisis over James II, both parties did act this time upon the common principles of the constitution. Their action in concert purged the reputations of each, which had been laid upon them by their opponents and had survived as shadows of an earlier genuine division. Thus, “the proper and real distinction of the two parties expired at this era” (II:67). The religious issue had been raised and settled, and there was no further reason for parties to exist.

This interpretation of the relative insignificance of the religious question after 1688 was expounded, one must recall, from the confident perspective of deism, a belief whose crucial attribute in this context is the certainty that first principles can be clearly and exhaustively presented so as to command the assent of all reasonable men, whose reasonableness is evident in their espousal of true (deist) first principles. The less than reasonable may freely cling to their opinions, but have no warrant to dim the light that shines upon others. Bolingbroke's reason favored a policy of toleration, which meant that the religious question should not intrude upon the public stage.<sup>5</sup> But once again reason existed in harmony with the evidence of history (properly interpreted). That the religious question need not have been raised to the heat of civil war in order to be settled was proved by the policy of Elizabeth (I:216). Bolingbroke's praise of Elizabeth has often been dismissed as romantic nonsense,<sup>6</sup> and no doubt the fidelity of his portrait left as much to be desired as did his general account of the Gothic constitution. Yet it was surely not a gross distortion to claim, as Bolingbroke did (*H.W.*:236), that in respect of the religious question Elizabeth's reign saw the form of the constitution settled. Thus whatever depth it acquired through the resolution of post-Elizabethan problems, the settlement of 1688 could appear readily enough as a restoration.

More contentious was Bolingbroke's remark on the exhaustion of political principles in the whig and tory parties. Historians<sup>7</sup> are far from agreed on the structure of political organizations during Bolingbroke's day, so the descriptive accuracy of his views cannot be determined unambiguously. Nevertheless, two observations may be allowed. The first is that his account of political divisions and the demise of the "great parties" was considerably more complex than would have been held by a "typical tory," an epithet with which he has been

<sup>5</sup>That the young Bolingbroke acted as a "high-church tory" does not contradict this interpretation. On the contrary, one need only make a quite commonsensical distinction between Bolingbroke the political actor, who saw the usefulness of the religious issue and felt free to employ it for his own purposes, and the speculative thinker who confided his true views to none but a few close friends, a prudent thing to do considering the furor that erupted when his religious opinions were published. In order to manipulate religious sensibilities when he was in active politics, Bolingbroke could hardly have believed the claims of Christianity to be compelling. He is, therefore, one of Felix Rabb's Machiavellians (*The English Face of Machiavelli*, Toronto, 1964). Thus, for example, his severe miscalculation of the flexibility of the Old Pretender, for whom England was not worth giving up a mass, resulted in part from his low estimate of biblical religion as a basis for sound first principles.

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, H. T. Dickenson, *Bolingbroke* (London, 1970), pp. 263ff., or Isaac Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 234ff.

<sup>7</sup>A review of what may be called the "Walcott thesis" and its critics may be found in Henry Horwitz, "Parties, Connections, and Parliamentary Politics, 1689-1714: Review and Revision," *Journal of British Studies*, 6 (1966), 45-69. See also Geoffrey Holmes, *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (London, 1967), pp. 1-9, and J. H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675-1725* (London, 1967), Ch. 5. A further refinement has been suggested by B. W. Hill, "Executive Monarchy and the Challenge to the Parties, 1689-1832: Two Concepts of Government," *Historical Journal*, 13 (1970), 379-401.

burdened.<sup>8</sup> The second is that, if we may grant that seventeenth-century divisions were based on “a real difference of principles and designs” (II:11), the reasons for their separation, according to Bolingbroke, were not equivalent. Owing to the corruption of Charles II, “the appearance of a court party” was maintained, and in opposition to it a genuine country party arose (II:41). Neither group was, properly speaking, a party: The court party was a faction that subordinated national to personal interest (II:11–13), while the country party, “authorized by the voice of the country,” was “the nation, speaking and acting in the discourse and conduct of particular men” (II:40). The court faction began the attack on the constitution and the nation, acting through its representatives, defended it. By common consent both were called parties, though their natures were distinct and even opposite.

One may summarize Bolingbroke’s argument to this point as follows: The British constitution is a mixed or balanced regime. Such a regime accords with the interpretative principles Bolingbroke called “reason.” When these principles are applied to the history of the constitution the beauty and goodness of British political order are apparent (to all “reasonable” persons). The preservation of liberty, which is the chief purpose of the constitution, and which accords with the “natural” competitiveness of heads of families, has been sustained historically by maintaining or, if necessary, restoring the motivating sentiments and principles of the Gothic exemplar. Specifically, the recent religious upheavals, which animated the so-called great parties, whig and tory, had been settled by the events of 1688, which in turn was no more than a restoration of the balance achieved by Elizabeth. There was, therefore, no reasonable or historical basis for the continuation of political “parties.”

### *The New Corruption*

One of the unforeseen consequences of the Glorious Revolution was, in the phrase of a modern historian, the Financial Revolution.<sup>9</sup> The settlement of the religious question brought, through the triumph of British arms during the wars of King William, prosperity (or the hope of prosperity) by way of trade, and the association of political stability with credit and investment. To Bolingbroke the new links between the army and trade, and especially the attitudes engendered by the successful new military and economical organizations, meant corruption. His use of the term “corruption” was not confined to the more or less subtle use of bribery, but also had a broader and more technical meaning, derived from Harrington and Machiavelli, indicating a disturbance of the equipoise of the mixed regime. One of the constituent elements would encroach

<sup>8</sup>J. H. Burns, “Bolingbroke and the Concept of Constitutional Government,” *Political Studies*, 10 (1962), 267.

<sup>9</sup>P. G. M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688–1756* (London, 1967), esp. Chs. 1 and 2.

upon the others, transforming the constitution into a "simple" regime, which would precipitate a further decline because of an excess of its defining attribute. In the language of the day, disruption of the balance was corruption of virtue.<sup>10</sup>

Modern historians and political scientists have seldom considered Bolingbroke's arguments on their own merits. The former have tended to discount ideas in general as if, in Namier's image, they were but libretti of inferior quality to the music of human emotion.<sup>11</sup> Political scientists have generally commended Bolingbroke for his insights into contemporary social transformations even while they condemn as romantic and reactionary his support of landed estate rather than financial wealth as the basis of political power.<sup>12</sup> Yet Bolingbroke claimed to argue on the basis of first principles. It is therefore not unreasonable to analyze his arguments on those grounds, whether or not they are cleverly forged from within the "whig canon," or actually held by him, or acted upon in good faith.

The peacetime standing army was a twofold source of corruption.<sup>13</sup> Apart from expense, which would be borne by the landowners, and the suspicion that the Hanoverians favored a large army in order to be able to look their continental cousins in the eye, the maintenance of a standing army instead of a militia was widely held to be the means by which tyrannically inclined kings delivered the *coup de grâce* to a tottering but still free regime. The eclipse of liberty in modern Europe (II:132) and ancient Rome (I:304) served as a warning and an example: "standing armies have been generally the instrument of overturning free governments" (*H.W.*:316). At the same time, the existence of an army

<sup>10</sup>For a thorough account of the background to the Augustan vocabulary, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), esp. Chs. 13 and 14.

<sup>11</sup>A notable exception is Quentin Skinner, "The Principles and Practice of Opposition: The Case of Bolingbroke versus Walpole," in *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society in Honour of J. H. Plumb*, ed. Neil McKendrick (London, 1974), pp. 93-128. In this article he insisted that, whatever the degree of truth in Namier's insight, it is equally important to insist that one cannot sing *Così fan Tutte* to the music of *Die Zauberflöte*, that one must have recourse to the principles espoused and the reasons for their espousal if one is to explain actual political action.

<sup>12</sup>Unable to account for the rationality or irrationality of morality, Kramnick was forced to dismiss Bolingbroke's moral arguments as errors that detracted from his Harringtonian insight regarding structural changes in the economy and society (*Bolingbroke and His Circle*, pp. 168, 256). See also J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time: Essays on Political Thought and History* (New York, 1971), p. 134.

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of the debate over the standing army see, *inter alia*: Lois G. Schwoerer, "The Role of King William III of England in the Standing Army Controversy, 1697-1699," *Journal of British Studies*, 5, No. 2 (1966), 74-94; E. Arnold Miller, "Some Arguments Used by the English Pamphleteers, 1697-1700, Concerning a Standing Army," *Journal of Modern History*, 18 (1946), 306-13; Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time*, pp. 122-29; J. R. Western, *The English Militia in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1965); Skinner, "The Principles and Practice of Opposition," pp. 117-20. See also J. Hurstfield, "Political Corruption in Modern England: The Historian's Problem," *History*, 52 (1967), 30.

meant that well-paying commissions, carrying no obligations save attendance at regimental dinners, might be bestowed upon members of Parliament. Not all officers, of course, were placemen, and not all placemen held sinecures. Nevertheless, more money meant that archaic offices could be revived, endowed, and filled with loyal supporters. It also meant that the progress of campaigning through the countryside during elections might constantly grow more lavish. Politics, which had once been an honorable duty, had, according to Bolingbroke, become a trade.

Bolingbroke thought the new tradesmen personally contemptible and politically disastrous. "The landed men are the true owners of our political vessel: the moneyed men, as such, are no more than passengers in it" (II:568). The problem, as Bolingbroke saw it, was that too many of the passengers had moved themselves from below decks to the bridge. The ship had become topheavy and was in danger of capsizing in spite of outriggers in the form of credit. These newly moneyed men were, in Bolingbroke's colorful phrases, "impudent, rash, presumptuous, ungracious, insolent, and profligate in speculation as well as practice." They could bribe but not seduce, buy but not gain, lie but not deceive (II:356). As a result, while retaining "ancient and known forms" the constitution had become under their hands "a new and undefinable monster; composed of a king without monarchial splendour, a senate of nobles without aristocratical independency, and a senate of commons without democratical freedom" (H.W.:149). Private and public virtue, science, and wit had declined together when wealth and not estate became the token of effective rule. Wealth stimulated desires, desires induced dependence upon him who slaked them, dependence brought forth venality, servility, and cunning without responsibility.

Because of his criticisms of the new economic and social order, Bolingbroke has been called a conservative; because of his objections to the new men it produced, his conservatism has been called "stylistic and aesthetic."<sup>14</sup> Terms such as "conservative" are of little use in political analysis. It is true, however, that Bolingbroke was an elegant man both in his writing and, evidently, in his oratory. What may lurk behind such a characterization and has sometimes been betrayed by the tone of his critics, is that Bolingbroke was a snob, that he *really* objected to the dreadful lack of breeding that the new men made evident with every word and deed. By using their money as a club they maltreated the poor in order the better to distinguish themselves. A gentleman, in contrast, would demean himself if he oppressed his inferiors. What, then, was Bolingbroke's answer to this bourgeois prejudice against superiority expressed in anything but one's bank balance?

The opening of his "Letter on the Spirit of Patriotism" (1736) contained a characteristically "snobbish" remark. There he differentiated "the vulgar, who

<sup>14</sup>Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle*, p. 7.

are accidentally distinguished by titles of king and subject, of lord and vassal, of nobleman and peasant; and the few, who are distinguished by nature so essentially from the herd of mankind, that, figure apart, they seem to be another species." Of the first, "if caprice or accident did not raise them often to stations, wherein their stupidity, their vices, or their follies, make them a public misfortune," they would be utterly unnoticed. Of the second, they

observe with distinction, they admire with knowledge. They may indulge themselves with pleasure; but as their industry is not employed about trifles, so their amusements are not made the business of their lives. Such men cannot pass unperceived through a country. If they retire from the world, their splendour accompanies them, and enlightens even the obscurity of their retreat. If they take part in public life, the effect is never indifferent (II:353–354).

"Reason," Bolingbroke added, would "demonstrate, that all men are directed, by the general constitution of human nature, to submit to government, and that some men are in a particular manner designed to take care of that government on which the common happiness depends" (II:355). These people deserve recognition because of their personal or particular qualities, especially virtue and spirit.<sup>15</sup> By nature, the men of splendor ought to govern.

No less an authority than Walpole, who ought to have known, assured posterity that all political men among his contemporaries had their price. By implication, men entered political life in order to gain wealth, not the honor of being recognized for their splendor nor from a sense of duty that "the common happiness" depended upon their governance. One may sharpen the contrast between the two men and the principles for which they stood by observing that for Walpole the particular talent or character of a person was subordinated to a single public and common denominator, price, whereas for Bolingbroke the public realm was to serve primarily as the setting for the appearance of splendor, the receipt of individual recognition, and the capture of immortal fame. To dismiss Bolingbroke's argument as snobbery is already to take one's stand within Walpole's world, where money alone granted distinction.<sup>16</sup> The distinction granted by money, however, is in terms of what one has, not who one is. Since others may also gain wealth, what is recognized is already common, indiscriminate, universal, and eventually anonymous. The intelligible essence of the new corruption, then, was that private economic cares had entered the

<sup>15</sup>Bolingbroke often used the two words synonymously to connote the modern Machiavellian notion of *virtù* and the ancient *thymos*.

<sup>16</sup>Thus, for example, Professor Gunn listed one of the dangers courted by a formed and articulate opposition as "the charge of a trivial quest for personal honour," in J. A. W. Gunn, ed., *Factions No More: Attitudes to Party in Government and Opposition in Eighteenth Century England, Extracts from Contemporary Sources* (London, 1972), pp. 10–11; Kramnick dismissed the originally separate essay "The Private Life of a Prince" (*P.K.*:72–84) as "the most ludicrous example of Bolingbroke's insistence on the theatrical image" (*Bolingbroke and His Circle*, p. 168). For Bolingbroke, on the contrary, the quest for personal honor was the essence of politics and administrative capacity a mere pass through the stage door.

realm of public political action. Politics, which above all meant a public performance by men of spirit and virtue, had become subordinated to private welfare sustained by secret service.

Bolingbroke's defense of politics as performance was presented in terms of a defense of property and the Gothic constitution. The great advantage of the Gothic constitution, as we saw above, was that it combined stability and freedom. The condition for political action, which was the actualization of freedom, was that one be a property-holder, and the continuity of family property was one expression of social stability. The task of Parliament in this respect was to preserve the independence of propertied estates and thereby assure the possibility of a free constitution, its actuality depending as well on the requisite spirit. More generally, one could say that property provided for the needs of free men; once their needs were met they could act politically. On the other hand, those in bondage to need were politically invisible, and they were the vast majority of the population. Government may or may not have been conducted for their general good, but it was certainly transacted over their heads. Let us grant the validity of Bolingbroke's interpretation of seventeenth-century history and agree that the religious issue had been settled, if not by 1688, then by 1714. *Ceteris paribus*, a return to mixed government was not a wholly unreasonable expectation. Certainly it was inconceivable, and not simply to Bolingbroke, that wealth in the form of liquid assets could ever fulfill the purpose of property.

Nor could it do so within a mixed regime. However, when economic changes liberated increasing numbers of the wealthy but minimally propertied members of the third estate, they attained political visibility. This of itself would have been enough to disrupt the balance. Strictly speaking, however, it was not the individual but his wealth that became visible. Thus politics were to be bent to the purpose of accumulating wealth. The chosen instrument of this new activity was party. But according to Bolingbroke, the need for the "great parties" had expired with the religious issue. In fact, there is no constitutional provision for parties within a mixed regime. As Professor Gunn recently reminded us,

If parties were related to the institutions of mixed government, they came to look as though they were branches of the legislature or orders in the state. If, on the other hand, parties were faithfully portrayed as they existed, it remained difficult to say convincingly that they were a necessary aspect of mixed government.<sup>17</sup>

That is why the so-called court and country parties were described respectively by Bolingbroke as a cabal and the true voice of the nation.<sup>18</sup> From the

<sup>17</sup>J. A. W. Gunn, "Influence, Parties and the Constitution: Changing Attitudes, 1783-1832." *Historical Journal*, 17 (1974), 305. Consider also his remarks in *Factions No More*, pp. 16, 95. Among the older works, only H. D. Fieldhouse, "Bolingbroke and the Idea of Non-Party Government," *History*, 23 (1938), 41-56, is sensitive to the problem, but he fails to account for it satisfactorily.

<sup>18</sup>Mansfield convincingly argued, in a study of Burke, who was the first to present a comprehensive justification for it, that party government meant the rule of gentlemen in a popular, not

perspective of a political actor within a mixed regime, parties were little more than conspiracies to prevent his performance.

To summarize Bolingbroke's charges: the new corruption had perverted the purpose of politics from the defense of liberty and property and the actualization of freedom by means of the splendid and admirable performances of superior men, to the accumulation of riches by means of the factious plots of mean-spirited and cunning individuals. Any remedy would have to reestablish political order in such a way that the changes made by economic homogenization of estates and the new interests of wealth would be leavened by distinctions to which splendid men were by nature entitled. This was the task of Bolingbroke's "patriot prince," the original title of *The Idea of a Patriot King*.

### *The Patriot Prince*

Unlike Machiavelli, Bolingbroke did not claim that the *Patriot King* contained "everything he knew," even concerning the "things of the world." Nevertheless, there is much in the *Patriot King* that alludes to topics treated at length and in detail in his more occasional works.<sup>19</sup> The significant difference between the rhetoric of the *Patriot King* and that of his other political writings is that history was mined for examples illustrative of truths established by argument and did not serve, in the guise of tradition, as a separate source of meaning.

A patriot king was a king and hence ordained of God. In Britain he was a limited monarch and therefore, Bolingbroke remarked on the first page of the *Patriot King*, "appointed by the people." But as the British king was also an hereditary monarch, we are bound to wonder if there was any essential difference between hereditary and elective monarchy. In one decisive theoretical sense there was none: "They are sacred alike, and this attribute is to be ascribed or not ascribed to them, as they answer, or do not answer, the ends of their institution" (*P.K.*:15). The principles by which a true or patriot king rules are the same "whether he comes to the throne by immediate or remote election." There is, in short, only one way to become king: by election, "for in hereditary monarchies, where men are not elected, families are." Every prince who inherits the crown "comes to it under the same conditions under which the first took it," plus any others added subsequently by the electorate. "The first and the last hold by the same tenure" (*P.K.*:32-33).

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mixed regime (*Statesmanship and Party Government*, Chs. 6-9). To simplify somewhat, a popular regime is more akin to a democracy than to a mixed regime; it contains an aristocratic (or, as Michels pointed out later, an oligarchic) element, but one contained within an extraconstitutional order rather than being a constituent part of it.

<sup>19</sup>We are assuming that *The Idea of a Patriot King* was more systematic than occasional, though this is a disputed point. That it is not as occasional as his writings that appeared first in periodicals may be granted, and the controversy surrounding its publication suggests that Bolingbroke's hand was nudged, if not forced. For details, see Dickenson, *Bolingbroke*, pp. 290-94, and Frank T. Smallwood, "Bolingbroke versus Alexander Pope. The Publication of the *Patriot King*," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 65 (1974), 225-41.

The distinction between elective and hereditary monarchy reflects the distinction between theory and practice, or between nature and convention. Hereditary monarchy is a practical convention, a concession made necessary because of the instability of generation. It is true that heredity accords with "the very constitution of our nature" as beings born into families (*P.K.*:16), yet, as we saw, this was not a political principle but rather the natural basis for the general society of mankind. When heredity is introduced as a principle of politics it necessarily becomes, by the standards of that order, no more than a practical convention. The grandfather problem indicated earlier was inherent in the principle of heredity; but when that principle is subordinated to the political principle of election, it disappears. Consider, for example, the specific practical problem that Bolingbroke most likely had in mind when writing the *Patriot King*. An actual hereditary monarch had violated the terms of his coronation oath (whether these were the expressed terms or those implied by reason made no difference to Bolingbroke); an appeal must be made to the founding principles of all reasonable or limited monarchies. Because the British monarchy was hereditary, this might be most expediently attained by directing the attention of the heir apparent and his noble contemporaries toward the true meaning of the constitution (*P.K.*:4–5; II:364). In this indirect way the claims of a reasonable political order could be made effective within a conventional and hereditary monarchical regime. Nevertheless it was a compromise and Bolingbroke knew it to be so.

Historical experience in 1688 and 1714 confirmed the vitality of the principle of election as much as the principle of heredity, whereas education of the heir apparent meant working within the limits of convention. Direct recourse might be had, however, to the natural or reasonable principle of election. As noted earlier, Bolingbroke's original families behaved toward each other as in an Hobbesian state of nature. To obtain a patriot king without concessions to the conventions of heredity, these natural conditions would have actually to be approximated. Bolingbroke indicated this option in an all but neglected passage: "to save or redeem a nation . . . from perdition, nothing less is necessary than some great, some extraordinary conjuncture of ill fortune, or of good, which may purge, yet so as by fire." Various "tumults" as Machiavelli called them (*Dis.*, I:4), "may beget universal confusion" from which may arise order: "but it may be the order of a wicked tyranny, instead of the order of just monarchy." Either alternative seemed to be "at the disposition of fortune" (*P.K.*:7).

Tumults and the dangerous and stark alternatives they presented would sweep away the convention or prejudice of heredity to reveal the natural conditions under which a new political order could be founded or an old one restored to its proper principles. Tumults were the natural end of corruption, dramatic events to which a dramatic response was required. Meeting this "disposition of fortune" was the task of a single person (cf. *Dis.*, I:9): "He and he alone can

save a country whose ruin is so far advanced" (*P.K.*:37). Thus has the idea of a patriot king rightly been called an apocalyptic evocation.<sup>20</sup> As soon as he is raised to the throne, "the panacea is applied." His subjects will be delivered "if not from the guilt, yet from the consequence, of their fall." In short, the effects of this "standing miracle" will be "love among the honest, fear among the guilty, but submission by all" (*P.K.*:39).

One is reminded here of Machiavelli's own apocalyptic image of the savior with a sword. Bolingbroke followed his illustrious teacher into details as well, providing advice as to how the newly raised patriot king should proceed upon his reformation. His argument, much more than Machiavelli's, was advanced in the spirit of a technician. First principles are known; they are plain and may be widely publicized; they accord with reason and hence with divine will (*P.K.*:33; II:379). Thus, they need only be applied to fulfill all the requirements of sound policy, rationality, and piety. Resolution, not moderation, is the chief virtue of a patriot king.

Accordingly, the first act of a patriot king will be "to purge his court, and to call into the administration such men as he can assure himself will serve on the same principles on which he intends to govern" (*P.K.*:41). Certain among the former courtiers and ministers "perhaps will be abandoned by him; not to party-fury but to national justice," for they have injured their country and must pay. Clemency makes for an amiable character, "but clemency, to be a virtue, must have its bounds, like other virtues." Hence a patriot king would exercise clemency only with respect to "a sort of men too low to be much regarded, and too high to be quite neglected," the highborn incompetents who adorn every court. They are no more than evidence for the imperfections of the principle of heredity, yet necessary for the maintenance of pageantry, "and this pageantry, like many other despicable things, ought not to be laid aside" (*P.K.*:42).

Granting the possibility that a patriot king may emerge either from tumults or through conversion to an allegiance with Bolingbroke's first principles, we may wonder what kind of regime he would establish. From his analysis of the new corruption, two aspects at least are immediately indicated. The first is that a candidate for office would "have given proofs before-hand of his patriotism, as well as of his capacity, if he has either, sufficient to determine his general character" (*P.K.*:43). Such people will be "of public virtue and real capacity" (*P.K.*:39), patriotic men of ability called to power in order to govern in accord with the first principles of the constitution. Second, the regime of a patriot king will be without parties. Where parties divide people in order to govern them, the patriot king "will endeavour to unite them, and to be himself the centre of their union: instead of putting himself at the head of one party in order to govern his people, he will put himself at the head of his people in order to

<sup>20</sup>Herbert M. Atherton, *Political Prints in the Age of Hogarth: A Study of the Ideographic Representation of Politics* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 141, 145; Archibald S. Foord, *His Majesty's Opposition, 1714-1830* (Oxford, 1964), p. 150.

govern, or more properly, to subdue all parties." The true image of a good regime, "a free people, governed by a Patriot King, is that of a patriarchal family, where the head and all the members are united by one common interest, animated by one common spirit" (*P.K.*:46-47).

Upon statements such as those just quoted, it has been argued that Bolingbroke's patriotic party was intended to be a final party. His regime, therefore, might be characterized as a one-party regime. Moreover, it has become "one of the clichés of English history"<sup>21</sup> that George III, a pupil of Bolingbroke's "pupils," tried to rule according to Bolingbroke's teaching but succeeded only in establishing another court cabal. It was against the cabal, or rather against the "political school" whose tracts supported it and whose inspiration was said to have been Bolingbroke, that Burke wrote the *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*.<sup>22</sup> In terms of the history of ideas and their influence upon institutions, this interpretation and the characterization derived from it are unobjectionable. One might, however, add some further observations.

We noted above that Bolingbroke found in history a confirmation of the "truths of reason"; in discussing the nature of kingship we saw there were only accidental or conventional differences between an elected and hereditary monarch; and in discussing the accession of a patriot king, historical contingencies were proved capable of creating conditions of election indistinguishable from those natural ones described as obtaining at the origin of government. A regime fortified with the guarantees of nature, reason, piety, and historical tradition would act with supreme self-confidence. Ignorance and doubt had been banished by the brightness of first principles, to which all reasonable men adhere. Rhetoric need no longer be cautious, for political order would be based upon truth, based, indeed, upon a few simple truths that may be learned by all but the exceedingly dim. The only conceivable disputes would concern faulty deductions of policy from principles.

Having no corruption to tempt them, men would "not only cease to do evil, but learn to do well" (*P.K.*:39), for only "public virtue and real capacity," that is, patriotic competence, would be rewarded. Spirit and industriousness exhaustively describe the personal qualities needed for political advancement under the regime of a patriot king. The recognition of ability is the recognition of the actions of the unique-in-the-world person who actualizes that ability. Thus the inadequacy of recognizing wealth, particularly new wealth, as a proper qualification for political visibility is overcome; henceforth individuals and not their goods would be recognized. Nor is an ancient family sufficient to obtain a place in the council of a patriot king. Family is akin to wealth in that it does not directly express the worth of an individual. Just as a rich person's

<sup>21</sup>Sidney Jackman, *Man of Mercury*, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup>Mansfield, *Statesmanship and Party Government*, Ch. 5. But see also Jackman, *Man of Mercury*, p. 141, and Pat Rogers, "Swift and Bolingbroke on Faction," *Journal of British Studies*, 9, No. 2 (1969-70), 73-74.

wealth is the object of attraction and he the mere possessor, so the member of an ancient and noble house is simply an exemplar of family splendor. The patriot king, we recall, governs after the image of a patriarchal family united by a common interest and moved by a common spirit. Strictly speaking, therefore, the patriarchal patriot king destroys nobility of family as an independent source of public political significance. The destruction of the political importance of family and wealth, strictly demanded by Bolingbroke's theory, need not appear suddenly in practice. There is no necessity, for example, to exterminate the aristocracy or confiscate wealth, because wealth and the example of great ancestors may well inspire admirable personal qualities to which the appropriate political spirit may be added later. Contrarily, those who rise rapidly from low estate to political power or social prominence often bear upon their personal character the vices of their parentage and mobility. Perhaps an incompetent nobleman could have a part in the despicable but necessary pageantry of court.

Several comments may be made concerning Bolingbroke's intended regime. Consider first the sort of men who would govern. If men of ability rather than nobility or wealth are to advise a patriot king, two things seem clear: On the one hand, they will owe their position entirely to their own endeavors, and one may anticipate the most rigorous competition and self-assertiveness; on the other hand, they owe their position entirely to the king's favor, and one may anticipate the utmost servility. Only through servility or civil service can the men of ability prove their personal competence; only through fierce competition can the competent show their seriousness. The contradiction is resolved in the person, or rather, in the idea of a patriot king who combined combativeness on behalf of his subjects with service to them. In turn they confirmed his pre-eminence by their affection and obedience.

Machiavelli advised an innovator to maintain existing institutions even while infusing the polity with a new spirit (*Dis.*: I:25), and Bolingbroke followed his advice closely. His patriot king apparently would do no more to the forms of government than restore the Gothic constitution. Yet Bolingbroke knew that the economic changes were irreversible, that prosperity was not of itself to be despised, and that the old regime was gone. In the end, it would seem that the substance of the Gothic constitution, its stability of estates, was less essential to Bolingbroke's model than his belief in the greatness of performance and the glory of recognition, both of which would be ensured by the patriot king. If the priority of performance is kept in mind, there is no paradox involved in Bolingbroke's claim that the patriot king would both restore ancient modes and orders and introduce new ones: "a new people will seem to arise with a new king," a new people almost persuaded "that they are changed into different beings" (*P.K.*:39). The novelty of the regime will appear wholly as a result of the new spirit spread by the systematic and diligent activity of men of ability, which would ensure that only "simple truths" would be made public,

the most obvious "simple truth" or slogan being that the Gothic constitution had been restored.

For Bolingbroke, the essential purpose of politics was to provide a stage where great actors might receive their due. There is, however, some ambiguity concerning the constitution of the audience. Bolingbroke distinguished between the cunning man who achieved by his "low artifice" the flattery of his "mercenary train," and the true statesman who "thinks of fame as well as of applause, and prefers that, which to be enjoyed must be given, to that which may be bought" (*P.K.*:45). Bolingbroke was here adverting to a difference between himself and Walpole. Walpole's politics, which accorded recognition to wealth, ensured that a possessor of wealth would be admired for his possessions and not for himself. His "left-handed wisdom called cunning" would, indeed, occasion anything but admiration for his person. Accordingly, Walpole's mercenary train were greedy rather than competent. Bolingbroke's men of spirit, in contrast, would be admired for their personal and particular qualities, which would shine forth in their splendid performances. Walpole's success meant that politics in Bolingbroke's sense had been destroyed. In the theatrical image, Walpole was a lover of darkness who busied himself turning out footlights. A patriot king, however, would restore the entire shabby playhouse to its former grandeur and allow a new season of patriotic performances to begin. Now, we have argued that the advisers of a patriot king are serious and competent men of ability. Such men are surely the best ones to judge the nobility of political action, being themselves moved by a kindred spirit. Performances would be held, as it were, before theater critics rather than members of the general public. Bolingbroke's audience, therefore, were a natural aristocracy competent enough to judge and serious enough to take part in the action should the opportunity arise.

Upon one thing historians of Bolingbroke and his age are agreed: he was a mixture of great ability and great insincerity. In the vocabulary used here, Bolingbroke himself was not a serious opponent of Walpole. Though his desire for recognition seemed bounded by no external virtues, perhaps within the economy of his "mercurial" soul his much discussed failure of nerve was equivalent to moderation in the soul of a just man. Then again, perhaps it was not a serious age. After all, gentlemen had exchanged their swords for canes and fought battles with books. A declared traitor such as Bolingbroke no longer lost his head, he lost his place in the Lords; a presumptive traitor such as Walpole was satirized, that is, he served as an occasion for the display of wit. Perhaps, indeed, recognition received in the privacy of salon or coffeehouse was as satisfying as that gained in the theater of the world.