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AN INTEREST IN CORRUPTION?

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Abstract

Uncertainty clouds the development of the concept of corruption in modern political discourse. Although it is widely assumed that the concept underwent a substantial narrowing of focus during the eighteenth century, the conceptual parameters of corruption in eighteenth century thought have yet to be fully explored. In broad terms, prior to the eighteenth century the concept of corruption could be said to have connoted the moral decay of the polity due to the incidence of 'self-interested' conduct. By the early nineteenth century however, corruption denoted less a moral failure in the polity, so much as the unwarranted intrusion of 'self-interested' private motives of a financial kind in the fulfilment of public, political office. Crucial to this shift of emphasis, I will argue, was the reconsideration of 'interest' in eighteenth century thought. In arguing so, I wish to complicate the conventional histories of 'interest' which have tended to emphasise its 'positive' role in Enlightenment thought. On this view, the positive evaluation of 'self-interest' was thought crucial to the rise of modern polities based on the pursuit of the common good (ie. the peace and prosperity of the populace under a sovereign state) incorporating a more coherent delineation of private from public domains. I will argue however, that Early-Modern and Enlightenment thought (c.1500-1800) was characterised by persistent doubts about the role of interest in morality and politics. Part of these doubts related to the diversity of interests, including self-interest, national-interest, factional or party-interest. A crucial question this paper seeks to explore is where corruption features as a problem in the context of these manifold interests?

1. Introduction

Few concepts in Western political thought are more frequently paired, but so infrequently analysed as interest and corruption. It has become an axiom of contemporary social scientific analysis that the term corruption refers to an improper intrusion of self-interested motives in the performance of one's duties in public office (Nye 2002, 284). Those interests routinely defined as corrupt in the existing literature are those in personal gain carried on through, alongside, under the guise of, or at the expense of the fulfilment of the duties of public office. This view implies an irresolvable tension, or radical disjunction between the self-interest manifested in corruption, and the public interest manifested in the disinterested fulfilment of public office. The point however, is not that self-interest as such is incompatible with public office, but that particular kinds of self-interest may be. Here, the focus is usually placed on the self-interested search for monetary or material gain.¹ Nonetheless, few would deny that the average public servant or politician should not be concerned with their own remuneration, or with their search for career advancement. The problem once again is not with self-interest as such, but with the degree of self-interest and the degree to which it interferes with the fulfilment of public office and incurs costs on others (eg. Pufendorf, 1691/2003, 229).

This relationship between interest and corruption may thus be understood as a two-fold problem. One may be called the problem of motive, the other, the problem of consequence. The problem of motive resides in the individual's intent in public office – put simply, whether one intends to serve the public, or to serve oneself. The problem of consequence resides in the effect of self-interested actions – whether the self-interest in question incurs a cost (material or otherwise) on the public in general or at large. In much Early-Modern European thought however, corruption denoted rampant self-interest causing personal moral decay, or interest in self distracting from godliness and virtue (eg. Baxter 1707, 352-60). Either of these could become widespread and affect a whole polity. My focus in this paper is to explore how the more modern understanding of corruption (as a particular kind and degree of self-interest) emerged in Western political thought. I will argue that its development hinged not simply on newly emerging concepts of interest, but on new and unexpected ideas of public office.

2. Of Self and National Interests

In Albert Hirschman's (1977, 15-20) classic study, the concept of interest was said to emerge and rise to prominence in Western thought in the wake of the disastrous wars of religion in France in the sixteenth century. It was in this context, he argued, that a variety of largely Huguenot writers sought to envisage a moderate, centrist politics based on the calculated pursuit of a unifying national interest in opposition to passionate religious convictions, or aristocratic desires for glory. Gunn (1969, 43) had earlier explored the influence of such ideas of national interest in British political thought, and argued that the idea of interest only became a 'social force' for controlling individual human conduct (rather than state conduct) in the later seventeenth century. Hirschman (1977, 63) argues that the transition of the concept of interest from national to social force owed much to the declining influence of purely religious condemnations of money making which came to be seen as 'peaceful and inoffensive' in comparison to warfare and the 'passionate pastimes and savage exploits of the aristocracy'. This in turn allowed a variety of thinkers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century to reconfigure the self-interested pursuit of

money-making as an essentially virtuous activity, the bedrock of ‘industriousness and assiduity... frugality, punctuality, and... probity’, and therefore a beneficial force (Hirschman 1982, 1464).

Part of the problem in tracing the rise of interest in British political thought relates to the sheer number of interests, whether self, national, party, or factional (McGill 1959, 808-27). According to Gunn (1968, 551-64; Hollander 1977, 133-52; Mansbridge 1990) however, from the seventeenth century, the bedrock of self-interest became an axiom of British political discourse, a potentially quantifiable guide to political predication and policy. According to Holmes (1995, 47, 56), self-interest was conceptualised as an essentially peaceful mental discipline based on instrumental or ‘strategic rationality’ in contrast to the violence and instinctiveness of emotions and passions (Holmes 1995, 56). In doing so, Holmes argues, Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as Smith and Hume reconceptualised social order by substituting the virtues associated with rational self-interest (probity and thrift for instance) for those which had reinforced a less peaceful (and less democratic) social order (such as valour or pride). In arguing so however, Holmes and Hirschman have tended to obscure a more complex association between national and self-interests in Enlightenment thought. What is more, they miss a significant feature of this association, namely, its articulation in theories of civilization which sought to explain the emergence of sociable manners alongside intensifying state sovereignty and the increasing lethality of warfare waged by sovereign states.

3. Civilized Interests

A variety of intellectuals in eighteenth century Europe saw the rise of interest – and of national interest in particular – as a defining characteristic of Europe’s civilization. As Lord Bolingbroke (1752/1972, 82-3) put it,

New interests beget new maxims of government, and new methods of conduct. These in their turns, beget new manners, new habits, new customs. ... Such a period therefore is... an epocha or era... from which you reckon forward. ... The end of the fifteenth century seems to be just such a period as I have been describing, for those who live in the eighteenth, and who inhabit the western parts of Europe. ... [At that time] all those revolutions began, that have produced so vast a change in the manners, customs, and interests of particular nations...

What Bolingbroke seemed to have in mind here was the emergence in Europe of a Westphalian ‘balance of power’ between sovereign states premised on the dispassionate pursuit (by each member state) of their own national interests. Far from unleashing further conflict, Bolingbroke and others saw this development as a further step toward greater regularity and peace – the cold-blooded calculation of national interest maximization replacing the hot-blooded pursuit of religious zealotry or dynastic ambition.

These sentiments received surprising expression in a letter by the avid and erratic English Advocate General, James Marriott (1765), in which he characterized his as an age in which European diplomatic practice had been ‘civilized’. In effect, he suggested that contemporary Europe was more ‘civilized’ than previous eras due in large part to the calculated pursuit of self-interest. Here the logic of Marriott’s argument turned on the fundamental assumption then becoming a shibboleth of

European Enlightenment thought, namely, that European nations had succeeded in civilizing war.¹¹ ‘In the present Age’, Marriott suggested,

...War is commenced on different Principles from the Wars of Antiquity, so it ends with different Principles, in both more to the Honour of Humanity. The public law of Europe abhors the sanguinary Object of antient Wars, universal Slavery, or Extirpation – Every War in these Times is considered but as an Appeal to the rest of the powers of Europe, and is but a temporary Exertion of Force to decide a Point of Interest...

Marriott’s point was that the civilized manners of European nations meant that wars could be waged solely in the rational pursuit of national interest rather than the irrational desire to enslave or exterminate all enemies.

Perhaps nowhere were these sentiments more forcefully expressed than in Scottish Enlightenment histories of civilization in which war and diplomacy were treated as crucial indexes of social progress. In Hume’s *History* for example, even the invention of devastatingly lethal artillery showed the influence of civilization by reinforcing the calculation of national interests. This ‘furious engine’, Hume (1807, 432) wrote, has ‘rendered battles less bloody... less frequent and rapid’. Above all, artillery has meant that ‘[s]uccess in war has been reduced nearly to be a matter of calculation’ and has reinforced the need for ‘alliances against’ wanton ‘violence and invasion.’ The extension of this argument was that the practice of war in Europe showed not only the effect of civilization, but even drove it forward (Robertson 1769/1856, 67, 86, 93). The crucial point was that for Hume and many others, this kind of warfare reinforced the civilized and civilizing pursuit of national interest.

Baron de Montesquieu (1748/1989, 461-2) had already celebrated the civilisation of war in Europe (that he referred to as the European ‘right of nations in war’) due to the softening influence of Christianity. Characteristically however, Scottish Enlightenment thinkers emphasised the essentially unintentional effects of civilisation (Hume 1777/1985a, 271). Accordingly, even the destructiveness of war could produce benefits, one of which was an intensification of considerations of national interest. This can be seen clearly in William Robertson’s (1769/1856, 413) identification of the mutual exhaustion of European nations after the wars of the religion in the sixteenth century. Robertson’s *History* culminated, as had Hume’s, in the creation of independent, militarily powerful sovereign states in Europe, each based on largely pacified civil societies, capable of regulating their international relations on the basis of a rough military balance of power. This view informed Hume’s (1777/1985b, 338-41) contention that Britain’s national interest invited a prudent participation in continental warfare against France in order to maintain a balance of power in Europe. Above all, Hume’s and Robertson’s historical narratives echoed Montesquieu’s (1745/1989, 487) insight that the formalised structure of interaction between sovereign states in Europe was above all a secular model of political interaction, in which considerations of interest rather than those of conscience or religious confession were paramount.

For a variety of Enlightenment thinkers, then, the rise of national interest was associated with the historical process of civilization understood as the transformation of the rudeness of savage life into the flexible and rational manners of civilized society. Savagery was characterised by the passionate pursuit of desire predominating over simpler virtues of hardiness and courage (Smith 1759/1976, 205, 209). A key to

the transformation of savagery was the development of societies in which members were thought to conduct themselves in line with the interest to win the esteem of others and to avoid shame and disgrace (Smith 1759/1976, 144-45; Bourke 2000, 632-56). Civilized societies were also thought to conduct 'civilized' war regulated by honour and interest, thereby avoiding pitiless wars of cruelty or irrational extermination (Hume 1777/1985c, 404, 406). As Hume (1777/1985a, 274) put it, 'where honour and interest steel men against compassion as well as fear... combatants divest themselves of the brute, and resume the man.'

For these writers then, national interests were identified as socially and historically progressive forces. It is significant however, that for Montesquieu, Ferguson and Hume, the international rise of national interests reflected and reinforced the domestic pursuit of commercial self-interests by citizens of civilized, commercial societies. Alongside these commercial interests however, were essentially non-material interests – consisting in the search for social approbation (by displaying honour, compassion, or integrity). Adam Smith (1759/1976, 38) formulated this view in his theory that humans ought to conduct themselves as if under the eyes of an 'impartial spectator'. This consideration, he thought, would lead them toward moderate and sociable conduct in preference to immoderate and unsociable conduct. Thinkers like Smith and Hume however, were deeply concerned to distinguish their recommendation of the polite virtues of civil sociability from the purely self-interested conduct praised by Mandeville in his *Fable of the Bees* (Ferguson 2006, 207-15). Mandeville (1714/1970, 51-76) had famously argued that all human conduct was self-interested rather than 'virtuous', but that vicious conduct (such as luxury and greed) was socially beneficial, by providing employment and fuelling commerce. Force (2003, 49, 80; Matson and Onuf 1985, 496-531) refers to this as Mandeville's 'Epicurean/Augustinian doctrine of self-interest' opposed to Smith's 'Stoic' argument for a 'harmony of interests' allowing the exercise of virtue. Interestingly, Mandeville (1714/1970, 219-220; Jack 1989, 49) believed that in a 'Savage State', human passions were relatively few and straightforward (food, sex, shelter), but in a 'civiliz'd State', human 'Desires are enlarg'd' and 'multiply'd'.

4. 'The People's Interest is the Publick Interest'ⁱⁱⁱ

Mandeville's contention cast considerable doubt on the supposed virtues of civilization, but also on the possibility of a 'harmony' of interests in society. In arguing so, Mandeville considered the hypocrisy of all claims to virtue as a distortion of human nature. For those who maintained the 'Stoic' view, the most problematic distortion was that caused by rampant self-interest and corruption. In 1649, John Warr (1649, 1-2) criticised what he saw as the creeping corruption of the laws – the true purpose of which 'was to bridle Princes, not the People' – because they were 'being put upon the rack of *self* and *worldly interest*' by '*great men*'. Warr's (1649, 15-16) complaint rested on a key distinction of interests. Interests 'grounded on *weaknesse*', such as the interest of the weak to be protected from the ravages of the strong, form the true foundation of the law. Other interests however, are grounded 'upon *corruption*', and such he argued was the '*interest of Lawyers*' who have become a 'body' with a '*distinct interest*'. The problem with this interest he specified in the following way,

I take this to be a main difference between *lawfull* and *corrupt interests*,
just interests are the *servants* of all... But *corrupt interests* feare a change,
and use all wiles to establish *themselves*, that so their *fall* may be great,

and their *ruin* as chargeable to the world as it can; for such *interests* care for none but themselves. (Warr 1649, 17)

What he meant by this was not only that corrupt interests are self-serving, but that unlike just interests which exist only so long as the people's interest (the common good) is served, corrupt interests are continuous and accrue greater power and influence. This continuity becomes inimical to the people's interest not only because they subvert short-lived just interests, but because the inevitable reckoning will make the disruption of their passing more tumultuous.

Warr was not alone in identifying 'corrupt interests' as necessarily opposed to the 'Fundamental Lawes and Liberties of the people', nor was he alone in identifying the law as the chief object of corruption (Baldwin *et.al.* 1652, 1). For Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) (1651/1968, 312) sovereignty consisted in the awesome power of the ruler to maintain social order by protecting life and property by force and fear. The very rationale of this sovereignty was the self-interested bargain that subjects could be thought to have made with one another to renounce their own right to self-protection in order to establish such a Leviathan. In his view, the Leviathan's law was the mechanism of protection and security because it must be understood as the 'Command' of the '*Persona Civitatis*, the Person of the Commonwealth', or sovereign. Hence, for Hobbes (1651/1968, 328, 382-3) it was absolutely essential that 'corruption either of Judges or Witnesses' by bribery to render 'false judgements' must be avoided.

Proponents of greater popular sovereignty argued that it 'bringeth the government from a more private unto a more public interest', whereas in oligarchies and monarchies, private interests prevail (Harrington 1656/1977, 202). Republicans emphasised that law was a brake on sovereign power, rather than being (as it was for Hobbes) the expression of sovereign power. Consequently, they expressed concern at the corruption of the law 'when the interest of one or a few is set up in opposition to that of the nation',

...faults in the law introduce all manners of corruption into the administration of it. They who corrupted the law for corrupt ends will certainly make a corrupt use of its corruption. The effect of this is that the king does what he pleases, and the courtiers and lawyers get what they please. ...if there be a great defect in the law, it leaves an easy entrance for corruption in the administration... Again, if there be corruption in him or them who administer the law, he or they will corrupt the laws, as the depraved will darkens and corrupts the understanding. (Sidney 1664-5/1996, 128, 131-3; Sidney 1681-2/1990, 434-5)

The argument that a 'depraved will... corrupts the understanding' hinged on the idea that a true understanding, at least within the terms of republican discourse, would necessarily illustrate the concurrence of the national with the popular or people's interest. Absolute monarchies were castigated because the 'inclinations of the monarch' or the 'impulse of ministers, favourites, wives or whores' would 'govern all things according to their own passions or interests', whereas in popular governments magistrates 'can have no interest distinct from that of the publick' (Sidney 1681-2/1990, 141-2, 185). William Temple's (1673/1932, 66) encomium to the Dutch republic praised, *inter alia*, their democratic system because it effectively 'united' decision-makers in 'one common bond of Interest' to promote the 'Publick Good' and suppress 'all private Passions or Interests'. This argument for the alignment of self

and national interests rested on an institutional mechanism, whereby democratic assemblies and debates create a common interest. English republicans however, remained concerned that the depravity of corrupted magistrates and councillors would magnify their own interest at the expense of the people's and the nation's interest. As John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon (1733, 178) put it in their *Cato's Letters* of 1720, the people were the best defence of the national interest,

The People have no Biass to be Knaves; the Security of their Persons and Property is their highest Aim. No Ambition prompts them... No aspiring or unsociable Passions incite them; they have no Rivals for Place, no Competitor to pull down... they can serve no End by Faction; they have no Interest, but the general Interest.

The virtuous humility of the people, whose sole interest was to preserve their liberties, lives, and property with good laws, was opposed to the interests of 'Great Men' who desired to use their place and privileges of office to fill their 'private Purses', build their 'private Fortune', and through 'Debauchery... Riot and Luxury' pursue their 'private Pleasure' all at public and national expence (Trenchard and Gordon 1733, 178, 134-5).

So far as there was any coherent political programme in *Cato's Letters* it centred on an idea of political power within the British nation constituted by a rough balance between the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the people. This was not necessarily a vision of democratic government, but of government committed to what the authors conceived to be the common interest of each of those sectors. That common interest was the preservation of the ancient liberties of British subjects (such as freedom of conscience, and freedom to own property), the encouragement of trade and commerce (understood in terms of trade in agricultural or manufactured products), and the consolidation and amplification of British sea power. Above all however, this conception of government was one in which the private interests of particular groups or individuals could not prevail over the common interest of the nation (as a whole or at large) (Black 2000, 126-7). As Trenchard and Gordon (1733, 91) put it, 'Thrice happy is that People, where the constitution is so poised and tempered, and the Administration so disposed and divided into proper Channels, that the Passions and Infirmities of the Prince, cannot enter into the Measures of his Government...'

Yet, as the authors and all their readers would have known, this idea of government, and of public office-holding in general, was contrary to established practice,

A very great Authority has told us, that '*tis worth no Man's Time to serve a Party, unless he can now and then get good Jobbs by it*. This, I can safely say, has been the constant Principle and Practice of every leading Patriot... They all professed to have in View only the publick Good, yet every one shewed he only meant his own... (Trenchard and Gordon 1733, 104)

The traditional target of republican diatribes was the use of public funds by the Court to create their own faction in Parliament (and beyond) through bribery, place or patronage. Trenchard and Gordon (1733, 135) devoted considerable attention to this *bete noir*, but broadened their critique to the analysis of how corruption of the great led to corruption of the small 'and so on in lesser Progression' till all the public revenues were exhausted. Theirs was then, a critique of corruption not simply as rampant self-interest of the great office-holders, but of a systemic entrenchment of self-interest at all levels of government. What they aimed for, so they claimed, was to

establish an idea of public office-holding where incumbents must ‘look upon themselves as Creatures of the Publick, as Machines erected... for Publick Emolument and Safety’ (Trenchard and Gordon 1733, 133).

5. Public Office and ‘Purchase’ of ‘other Employments’

Satirists had long poked fun at the very idea of disinterested public service. When Charles D’Avenant (1710, 5, 10) satirized the Whigs’ declining ‘Interest’ out of office, one of his characters described interest as that ‘certain Glue... which knits the Joints’ of government, while another recalled that ‘[i]t has been always our Maxim, That Men are Born for Themselves, and not for Others.’ Indeed, Lord Halifax (1750/1969, 263) had long ago warned of the assiduous self-interest of office holders,

When men receive benefits from Princes they attribute less to his generosity than to their own deserts, so that in their own opinion their merit cannot be bounded; by that mistaken rule, it can as little be satisfied.

... Merit hath a thirst upon it that can never be quenched by golden showers. It is not only still ready, but greedy to receive more.

The problem of public office was how to prevent it from distorting or obscuring the national interest. Thus Charles D’Avenant (1701, 5) excoriated the ‘self-interest’ that ‘[e]very one is upon’ to ‘scrape for himself, without any regard to his Country, each cheating, raking, and plundering what he can...’. What D’Avenant and Trenchard and Gordon seem to have been groping toward was a conception of public office in which the self-interest of the office holder, when rightly considered, would be the same as the public’s and the nation’s interest (Mansfield 1995, 48-66). As *Cato’s Letters* put it, when the people’s representatives are ‘neither awed nor bribed [they] will always act for their Country’s Interest; their own being so interwoven with the People’s happiness’ (Trenchard and Gordon 1733, 181). The twin dangers of politics as republicans saw it, was the fear of military rule and arbitrary power, and the danger of popular representatives being ‘so corrupted by Places and Pensions’ that they ‘betray the Interest of their Principals...’.

And yet, this image of public office competed with the widespread practices of patronage and purchase of office.^{iv} This was not Trenchard and Gordon’s chief concern. Rather, their concern over the delineation of these interests resulted from their opposition to the rise of Robert Walpole (Britain’s de-facto Prime Minister from 1721-1742), and his apparently willing presidency over an elaborate system of corruption to create a ‘party’ interest (Gerrard 1990, 50-51, 58). Walpole was identified by his critics as the chief string-puller behind a farrago of trading interests inextricably linked with Britain’s expanding global empire originating in the infamous South Sea Bubble of 1720. That particular ‘bubble’ of speculative capital arose due to unprecedented public subscriptions in the South Sea Company. The Company’s strategy was to buy increasing portions of the national debt by exchanging shares for privately held annuities, while promising financial returns far in excess of its capacity to deliver. To secure this strategy the Company liberally distributed shares to parliamentarians, members of the Ministry, and courtiers who were able to pocket large profits as the value of the shares rose exponentially. Prior to the bubble bursting in September 1720, the Paymaster of the Forces, Robert Walpole, had been avidly trading in (and then cannily divesting himself of) Company shares while also buying up government annuities (Balen 2002, 91). In the wake of the financial collapse, Walpole used his position to ‘screen’ the leading members of the cabinet from disgrace while engineering his own rise to the prime ministership. For his critics,

among them Trenchard and Gordon (1733, 47), Walpole was the architect of a vast scheme of corruption, seeking to prop up the South Sea Company with Bank of England and East India Company stock, and shape them all into ‘one Interest’, a ‘potent Conspiracy against the whole Kingdom...’.

According to Pocock (1975, 426-7), this critique was based on Harrington’s earlier analysis that the constitutional upheavals of the 1640’s had unbalanced the distribution of property within England. This delivered power into the hands of the least virtuous among the people (the landless poor) through the army, at the expense of the gentry whose land ownership gave them a solid, virtuous interest in the nation (Pocock 1975, 468-72). Those who followed Harrington, Pocock (1975, 452-8) suggests, adapted his analysis to criticise the rise of highly mobile, intangible, speculative capital in the wake of the Glorious Revolution (1688-89). The target of their criticism was the increasing use by the Crown of funds raised by credit through the newly established Bank of England to finance a militaristic foreign policy, an expensive standing army, and a faction of compliant placemen. According to this critique, credit, speculative finance or ‘jobbing’ was associated with rampant and grasping self-interest, an intangible (potentially untaxable) property which undermined traditional virtues and social orders based on stolid (and virtuous) land holding. Daniel Defoe’s (1701, 8, 15-20) *Free Holder’s Plea* is an example of this style of critique, castigating the debasement of trade to ‘Lottery’, ‘Gaming’, or the ‘Imaginary Coins’ of pure speculation. Above all, he criticised the creeping ‘Interest’ of the East India Company in Parliament by buying boroughs and advancing ‘private Interests and parties’ at the expense of the ‘Welfare of the Nation’. Pocock’s persuasive analysis reinforces the degree to which the problem of self-interest in British republican discourse hinged not on its inherent viciousness, but on its distortion of a true appreciation of national interests which came to be associated with the progress of civilization itself.

6. Commerce, Corruption, and Civilization

The term ‘civilisation’ was first coined by the French *philosophe*, the Marquis de Mirabeau in 1756. The term denoted a range of personal, social, and political qualities that Europeans in the late eighteenth century were coming to associate with their own historical development from ancient ‘savagery’ and ‘barbarism’ to an ever more refined condition of civility (Mazlish 2005, 5-7; Pagden 1988, 33-45). While this difference could be seen in terms of the accomplishments of urbanized societies, commercial economies, systems of written law, arts, sciences and letters, it also denoted life under sovereign states, with regular government (Febvre 1973, 223-5). For this reason, securing civilization meant securing good government under sovereign states. Moreover, problems of government – among them corruption – assumed potentially epochal proportions.

For Montesquieu, ‘corruption’ had different forms in each of the different regime types, republics, aristocracies, monarchies, and tyrannies. A uniting theme however, was that corruption denoted a condition of rampant self-interest (tyranny being the only regime corrupt ‘by definition’). The corruption of republics consisted either in immoderate expansion, for the common interest is ‘better known’ in small republics, or, more interestingly in a spirit of either extreme equality or extreme inequality (1748/1989, 124, 112-114; Levy 2006, 51-2). Extreme inequality would lead to the exalting of the few or the one over the many (Montesquieu 1748/1989, 117). In this

situation, the narrow self-interest of the ruler overcrowds the national or common interest by substituting whim for law. The danger of extreme equality was that there would be a loss of appropriate respect for office holders leading to a generalised 'love' of 'license'. Montesquieu (1748/1989, 113) was clear that this state of affairs would be one of rampant moral degeneracy where each pursued their own narrow and selfish interests. One of Montesquieu's achievements was to weld this republican analysis of corruption to a (then) more unconventional (and modern) view of essentially self-interested commercial money-making as a progressive social and historical force. That he was able to accomplish this was due in large measure to his representation of commerce as a peaceful and modifying force, softening national characters and personal manners while it also encouraged more realistic and less violent appraisals of national interests (Montesquieu 1748/1989, 382-90). This view of commerce hinged on his argument that it fostered 'a feeling for exact justice', as opposed to both an overweening focus on 'one's own interests alone', and equally to the 'neglect [of] them for those of others' (Montesquieu 1748/1989, 339).

The problem, as David Hume (1777/1985d, 59) saw it, was how to achieve that constitutional balance of interests in popular government, enabling different 'orders of men, such as the nobles and people' to achieve a unity of interest. Where that balance cannot be struck, then each order will 'naturally follow a distinct interest' and coalesce into distinct, rival parties or factions. Though Hume (1777/1985e and a, 255-56, 272-3) was less clear on how the pernicious rivalry of faction could be avoided, he obviously regarded the fostering of commerce as one of the keys to the solution of this problem. Commerce of course entailed the disciplined pursuit of self-interest, but thriving commerce aided the public by increasing the wealth of society and the power of the state. This provided a powerful incentive for those with an interest in government to govern by fostering commerce and thus enhancing the pursuit of commercial self-interest, further mollifying the brutality, savagery, waste and profligacy of less civilized nations.

For Adam Ferguson (1767/1967, 97), the interest an individual has in accruing and protecting personal wealth was also identified as a progressive social and historical force, modifying savage violence and encouraging civilised commerce. Ferguson's analysis was complicated by his characteristic concern that advantages of social and historical advance or civilization were only won at considerable cost. Ferguson's analysis of corruption hinged on the presumption that, human beings were by nature neither entirely virtuous nor completely corrupt. Human beings become virtuous or corrupt to the degree that their society or government encourages those tendencies. He was clear however, that corruption became endemic when 'mere riches, or court-favour, are supposed to constitute rank', and the 'individual considers his community so far only as it can be rendered subservient his personal advancement or profit' valuing his 'separate existence... his caprice or his appetite, at the expence of his species' (Ferguson 1767/1967, 238-9). This condition is obviously one in which considerations of self-interest prevail over those of the common good and even of national interest. Ferguson (1767/1967, 240-1) makes this clearer when he argues that when corruption becomes endemic, tyranny is the most likely result – a government based on the indulgence of the ruler's whims, and on the systematic use of fear or favour to compel or to purchase compliance.

In common with other Scottish Enlightenment luminaries, Ferguson framed his political and moral analyses within a theory of social or historical progress or civilization. The motor force of civilization was the development of commerce, an activity which (following Montesquieu) combined the animal dynamism of self-interest with the rational requirement to foster productive relations by emulating social virtues (probity, respect and justice). A characteristic concern of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers therefore, was to show that commerce (and hence civilization) incorporated social virtues, and avoided the Mandevillian celebration of the baser motivations of pure self-interest. Ferguson's contemporaries, Hume and Smith, certainly saw the socially beneficial aspects of luxury (but disagreed with Mandeville that vicious self-interest was the only real human motive). For Ferguson luxury was an unwanted, morally enervating concomitant of commerce and civilization,

The increasing regard with which men appear, in the progress of commercial arts, to study their profit, or... refine on their pleasures... may, perhaps, be considered as indications of a growing attention to interest, or of effeminacy... Every successive art, by which the individual is taught to improve on his fortune, is in reality, an addition to his private engagements, and a new avocation of his mind from the public. (Ferguson 1767/1967, 255)

Only those governments committed to the cultivation, practice and reinforcement of public virtue (through such means as the citizen's militia) could escape the drift toward corruption brought on by the increasing focus on self-interest inherent in civilized, commercial economies.

7. Interest in Empire

Ferguson's anxiety about effeminacy reminds us that for many eighteenth century thinkers, 'effeminacy' was one of the synonyms for corruption. It meant a loss of the manly, martial virtues such as courage, fortitude and strength that Britons associated with themselves, their nation, and Empire (Wilson 1995, 186-7). While many Britons saw their Empire as a product of their national virtue, others warned that Empire could promote 'ruinous corruption at home' through the emergence of 'motives of avarice' and the 'variance' of 'separate interests' (Ferguson 1783, 276). Such warnings were prompted in part by the perception that the development and (mis)management of Britain's global Empire posed real problems for government. Where once political stability had been thought to rest on a foundation of virtue, now political stability was linked to the successful management of the requirements for a flourishing market, a solvent state, a more efficiently disciplined civil service, and a growing commitment to Empire as the essential mechanism for amplifying British virtues and British trade globally (Bayly 1989, 117-9). Indeed, eighteenth century Britons came increasingly to think of their Empire as an embodiment not only of their own national strength and vigour, but also of the interests of civilization itself.

Historians of the British Empire have long argued that after the Seven Years War (1754-61) the nature of the Empire began to shift away from territorial expansion by conquest, toward a focus on inter- and intra-colonial trade fuelling the commercial supremacy of Britain (McLynn 2004, 388). This so-called 'second empire', as distinct from the 'first empire' (roughly 1580-1763), came to be seen more as a network of commercial advantage to Britain and its colonies based on the supposedly peaceful pursuit of profit opposed to the 'Black Legend' of Spanish cruelty and corruption (Armitage 2001; Gibson 1971). According to C.A. Bayly (1989, 136, 150-2; Marshall

2005, 160, 183) however, the real distinctiveness of the 'second' British Empire lay in the emergence of notions of British 'racial superiority' that began to emerge and receive institutional expression during the late eighteenth century. This superiority, he argues, was supposed to reside in the qualities of 'self command', the capacity of individuals to control their conduct and pursue their rational self-interest. These qualities, most forcefully expressed in the social and political thought of the Scottish Enlightenment, were thought to be the chief gifts bestowed on others through the 'civilizing' and 'benevolent' British Empire.

The origins of this self-perception of Empire, which became so dominant in the nineteenth century, lay in a range of eighteenth century polemics on corruption and interest. The effect of these polemics was to cast 'corruption', caused by the cronyism of patronage or the entrenched privileges of the governing elite, as a source of national weakness (Wilson 1995, 272-3; Commanger and Giordanetti 1967). Weakness was to be avoided by means of empire, variously portrayed as a fitting object of national pride, as a test of loyalty to crown and country, as a device to project Protestant values, as an outlet for manly virtues, and crucially as an embodiment of English liberty through the pursuit of peaceful commercial interests (Armitage 2004, 91-107; Langford 1989, 514-5; Wilson 1995, 193, 201; Buchan 2008, forthcoming). The viability of these portraits of empire rested on campaigns to eliminate imperial corruption, as seen in the effort to regulate the activities of the British East India Company (Burke 1785/1981, 491; Whelan 1996, 98-108). A key phase in this development was Edmund Burke's extraordinary campaign to impeach the former East India Company (EIC) Governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings, an architect of the EIC's unprecedented commercial and imperial expansion in India.

Burke (1788, 275) relentlessly attacked Hastings' responsibility for EIC corruption, castigating him as 'a heart blackened to the very blackest... a heart corrupted, vitiated, and gangrened to the very core.' Embedded within this attack however, was the identification of corruption, and of the rampant self-interest of commerce, as a threat to the historical process of civilization (Ahmed 2002, 34). That process hinged on the development of sovereign states able to foster civility and protect property by sustaining firm distinctions between the private realm of self-interested motivations, and the public realm of the common good. It was this view that lay behind his famous characterization of the EIC as 'a State in disguise of a Merchant, a great public office in disguise of a Countinghouse' (Burke 1788/1991, 283). The result, he argued (Burke 1788/1991, 285-6), was a mixing of private and public, economic and political interests and responsibilities, in which the EIC, 'a Nation of placemen', pursued their corruptions by subverting the immemorial order of Indian society and threatening to return India to an impoverished barbarism. For Burke (1788/1991, 375), there was only one solution, and that was to apply the standards of British government to the EIC in India because, he argued,

If there is any one thing which distinguishes this Nation eminently above another, it is that its Offices at home, both Judicial and in the State, are so managed that there is less suspicion of pecuniary corruption attached to them than to any similar Offices in any part of the Globe or that have existed in any time. So that he who would set up upon these principles a system of corruption and attempt to justify it upon utility, that man is staining not only the nature and character of office, but that which is the peculiar glory of the official and judicial character of this Country...

8. Conclusion

Burke's campaign represented a dramatic statement of a certain view of public office. Burke's was a vision of public office from which the taint of commercial self-interest had been divorced. Ironically, Burke was not himself immune from suspicion about his own interests when (briefly) in office. Nonetheless, the weight of Burke's attack on Hastings and the EIC fell on Hastings' avid pursuit of his own financial self interest, and on the danger this posed to Britain's national interest, rightly conceived. Britain's interest, he argued, should be considered in terms not simply of imperial expansion and exploitation (both of which Hastings achieved). Rather, Britain's true interest was in an empire that extended the best qualities of the British Constitution (the protection of British law and the privilege of British liberties) to the peoples of the Empire. That meant that the British Parliament, and through it the British nation, had an interest not simply in the material effects of EIC rule in India but in its moral qualities. In arguing so, Burke's (ultimately unsuccessful) impeachment campaign reinforced a then conventional notion of British national interests as co-extensive with civilization. Burke thereby managed to defend Empire as a remedy for the corruption he associated with rampant self-interest. In this way, the Empire was conceived as the embodiment and amplification of civilized and civilizing principles, and thus as a national interest that supplanted all corrupting self-interests.

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ⁱ I will leave aside here the question of non-financial interests as sources of corruption, such as interests in accruing power or influence, or in gaining fame and celebrity.

ⁱⁱ Thus consideration of interest was thought to lead to finer calculations of the benefits of securing a peace favouring future commercial prosperity rather than continual conquest. Accordingly, under considerations of interest 'the Effusion of Blood is spar'd', and indiscriminate reprisal is forbidden (Brewster 1740, 7).

ⁱⁱⁱ (Trenchard and Gordon 1733, 106).

^{iv} Francis Hutcheson (1735, 9, 16, 19) for instance, criticised the use of political patronage in the appointment of Scotland's Presbyterian ministers, while defending the patronage of the 'principal Men of Interest in the Parishes' because they would appoint candidates who reflected their own 'rational' and 'virtuous Dispositions', 'liberal Education', and 'Society'.