

# Interpretation

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# The Value of the Feudalistic Relationship in Edmund Burke's Political Economy

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that Burke's seemingly contradictory support for modernistic economic liberalism and advocacy of political feudalism are not as incongruous as they appear. Indeed, Burke's opinion that the feudalistic reciprocal relationship is necessary for a free, modern, civilized society is key to understanding his ideas on political economy. The feudalistic reciprocal relationship, according to Burke, is a trustful relationship between the ruler and the ruled, because of which the ruler and the ruled can both enjoy civil liberty. This viewpoint contributes significantly to a comprehensive understanding of Burke's political philosophy.

## 1. BURKE, THE PRACTICAL STATESMAN

The eighteenth-century British statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke has generally been regarded as an antirevolutionary, conservative political thinker, owing to his fierce criticism of the French Revolution. Far from being an "armchair philosopher," Burke served as a member of Parliament in the House of Commons, and much of his philosophy was expressed in the form of speeches and correspondence. This is both a remarkable feature and at the same time one of the challenges in studying Burke. It would be rash to conclude, from the fact that Burke's ideas developed as per his speeches and correspondence for specific circumstances, that his philosophy was also confined to being circumstantial. As H. J. Laski said, Burke's principles "form a consistent whole."<sup>1</sup> This paper will demonstrate that Burke's criticism of the French Revolution included the crucial issue of "modernity," which is

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<sup>1</sup> Harold J. Laski, *Political Thought in England: Locke to Bentham* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 224–25.

generally thought to have been ushered in with the revolution, and that a careful reading of his ideas offers important suggestions for modern society.

In 1765, Burke became the private secretary of Lord Rockingham, prime minister of Great Britain, and in the same year, he was elected to the House of Commons as a member of Parliament in a by-election. In his maiden parliamentary speech in 1766, he called for the repeal of the Stamp Act imposed on the British American colonies. His speech was generally praised at the time.

The Stamp Act had been passed by Great Britain to finance its vast military costs by taxing stamped paper for newspapers, pamphlets, and even playing cards in the American colonies, prompting a fierce outcry by American colonists and a drastic deterioration in Anglo-American relations. Although the Rockingham cabinet succeeded in repealing the Stamp Act, they had no choice but to establish the Declaratory Act in its place and state that the British Houses of Parliament held legislative power over the colonies. The nonconformist preacher and radical Richard Price, who later became Burke's greatest adversary, sided with America and denounced the Declaratory Act as the chief cause of America's oppression.<sup>2</sup>

While Burke likewise spoke in favor of America, he continued to support the Declaratory Act. When it was debated on February 3, 1766, Burke posited that the British Parliament's right to legislate and tax the colonies was "the clearest right imaginable" in accordance with the spirit of the act, but he also noted that "the practical Exertion of many clear rights may by change of times and circumstances become impossible, may be inequitable,"<sup>3</sup> and urged caution and a prudential understanding of the circumstances in exercising Parliament's rights.<sup>4</sup> While acknowledging that the absolute right of legislature and taxation rested with the Houses of Parliament, he suggested a prudential approach to its enforcement. Here lies the discrepancy between Price and Burke concerning the Declaratory Act. This discrepancy formed an important part of their later ideological opposition.

At this time, Burke adopted a reconciliatory stance toward the American colonies striving for freedom and an aggressive stance toward the oppressive

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Price, *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (1776), in *Political Writings*, ed. D. O. Thomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Burke, *Speech on Declaratory Resolution* (1766), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 2, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 48–49.

<sup>4</sup> Similarly, see Edmund Burke, *Observations on a Late State of the Nation* (1769), in *Writings and Speeches*, 2:196.

British government; for this attitude, he was praised by radicals such as Thomas Paine and Price, and the former called him “a friend to mankind.”<sup>5</sup> However, after the French Revolution began in 1789, this favorable assessment was turned on its head. At the London Revolution Society, which was established to commemorate the Glorious Revolution in Britain in 1688, Price spoke in support of the French Revolution. Burke was initially cautious in his judgment of the French Revolution, but after learning about the content of Price’s speech, he began to fear the possibility of the French Revolution spreading to Great Britain; thus, he immediately began to script a rebuttal. Many scholars have wondered why Burke supported the Americans when they had stood up and demanded freedom, whereas he criticized the French for doing the same. This issue has been long debated as “the Burke Problem.”

Burke’s fundamental reasoning in sharply distinguishing the principles of the French Revolution from those of the Glorious Revolution (which he supported) was developed in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Published in 1790, *Reflections* has attained, in its posterity, the status of “a classic of English conservatism.”<sup>6</sup> After resigning his parliamentary seat in 1794, Burke remained politically active, presenting Prime Minister William Pitt with his free-market memorandum *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* in 1795. He died two years later, in 1797.

The period between the American and French Revolutions was a crucial turning point in British political history, during which Burke was active as a member of the House of Commons. His shifting attitudes during this period have caused much confusion in the interpretation of his thought.

## 2. THE NEW BURKE PROBLEM

As suggested above, a remarkable feature of Burke as a political theorist is that he was a practical statesman, but this has inevitably caused various “Burke Problems.” Since his opinions were set forth as practical statements in reaction to the political and economic issues of the time, his individual arguments appear to contain inconsistencies in certain areas when they are viewed together as a whole. The “Burke Problem” of his having supported the American Revolution while opposing the French Revolution is a typical example, and, as noted above, has been the subject of controversy.

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Part 1* (1791), in *Rights of Man, Common Sense, and Other Political Writings*, ed. Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 86.

<sup>6</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, editor’s introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, by Edmund Burke (Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), vii.

However, other “Burke Problems” have surfaced in recent years, owing to apparent inconsistencies between his economic and political theories.<sup>7</sup> Burke was an extreme proponent of free markets in economics, which is a modernistic idea; however, he was extremely conservative in his political thought, as exemplified by his defense of chivalry and religious spirit and support for preserving extreme inequality between commoners and the aristocracy in Europe. In other words, both modernistic and feudalistic ways of thinking seemingly resided in Burke.

For example, Burke noted in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* that “the laws of commerce...are the laws of Nature, and consequently, the laws of God,”<sup>8</sup> and argued that the economic realm must not be under intentional human control. Today, it is common for governments to support the economy through fiscal policy during times of depression, but Burke argued that such actions would worsen the situation. He also asserted that “labour is a commodity like every other, and rises or falls according to the demand.”<sup>9</sup> The view that labor is a commodity was extremely modernistic, and even Marx, who was a critic of Burke, cynically praised his prescient perception of the modern shift to the wage earner.<sup>10</sup> According to Marx, for the laborer

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<sup>7</sup> After I had composed and submitted this paper, Gregory M. Collins’s elaborate work *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke’s Political Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) was published. My theme of unraveling the inconsistency between Burke’s political traditionalism and economic liberalism is similar to the theme of his work; it can be inferred that this theme is quite important. Collins attempts to resolve this inconsistency from the perspective of Burke’s market liberalism based on virtuous manners. However, in this paper, the key to this inconsistency is found in Burke’s hierarchical feudalism. More precisely, although Burke was not a defender of real feudalism, he was a defender of the idealized Germanic (hierarchical) feudalism that partly compromised with eighteenth-century commercial reality. From this perspective, as mentioned below, we can comprehensively understand why Burke defended the hierarchical order even in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*; why he sympathized with the American Revolution, while criticizing the French Revolution; and why he claimed that European civil society is rooted in ancient Germanic society in both his early *An Abridgment of English History* and his later *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*. Indeed, as Collins correctly notes, the code of chivalric manners safeguarded “civilized social relations” (*Commerce and Manners*, 489), but, in my opinion, these “civilized social relations” were *hierarchical* for Burke; as he said, “The state of civil society, which necessarily generates this aristocracy, is a state of nature” (Edmund Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* [1791], in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 4, ed. Peter J. Marshall and Donald C. Bryant [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015], 449). Therefore, we must analyze what the code of chivalric manners in the hierarchical order meant to Burke. The essential point is not that we are rash to decide whether Burke was a modernist or a feudalist, but that we give his thoughts their proper place in the historical and ideological continuance of the characterization of Britain where the bourgeois revolution had not flared up, meaning the modernistic was not detached from the feudalistic.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Burke, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 9, ed. R. B. McDowell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 137.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (1867), in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 35 (London:

to be “a free seller of labour power, who carries his commodity wherever he finds a market” (i.e., for the laborer to be in charge of his own labor power), it is essential to eradicate guilds, serfdom, and feudal lords in favor of the sudden ascension of wage earners and industrial capitalists. Marx expressed this rhetorically as “the chevaliers d’industrie...succeed[ing] in supplanting the chevaliers of the sword”; by this, he meant that “the economic structure of capitalistic society has grown out of the economic structure of feudal society. The dissolution of the latter set free the elements of the former.”<sup>11</sup> In the feudal societies of the Middle Ages, laborers were tied to the means of production, such as the land, and their labor power was not considered a commodity that could be freely circulated in the marketplace. Consequently, Burke’s suggestion at the end of the eighteenth century that labor was a commodity demonstrated an extremely modernistic way of thinking. However, in *Reflections*, Burke seemed to suggest a sentimental defense of the feudal era:

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France [Marie Antoinette], then the dauphiness, at Versailles.... Oh! what a revolution! ... Little did I dream... that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honor and of cavaliers.... But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever. Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and heroic enterprise, is gone!<sup>12</sup>

Burke depicted the tragedy of Marie Antoinette in this way, lamenting the demise of “the age of chivalry” because of this affront to her. Burke’s glorification of “the age of chivalry” was felt by people at the time to be atavistic, and led to many caricatures depicting Burke as Don Quixote.<sup>13</sup> To borrow Marx’s words, Burke appears to have supported “the chevaliers d’industrie” in economic aspects, while supporting “the chevaliers of the sword” in political aspects.

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Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 747–48.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 706.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 66–67.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas K. Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

Isaac Kramnick was one of the first scholars to call attention to Burke's inconsistency, explaining it as a schizophrenic discourse.<sup>14</sup> J. G. A. Pocock attempted to resolve this inconsistency, insisting that "commerce can flourish only under the protection of manners, and that manners require the pre-eminence of religion and nobility, the natural protectors of society."<sup>15</sup> Pocock also thought that "to overthrow religion and nobility, therefore, is to destroy the possibility of commerce itself," but he did not give an explicit reason why Burke considered feudal manners an essential basis of civilized society. Concerning this inconsistency, C. B. Macpherson suggested that such a feudal discourse was merely rhetorical and that "his traditional order was already a capitalist order."<sup>16</sup> But was Burke's feudal discourse just a rhetorical device without much significance?

The key to this *new* "Burke Problem" of recent years is this question: Why did Burke simultaneously advocate economic liberalism and political feudalism? This is problematic because, according to the common ideas of social theory that continue to have currency, modern civilized society—namely, free-market society—is regarded as having emerged after feudal systems were destroyed. Influential and exceptional thinkers, such as Marx and Max Weber,<sup>17</sup> also believed this. In this sense, Burke's theories are outside this commonly accepted history of social theory.

### 3. PRICE'S THEORY AND BURKE'S REBUTTAL

The analysis of Burke's key work of political theory, *Reflections*, is indispensable to an understanding of the logical structure of his inconsistent ideologies. Given that Burke wrote *Reflections* as a rebuttal to Price's glorification of the French Revolution, we should first analyze Price's ideology.

Price's support for the French Revolution was grounded on his radical liberalism connected with the Lockean "idea of *Self-direction*, or *Self-government*"<sup>18</sup> he proposed in *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty* (1776), published during the American Revolution. This is the belief that humankind should determine its own path and that this was the most

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Kramnick, *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 199.

<sup>16</sup> C. B. Macpherson, *Burke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Max Weber, *General Economic History*, trans. Frank H. Knight (New York: Collier Books, 1966 [1923]).

<sup>18</sup> Price, *Observations*, 22.

important “freedom.” Price applied this logic consistently to all political issues. At the time of the American Revolution, America was a British colony and, therefore, subject to British rule and unable to decide its own path; in other words, Price believed that America did not possess the freedom of self-determination, making the revolution for independence inevitable. At the time of the French Revolution, the existence of the oppressive ruling class of the aristocracy and the priesthood precluded French citizens from making their own decisions, which meant they too had no “freedom,” making democratic revolution a legitimate response.<sup>19</sup>

Burke took issue with Price's proclamation that the French Revolution could be supported by the *same* principles as those of the earlier Glorious Revolution in England. If this were true, then the principles of the French Revolution would be linked to the constitutional principles of Britain and, ultimately, flow across the Channel. In the Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689, Protestants overthrew the Catholic-friendly King James II. Price considered this an illustration of the people ousting their king in favor of a new selection through their own volition, thus embodying the exercise of the people's self-determining freedom.<sup>20</sup> In other words, Price's politics was premised on freedom and the idea that the governed should not acquiesce meekly to the existing order; the governed should instead determine their own order consciously.

In contrast, Burke thought that the Glorious Revolution obviated the need for the British order to undergo revolutionary chaos for a second time. To avoid revolutionary chaos, he wrote, “the Revolution was made to preserve our *ancient* indisputable laws and liberties, and that *ancient* constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty.”<sup>21</sup> He also called the British constitution that had materialized freedom “an *entailed inheritance*.” Burke praised the British constitution, which had developed in a context of historical continuity, as it “preserves a unity in so great a diversity of parts,”<sup>22</sup> allowing mutual checks and balances between the monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. This represents a common-law perspective, one that sees historical continuity as institutional evolution and the basis for institutional legitimacy.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Richard Price, *A Discourse on the Love of Our Country* (1789), in *Political Writings*, 195–96.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, 186.

<sup>21</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>23</sup> As a young man, Burke was sometimes critical of the common-law approach (Edmund Burke, *Fragment: An Essay towards a History of the Laws of England* [1757], in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 1, ed. Tim O. McLoughlin and James T. Boulton [Oxford: Oxford University

Consequently, Burke thought that a complicated constitution, enshrining coexistence and equilibrium between various actors, could not be created through the reasoning of one generation of humankind alone and without historical continuity. The stable, fine order of the British constitution had been revised and cultivated through various events in a long historical process, and Burke argued that it is this stable, fine order of the spontaneously formed constitution that had supported Britain's prosperity. Thus, he contended that the constitution had secured its legitimacy as "a prescriptive constitution." This approach was based on the idea that humankind lacked enough wisdom to create such an order within complex human society. Consequently, the British constitution must necessarily be something greater than human knowledge: "the happy effect of following Nature, which is wisdom without reflection, and above it."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, "in old establishments various correctives have been found for their aberrations from theory. Indeed, they are the results of various necessities and expedencies.... The means taught by experience may be better suited to political ends than those contrived in the original project.... I think all this might be curiously exemplified in the British Constitution."<sup>25</sup> In other words, Burke believed that the British constitution was an accumulation of historical and experiential wisdom. Burke atavistically called the experiential wisdom that had accumulated throughout history "prejudice." The word *prejudice* had negative connotations in Burke's time, as it does today.<sup>26</sup> However, for Burke, it meant something that was thought and held to be true over the years and, insofar as it incorporated practical and instructive truths from one's predecessors' experiences and reflections, was nothing other than "the prejudice, with the

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Press, 1997], 321–31; see J. G. A. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], 202–32). However, he later became more sympathetic to the common-law theory, perhaps because he noticed the ideological value of common law, especially its antirevolutionary value. On this, see Peter J. Stanlis, *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958); Reed Browning, "The Origin of Burke's Ideas Revisited," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18, no. 1 (1984): 57–71. Having abandoned his study of law for literature and politics in his youth, Burke was ambivalent toward law itself (see Frederick P. Lock, *Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France* [Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1985], 20).

<sup>24</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>26</sup> "In this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess that...instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree; and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices" (*ibid.*, 76). This famous passage in *Reflections* in support of prejudice demonstrates Burke's awareness that his opinion was atavistic.

reason involved.”<sup>27</sup> The two most prominent reasoned prejudices in Europe were chivalry and religious spirit:

When ancient opinions and rules of life are taken away, the loss cannot possibly be estimated. From that moment, we have no compass to govern us; nor can we know distinctly to what port we steer. Europe, undoubtedly, taken in a mass, was in a flourishing condition the day on which your Revolution was completed. How much of that prosperous state was owing to the spirit of our old manners and opinions [the chivalry and religious spirit] is not easy to say; but as such causes cannot be indifferent in their operation, we must presume that on the whole, their operation was beneficial.<sup>28</sup>

#### 4. SUPPORTING PREJUDICE: CHIVALRY AND RELIGIOUS SPIRIT

When arguing for “the prejudice, with the reason involved,” Burke was well aware that chivalry and religious spirit were illusory. Nevertheless, because he saw Europe flourishing when it had possessed these traits, and considered this proof of their presumptive benefit, he felt the onus to support them as “the pleasing illusions”<sup>29</sup> in consequentialist terms. For Burke, one of the benefits of chivalry and religious spirit was the suppression of passions. Chivalry gave ethical norms to those of high rank, forcing them to behave in ways that would be respected by others and to refrain from discreditable self-seeking, thereby leading them to provide public services. In Burke’s eyes, chivalry was nothing but a system of manners designed for the *voluntary restriction* of the aristocracy’s private passions; a civilized ethical system serving as “one of the greatest controlling powers on earth, the sense of fame and estimation.”<sup>30</sup> Montesquieu also noted this point in *De l’esprit des lois*, writing that “the nature of honor is to have the whole universe as a censor.”<sup>31</sup> Essentially, chivalry could suppress wild private passions *within the context of freedom, without recourse to violence or oppression*: “Without force or opposition, [the spirit of chivalry] subdued the fierceness of pride and power; it obliged sovereigns to submit to the soft collar of social esteem, compelled stern authority to submit to elegance, and gave a domination, vanquisher of

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 68–69.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>31</sup> Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989 [1748]), 71. On Montesquieu’s intellectual influence on Burke, see Cecil P. Courtney, *Montesquieu and Burke* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963).

laws, to be subdued by manners.”<sup>32</sup> Burke believed that religion had a similar effect and that the values of “mercy” and “tenderness” espoused in Christianity helped to restrain and calm the wild passions of Europeans:

The Christian religion, having once taken root in Kent, spread itself with great rapidity throughout all the other Saxon kingdoms in England. The manners of the Saxons underwent a notable alteration by this change in their religion; their ferocity was much abated, they became more mild and sociable, and their laws began to partake of the softness of their manners, everywhere recommending mercy and a tenderness for Christian blood.<sup>33</sup>

Burke reasoned that if “the prejudice, with the reason involved,” of chivalry and religion suppressed people’s wild passions and self-interest, instilling calm and refined, civilized ethics in society,<sup>34</sup> then the French revolutionist’s utter rejection of chivalry and religious spirit, embodied in the aristocracy and priesthood, must surely be a rejection of civilization and a retreat into savagery.

As well as being useful for suppressing private passions, chivalry and religious spirit also had the effect of transforming those passions into public goods. Burke lamented that the loss of chivalry, in which one *voluntarily* offered one’s life up to public service, meant the loss of “the cheap defence of nations,”<sup>35</sup> and noted that “without all doubt, charity to the poor is a direct and obligatory duty upon all Christians.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, he hoped that Christians’ voluntary charity would provide a social and economic safety net. The denial of private elements was a mark of honor for the aristocracy and priesthood, and thus an affirmation of the self. An ethos of denying self-interest in favor of public intentionality made ruling possible without tyrannical coercion, materializing in the form of *small government*. With this point in mind, it seems possible to understand how Burke could jointly, and

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<sup>32</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Edmund Burke, *An Essay towards an Abridgment of English History (1757-?)*, in *Writings and Speeches*, 1:404.

<sup>34</sup> The contention that chivalry and religion could calm and refine passions was shared by Scottish Enlightenment thinkers of that period. See Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996 [1767]), and William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles the Fifth* (London: Routledge, 1857 [1769]). On the relationship between the school of the Scottish Enlightenment and Burke, see Daniel O’Neill, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), and Anna Plassart, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 67.

<sup>36</sup> Burke, *Thoughts and Details*, 129.

without contradiction, argue for economic liberalism and the feudalistic elements of chivalry and religion. As voluntary forms of public spirit in which self-denial is transformed into self-affirmation, chivalry and religious spirit were neither simple prejudice nor fallacies, but rather excellent examples of “prejudice, with the reason involved.”

Conversely, Burke supposed that the democratic government created by the French Revolution meant that the nonaristocratic and nonpriestly commoners, who repudiated chivalry and religious spirit, in other words, people of low rank who were unable to deny self-interest, would come to power; consequently, the explosion of private passions of the “Swinish Multitude” would inevitably follow. Burke believed that “the demokratik commonwealth is the foodful nurse of ambition.”<sup>37</sup>

##### 5. BURKE'S VIEW OF ECONOMIC ORDER

We must consider Burke's view of economic order if we are to further understand the significance of chivalry and religious spirit for him in terms of the political economy. As stated above, Burke was a proponent of economic liberalism, but this did not blind him to its inevitable consequences; as he wrote in *Reflections*:

[The labourer] worked from dawn to dark in the innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations to which by the social economy so many wretches are inevitably doomed. If it were not generally pernicious to disturb the natural course of things and to impede in any degree the great wheel of circulation which is turned by the strangely-directed labour of these unhappy people, I should be infinitely more inclined forcibly to rescue them from their miserable industry than violently to disturb the tranquil repose of monastic quietude.<sup>38</sup>

If a division of labor was to develop and economic liberalism was to advance, then many people would have to be positioned within poor working environments as laborers. Of course, while Burke wanted to “rescue them from their miserable industry,” he also indicated, by his reference to “the strangely-directed labour of these unhappy people,” that the social arrangement of individuals was the provenance of a divine will; therefore, any reorganization through human agency would be “generally pernicious.” As we saw, economic laws were “the laws of God” and could not be controlled by

<sup>37</sup> Burke, *Appeal*, 441.

<sup>38</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 141.

human will. Underlying this way of thinking was the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of the natural hierarchical order and the “Great Chain of Being,” which was widely influential during the eighteenth century. Both posited that the social arrangement of individuals and their incident responsibilities were determined by nature.<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, Burke said, “you do not imagine that I wish to confine power, authority, and distinction to blood and names and titles,” partly expressing a negative view of static hierarchical order—as Macpherson spoke of Burke’s idea of a “natural aristocracy” as “the idea of meritocracy”<sup>40</sup>—but he subsequently also said, “the temple of honour ought to be seated on an eminence”<sup>41</sup> as he sought to defend social hierarchy by minimizing the possibility of advancement in social status.

Of course, Burke’s idea that such a natural hierarchical order should be accepted was antithetical to the revolutionaries’ ideas of freedom, equality, and the justness of restructuring the order through human will. This was the greatest problem for Burke at the time of the French Revolution: perceiving it to be “a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions” of “the most important of all revolutions,”<sup>42</sup> he immediately understood that the French Revolution was not a simple transformation of institutions but *a transformation of people’s way of thinking*: “We preserve the whole of our feelings still native and entire, unsophisticated by pedantry and infidelity.... We fear God; we look up with awe to kings, with affection to Parliaments, with duty

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<sup>39</sup> On Burke’s desire to revive the Aristotelian *ordo ad finem*, see Fukuda Kan’ichi, *Kindai seiji genri seiritsushi josetsu* [An introduction to the history of modern political principles] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1971), 416. Pappin also argued that Burke held an Aristotelian ethical view of the state (see Joseph Pappin III, “The Place of Laissez-Faire Economics in Edmund Burke’s Politics of Order” [paper delivered at the Austrian Scholars Conference, March 16, 2002]). On the influence of Thomism on Burke, see Francis Canavan, *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1960), and Joseph Pappin III, “Edmund Burke and the Thomistic Foundations of Natural Law,” in *An Imaginative Whig: Reassessing the Life and Thought of Edmund Burke*, ed. Ian Crowe (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005). Thomism is, of course, linked with the concept of the Great Chain of Being, on which see Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936). Kramnick pioneered the notion that Burke was influenced by the idea of the Great Chain of Being (*Rage of Edmund Burke*, 183). The concept of the Great Chain of Being was widely used to oppose revolutions seeking to overturn the hierarchical order (Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*, 205). From the perspective of the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of the natural hierarchical order, we see that there is an overlap between Otto Brunner’s concept of *das ganze Haus*, which focuses on the virtue of rulers, and Burke’s views on hierarchical order and the virtuous ruler. On the concept of *das ganze Haus*, see Otto Brunner, “Das ‘ganze Haus’ und die alteuropäische ‘Ökonomik,’” in *Neue Wege der Verfassungs- und Sozialgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968).

<sup>40</sup> Macpherson, *Burke*, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 44.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

to magistrates, with reverence to priests, and with respect to nobility. Why? Because, when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is *natural* to be so affected.<sup>43</sup> Whereas commoners had always looked up to their superiors and uncomplainingly devoted themselves to their tough labor, as it was self-evidently “*natural*” for them, the French Revolution proclaimed the ideas that humankind was free and equal, that the position of laborers was not self-evident, and that anyone could have the “ambition” to become a ruler, turning the previously existing spiritual value-system on its head. However, civilized society had developed along the lines of a liberal economy and division of labor necessitating many laborers to perform tough jobs. Despite this, the French revolutionaries destroyed the traditional belief in an order requiring people to accept the unavoidable and unpleasant consequences of a civilized society. This would inevitably lead to the disobedience of the people in the face of the existing order and the buildup of dissatisfaction. The common people acting as politicians, Burke said, “never will quietly settle in ordinary occupations, nor submit to any scheme, which must reduce them to an entirely private condition, or to the exercise of a steady, peaceful, but obscure and unimportant industry.”<sup>44</sup>

For Burke, it was impossible for tough labor to cease, given “the social economy” of civilized society, or for everyone to become a ruler; yet, the traditional “sentiments, manners, and moral opinions” necessary for accepting this stern reality were destroyed by the revolutionaries. Burke predicted that if the revolutionaries were to attempt to rule such refuseniks, because anti-establishment masses would not accept their situation of being the ruled and laboring, military force would inevitably be requested; therefore, the French Revolution government would eventually have to “send troops to sabre and to bayonet us into a submission to fear and force.”<sup>45</sup>

Burke held the idea that a highly civilized society requiring many laborers was essential because of its benefits, but he also agonized over the modern anguish, discussed by Erich Fromm,<sup>46</sup> of laborers who would no longer accept their social position as *natural*. In this context, Burke made his atavistic, near-hopeless appeal for the necessity of the “prejudice” of chivalry because, as previously stated, it was “that proud submission that dignified obedience,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 75–76.

<sup>44</sup> Edmund Burke, *Thoughts on French Affairs* (1791), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 8, ed. Leslie G. Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 366.

<sup>45</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 197.

<sup>46</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Rinehart, 1941).

that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom!” Chivalry was a moral ethos in which freedom and dignity are wrought from subordination, and self-denial is transformed into self-affirmation.<sup>47</sup> Were chivalry shared among the people, they would not view self-denying submission as unfreedom, and they would *voluntarily* submit to the established order. These “principles of natural subordination”<sup>48</sup> meant ensuring the conditions of freedom and order without oppressing the people through despotic law or coercion: “When the old feudal and chivalrous spirit of *fealty*, which, by freeing kings from fear, freed both kings and subjects from the precautions of tyranny, shall be extinct in the minds of men, plots and assassinations will be anticipated by preventive murder and preventive confiscation. . . . Kings will be tyrants from policy when subjects are rebels from principle.”<sup>49</sup> This expresses the dual importance of chivalry in a free society. While chivalry was the ethical source of the ruler’s (aristocracy’s) gentleness and tolerance and their public service, based on their sense of honor, it was the ethical source of the *voluntary* submission of the ruled to a ruler who provides good governance. Consequently, the voluntary submission of those who are ruled is *not* unconditional: as Burke asserts, “To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely,”<sup>50</sup> and the ruled must voluntarily submit only to a deserving, worthwhile order.

This reciprocal relationship between the ruler and the ruled is depicted in Burke’s early work *An Abridgment of English History*, written before his foray into politics, and could already be seen in the feudalistic relationship<sup>51</sup> between the Germanic lord and vassal that formed the source of chivalry.<sup>52</sup> Recognizing a reciprocal relationship between the lord’s duty to support and the vassal soldier’s allegiance, Burke believed that this was the source of civil-military

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<sup>47</sup> Tom Furniss calls this linguistic relationship “the oxymoronic tensions.” See Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke’s Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 175.

<sup>48</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 215.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Burke, *Abridgment*, 430–34.

<sup>52</sup> The view that chivalry originates in the description of the German invested soldier in the thirteenth chapter of Tacitus’s *Germania* (as referenced by Burke) is widely shared today (see Philippe du Puy de Clinchamps, *La Chevalerie* [Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1961]). In the eighteenth century, John Millar also argued that the manners and customs of German soldiers were the source of chivalry (see John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* [Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2006 (1771)], 135). Pocock argues that Millar’s theory of chivalry influenced Burke’s (*Virtue, Commerce, and History*, 198).

governments in Europe,<sup>53</sup> thus accepting, like Montesquieu, the legend of the German forest and seeing it as the base for the British constitution. Such political awareness, of course, resonates with the idea mentioned above of *noblesse oblige* aligning with the feudalistic natural hierarchical order.

When this is understood, the conventional “Burke Problem” of his supposedly conflicting views of the American and French Revolutions is revealed to be an illusion. The reason why Burke was able to harbor support for both the Declaration Act and the American colonies *without contradiction* is explained by his political philosophy as well as by the political situation at the time. He understood Britain’s position as a colonial ruler from the perspective of the feudalistic reciprocal relationship, which required it to behave toward the American colonies not with exploitation but with protection and grace. This was similar to Burke’s way of thinking during the French Revolution, which could be characterized as supporting a lord-vassal, feudalistic relationship in direct opposition to the revolutionist idea of leveling, or turning the ruled into the rulers. He believed that if treated as a subject, with protection and grace, the American colonies would be willing to serve as a vassal to its lord, Britain. For example, as he said in a speech directed at those living in the American colonies, “You (as we gratefully acknowledge) had acquiesced most cheerfully under that prudent reserve of the Constitution, at that happy moment, when neither you nor we apprehended a further return of the exercise of invidious powers.”<sup>54</sup> He believed that when the colonies were not overly interfered with and were ruled with tolerance, colonists would willingly acquiesce to rule without controversy. Therefore, Burke continued to think within the limits of the framework of the British Empire, even while adopting a pro-American stance.

This feudalistic reciprocal relationship of the lord’s protection and grace and the subjects’ voluntary submission can be seen in Germanic society, which, as we saw, was believed to be the fount of the feudal system; it was Burke’s belief that this feudalistic reciprocal relationship delivered true freedom without the need for much legal or political constraint. Conversely, he

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<sup>53</sup> Even in his later years, Burke believed that European civil society was based on the ancient Germanic (hierarchical) society, saying, “The whole of the polity and oeconomy of every country in Europe has been derived from the same sources. It was drawn from the old Germanic or Gothic customary; from the feudal institutions which must be considered as an emanation from that customary.... From hence arose the several orders...(which are called States) in every European country” (Edmund Burke, *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* [1795], in *Writings and Speeches*, 9:248).

<sup>54</sup> Edmund Burke, *Address to the Colonists* (1777), in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 3, ed. Warren M. Elofson and John A. Woods (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 285.

believed that if a leveled modernistic government would be “the foodful nurse of ambition,” it would bring about dissatisfaction and rebellion among the masses; since the truth of democracy was that “the people at large can never become the subject of punishment by any human hand,”<sup>55</sup> it would result in the complete loss of statesmen’s political responsibility and a political system replete with chaos.

#### 6. REFLECTIONS AND THOUGHTS AND DETAILS ON SCARCITY

It is now clear why even *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, Burke’s treatise most focused on economic liberalism, discusses hierarchical order (a feudalistic concept) while, oddly enough, developing a theory of the free-market economy (a modernistic concept) like that in *Reflections*.

There is no doubt that Burke consistently took an economically liberal stance even before writing *Reflections* and *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*. In *Tracts relating to Popery Laws* (1765), written in his youth, Burke states, “preventing its [landed property] free circulation through the community” is “a most leading article of ill policy” and that if land were monopolized by English absentee landlords, the people of Ireland would be unable to possess “industry” and this would “cut off that laudable avarice which every wise state has cherished as one of the first principles of its greatness.”<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, in *Speech on Economical Reform* (1780), he states, “commerce... flourishes most when it is left to itself. Interest, the great guide of commerce, is not a blind one. It is very well able to find its own way.”<sup>57</sup> The phrases “laudable avarice” and “Interest, the great guide of commerce” are suggestive of Burke’s contemporary Adam Smith,<sup>58</sup> who advocated self-interest, holding that “by pursuing his own interest [the individual] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 82.

<sup>56</sup> Edmund Burke, *Tracts relating to Popery Laws* (1765), in *Writings and Speeches*, 9:476–77.

<sup>57</sup> Edmund Burke, *Speech on Economical Reform* (1780), in *Writings and Speeches*, 3:535.

<sup>58</sup> One of the reasons why Burke supported economic liberalism since his youth was that he was born in Ireland, which suffered from economic destitution arising from English mercantilism. Thus, Burke highly praised Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, but he took an economically liberal stance even prior to its publication. Therefore, to Burke, *The Wealth of Nations* was merely “an excellent digest of all that is valuable in former Oeconomical writers.” See Ian Simpson Ross, *The Life of Adam Smith*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 376.

<sup>59</sup> Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Bantam Classic, 2003 [1776]), 572.

Of course, there are commonalities and differences between the economically liberal ideas of Burke and Smith.<sup>60</sup> Both Burke and Smith believed that society comprises diverse individuals who take up different roles under the concept of the Great Chain of Being. However, whereas Smith believed that the differences in people's abilities result mainly from acquired education, customs, and division of labor,<sup>61</sup> Burke mainly linked the diverse roles of individuals with innate, divinely granted duty. Burke said, "having disposed and marshalled us by a divine tactick, not according to our will, but according to His, He has, in and by that disposition, virtually subjected us to act the part which belongs to the place assigned us."<sup>62</sup> This idea of Burke's is unmistakably feudalistic and medieval. In asserting that the current status of the masses is based on the divine will, he denied the belief promoted by the supporters of the French Revolution that the masses can transform their status. As in *Reflections*, Burke employed the Aristotelian-Thomistic concept of a natural hierarchical order and the discourse of the Great Chain of Being to assert the following in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*: "The mind is the most valuable and the most important; and in this scale, the whole of agriculture is in a natural and just order; the beast is as an informing principle to the plough and cart; the labourer is as reason to the beast; and the farmer is as a thinking and presiding principle to the labourer. An attempt to break this chain of subordination in any part is equally absurd."<sup>63</sup>

The hierarchical economic order extending to the relationships between the beast, the farmer, and the laborer is "a natural and just order" following divine will, which cannot be overturned by human will, demonstrating that Burke maintained a medieval, feudalistic view of social order,<sup>64</sup> unlike Smith's modernistic perspective of social order.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, like the rela-

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<sup>60</sup> Regarding the detailed differences between Smith's and Burke's political and economic ideas, see Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>61</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 26.

<sup>62</sup> Burke, *Appeal*, 442.

<sup>63</sup> Burke, *Thoughts and Details*, 125.

<sup>64</sup> Burke was not especially feudalistic; the view of social order most widely shared in Hanoverian England was of a hierarchical order consisting of a combination of people with diverse characteristics and conditions due to providence. See David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>65</sup> It must be noted that Smith, especially in his later years, politically recognized the aristocracy as favorable for the social order and that the relationship between the aristocracy and commoners must be reciprocal. See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 6th ed. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000 [1790]), 334–44.

tionship between lord and vassal, this relationship between the farmer and the laborer was understood as reciprocal.

It is the interest of the farmer that his selfish work should be done with effect and celerity; and that cannot be, unless the laborer is well fed, and otherwise found with such necessaries of animal life, according to its habitudes, as may keep the body in full force, and the mind gay and cheerful.... It is therefore the first and fundamental interest of the labourer that the farmer should have a full incoming profit on the product of his labour.... [The benign and wise Disposer of all things] obliges men, whether they will or not, in pursuing their own interests, to connect the general good with their own individual success.<sup>66</sup>

Thus, Burke declared, “in the case of the farmer and the labourer, their interests are always the same”;<sup>67</sup> he did not envision class conflict. Smith, who held modernistic ideas—for instance, he was critical of large-scale land ownership and state religious systems—sensed conflict between capitalists and laborers, and Marx later carried on this argument. However, for Burke, a reciprocal, mutually beneficial relationship between capitalists and laborers, like the one between lord and vassal, was a prerequisite for economic liberalism, and he believed that without government intervention, a harmonious hierarchical order would form between the classes, based on the interests of all parties, if they were granted freedom. Thus, for Burke, modernistic economic liberalism coexisted with a medieval hierarchical order. Both Smith and Burke believed in “private vices, public benefits,” but their views of the social order, upon which this idea was predicated, differed entirely.

However, Burke did not believe that the relationship between capitalists and laborers was harmonized by virtue of a community of interests *alone*. As his premise was a medieval view of social order, duties according to positions accompanied the relationship between capitalists and laborers. Echoing the “principles of natural subordination” in *Reflections*, Burke asserts that “patience, labour, sobriety, frugality, and religion should be recommended to”<sup>68</sup> the laborers; they should work silently and submit themselves to capitalists and the rich rather than rising against them and destroying the hierarchical order. He warned that capitalists and the rich are “trustees for those who labour,” and that the fall of capitalists would mean the self-destruction of laborers. More importantly, as previously described, capitalists

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<sup>66</sup> Burke, *Thoughts and Details*, 125.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

and the rich had a Christian duty to aid the poor. That is, their relationship, while founded on hierarchical subjugation-subordination, is not a unilateral relationship of control and servitude, but a bilateral, mutually beneficial relationship. To somewhat humanize the relation of subjugation-subordination at the foundation of human politics, economy, and society, Burke attempted to redefine this relationship as mutually beneficial and bilateral. As *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* focused on current economic affairs, it is natural that it did not develop this notion fully. However, it is readily apparent that Burke's real intention was consistently to portray the relationship of subjugation-subordination between capitalists and laborers as mutually beneficial and bilateral. This reciprocal relationship could not be moral unless it were formed through the free will of capitalists and laborers rather than forced by the government. According to Burke, "the manner, mode, time, choice of objects, and proportion" of the duty to provide charity to the poor "are left to private discretion; and perhaps, for that very reason it is performed with the greater satisfaction...as the exercise of a virtue most suitable to a being sensible of its own infirmity."<sup>69</sup> Burke's *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* asserted that a distinction should be made between "what belongs to laws, and what manners alone can regulate," and socioeconomic relationships clearly belong to the latter. It goes without saying that this is bound up with the argument in *Reflections* that the social order should be maintained via manners rather than iron-fisted control, such as the French revolutionary government.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Burke's unchanging view of a civilized society was one where the rulers must comprise a small number of elites, and the majority must submit to the ruler and also engage in "obscure and unimportant industry": "Those who attempt to level never equalize. In all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost. The levelers, therefore, only change and pervert the natural order of things."<sup>70</sup> Burke believed that the French Revolution would have been ultimately unable to change this composition. The accuracy of his cool-headed political awareness was ironically vindicated by the fact that Britain, having been criticized by the French revolutionaries as an unequal and oppressive country, went on to secure greater civil liberties, whereas the French revolutionary system ended with terrible oppression. For Burke, one of the reasons for the French Revolution's failure

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>70</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 43.

was its aim to ensure “social freedom”<sup>71</sup> *through institutional formalization*. By introducing “a pure democracy,” that is, leveling, or turning the ruled into the rulers, the French revolutionaries attempted to eliminate subordination, believing that they could thereby secure *social freedom*. This radical way of thinking has appeared in various forms, such as Rousseau’s democratic treatise *Du contrat social* and Marx’s “die Wahre Demokratie” argument,<sup>72</sup> and has become a basso continuo in the history of ideas.

However, Burke held the opposite view, believing that the relationship between the ruler and the ruled could never be eliminated by human hand. Instead, strengthening the relationship of mutual trust, whereby the ruler governs the ruled with tolerance and prudence while the ruled voluntarily submit to the benevolent ruler (on account of his benevolence) with minimal coercion and laws, would ensure peace and freedom in civilized society. This is the true meaning of Burke’s statement, “To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely”; it is also the reason he argued for the atavistic appeal of chivalry as the essential ethical basis for the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and, hence, for a free and civilized society.

Here, then, is my resolution of the new “Burke Problem” articulated at the beginning of this article. Burke thought feudalistic chivalry was necessary precisely because he supported a free, modern, and civilized society.<sup>73</sup> He thought that feudalistic reciprocal relations, replete with trust between the ruler and the ruled and mediated by chivalry, mitigated the political and economic alienation of the people who could not escape from their position of being the ruled and laboring, which would ensure the freedom of a civilized society. Burke’s understanding of these issues is surely relevant for those of us who are tormented in the present by the political and economic alienation of late-capitalist society. The modern world seems to be facing an unprecedented collapse of these trustful relationships between the ruler and the ruled. As modern society cannot depend on Burke’s “pleasing illusions,” and must instead confront more difficult circumstances, we must realize that Burke’s understanding of the issues has not yet been overcome and is still relevant.

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<sup>71</sup> Edmund Burke, “To Depont (November 1789),” in *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, vol. 6, ed. Alfred Cobban and Robert A. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 42.

<sup>72</sup> Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* (1843), in *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 3–129.

<sup>73</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Kojima Hidenobu, *Dentoushugi to bunmeishakai: Edmund Burke no seijikeizaitetsugaku* [Traditionalism and civil society: Edmund Burke’s philosophy of political economy] (Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2016).