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James Moore

British Conservative Thought and the Classical Imagination, c. 1720-1820

The relationship between Radical philosophy and classical studies has long been understood as a central feature of eighteenth-century political thought. The American Founding Fathers used Roman history and philosophy to guide their creation of a federation of republican states¹. French revolutionaries embraced classical philosophy, classical imagery and sometimes even classical religion to invoke its new vision of government and society². Later, Philhellenes from around Europe drew on the glories of Marathon and the example of Athenian democracy to legitimize their struggle³. Yet few writers have considered the ways in which Conservative political thought used the classical world to forge a distinctly 'Conservative' understanding of Greece and Rome⁴. This article will map some of the more important contributions to Conservative historical thought by examining key features and how they developed in anti-Radical or counter-revolutionary historical writing⁵.

A major difficulty in mapping the landscape of Conservative thought is determining its essential nature and its conceptual point of origin. At one level the notion of 'Conservative thought' in the eighteenth century is an anachronism in that the concept is not one that emerged clearly until the beginning of the nineteenth. However many writers worked in what may be fairly termed 'the Conservative tradition', expressing values and principles that were to become central to modern Conservatism⁶. This tradition was characterized by its desire to challenge Whiggish interpretations of classical philosophy and emphasising the importance of history as the tutor of the statesmen and downplaying the role of abstract philosophy.

The history of British Conservative thought is often seen as originating in the work of Edmund Burke and his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*⁷. However, Burke is a problematic figure in Conservative thought not least because he is not entirely typical of Conservative writers or historians active in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Take, for example, his attitude towards Cicero. Much Conservative revisionist historiography came to regard the philosophy of Cicero as potentially dangerous and corrosive. Yet, as Browning observes, Burke's thought reflected many of the core philosophical components of Cicero⁸. His view that there were immutable standards of 'natural justice' dehistoricised the notion of justice and judicial progress. While other Conservative historians and thinkers favoured what today would be termed a 'communitarian' approach to the notion of justice, rooting it in the historically specific circumstances of the state, Burke's claim for universal principles had more in common with reformist thinking. Burke's interpretations of history represent a codification of the many strands of British anti-revolutionary thought, but these strands are by no means internally consistent or represent ideas that would later come to be described as Conservative. Montesquieu, Locke and Hume provided component elements of Burke's thought and in later years these thinkers were to become regarded as much as the inspiration behind Liberal and reformist constitutionalism as modern Conservatism⁹.

To properly understand the Conservative tradition, this article will identify key elements of Conservative political ideas and the ways these drew on ancient history. Three elements stand out as being particularly prominent in the latter half of the eighteenth century. First, there was the idea that a

strong central state is historically legitimised and essential to the preservation of liberty. Secondly, there was the view that social and political factionalism was largely the product of the abandonment of tradition for 'false' abstract classical philosophy. Finally, there was the belief that democracy and populism usually led to the tyranny of popular control and ultimately absolutism and autocracy. This article will examine these elements and end with an assessment of the relationship between them and their significance.

FOUNDATIONS: THE CENTRAL STATE AND THE FEAR OF FACTION

The development of modern historical analysis was partly driven by those who wished to utilise 'the voice of history' to legitimise modern state development. For Conservatives, the long periods of war and political instability in the classical world challenged the view that abstract ancient philosophy led to social progress. Hobbes' translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* was a classic example of this genre, highlighting the importance of a strong state in the preservation of liberty. As Schlatter points out, this work was in a tradition of Renaissance translations of Thucydides designed to help 'solve' the problems of modern politics¹⁰. Hobbes' work also served to articulate the broader theory that abstract notions of justice in international relations are meaningless when faced with a strong hostile power and that personal liberty is meaningless without a strong sovereign power to protect this liberty. Thucydides' *History* was an ideal tool with which to make this argument, not merely because the civil politics of Athens and Sparta depended on military strength, but because they provided examples of the terrors that occurred when the authority of the central state broke down. In book three of the *History* we have a classic example of the violent result of the breakdown of political authority, consequent on the war between democratic and aristocratic factions. The brutality of Corcyra aptly illustrated the consequences of civil strife, unregulated by leadership¹¹. Debates about loyalty, politics and justice were set aside to settle personal scores as men reverted to a brutal state¹². The episode represented a classic Hobbesian scenario with man's 'common course of life' being 'too weak for passion' resulting in violence and the destruction of property rights¹³.

The idea of the strong state as a guarantor of liberty began to feature in a number of ancient histories written in the early part of the eighteenth century. One of the most notable was Nathaniel Hooke's *The Roman History*¹⁴. Hooke advocated a strong central government to protect subjects from an over-mighty aristocracy. Hooke defended Tiberius Gracchus as someone who had exposed the need for moderate reform to protect the interests of the people from an aristocratic clique. The parallels with contemporary British politics were clear. A strong state was the counterweight to over-mighty Whiggish *élite*¹⁵.

Another key Hobbesian contribution to Conservative thought was the fear and suspicion of political factionalism. Followers of the political opinions of Aristotle and Cicero had contributed to a false notion of liberty that had led to rebellion and ultimately the Roman civil wars. Hobbes' translation of Thucydides was in a sense a response to the study of this philosophy, replacing abstractionism with the teacher of experience. This theme was also taken up by Hooke, where Julius Caesar was cast as the hero and the defenders of the existing republican order against a corrupt and factionalised oligarchy. Conservative historians tended to support Hume in arguing that the ideal state should attempt to reduce dissention and factionalism to secure stability¹⁶. This view was certainly prevalent in the increasingly popular genre of Greek history. Temple Stanyan's pioneering work argued that the factionalism of the demagogues provided the roots of Greece's ruin. The elite turned in on itself, becoming increasingly effeminate, forgetting the example of the great days of the Persian war¹⁷. Wortley Montague went one

step further and compared the factionalism of ancient states with that of modern Britain. His conclusion was bleak; Britain would face the same end as the ancient states if it continued to allow decadence and factionalism to go unchecked¹⁸.

CONSERVATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF ROME

By the second half of the eighteenth century a body of literature had emerged that seemed to provide a distinctly Conservative critique of Roman history. This was partly a reaction to Whig idealisation of Roman republicanism¹⁹. There was a long tradition of Augustan literature that depicted Caesar as the tyrant, with Brutus and Cato the standard bearers of disinterested civil patriotism²⁰. These were also the values that influenced many of the constitutional ideas in the early American republic²¹. Yet, by the time Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* appeared, there was a growing body of Conservative literature that attacked the constitutional views of Cicero and Polybius and, in particular, the assumption that a mixed constitution was necessarily a stable political arrangement²². For some Rome's fragmented constitution was inherently unstable because the corruption and decadence of the Roman people²³. For Cibber, the republic allowed conditions of barbarism to prevail, with Romans bereft of the type of civil virtue that could sustain the constitution²⁴. For Lyttleton, Cicero was effeminate and subservient in his support of the triumvirate of Caesar, Pompey and Crassus²⁵. Cibber dismissed him as an opportunist, in contrast to Whig historians who viewed him as a symbol of political patriotism. Blackwell echoed some of the views of Hooke on the nature of factionalism, but with a less sympathetic view of Caesar. For Blackwell, the development of factionalism and the growth of the over-mighty Tribunes played into the hands of Caesar who could then exploit the inevitable factions for his own political purposes. Blackwell's account was again a direct reflection of contemporary political concerns that the Whig hierarchy was manipulating public opinion for its own factional ends²⁶.

Conservative historical writing on the Roman Empire reflected the growing importance of Rome and the Augustan age in Britain's eighteenth-century self-image. British public opinion was increasingly aware of the importance of Empire and international trade for its prosperity. The development of military and naval bureaucracy and the problem of managing distant overseas territories had obvious parallels with the problems of Roman state development. British imperial expansion was not always an unqualified success. The Seven Years' War and the American War highlighted imperial weaknesses. Gibbon's *History* seemed to highlight the difficulties and fragility of imperial leadership, the problems of maintaining effective central authority and the danger of new movements, such as Christianity, undermining the stability of the state. It might be thought that Gibbon's *History* would secure the future of Roman historical writing as a literary genre. However by the end of the eighteenth-century Greece was challenging Rome as the focus of historical writing and cultural debate²⁷. Publications such as Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* fostered a revival in Grecian taste in architecture, a revival that would continue beyond the Greek War of Independence²⁸. The work of Winckelmann celebrated the Greek achievement and it to the achievement of liberty²⁹. Greece began to attract both travelers and historians³⁰. This in turn produced a new body of historio-political controversies³¹.

CONSERVATIVE APPROACHES TO GREEK HISTORY

Byron's enthusiasm for the Greek cause can sometimes shroud the fact that British and European Philhellenism predated Byron by at least three decades. In 1770 the supposed 'enlightened' Russian state

gave support for a Greek national rebellion. In France writers such as Chateaubriand popularised the Greek national cause while in Britain there was a long tradition of poets and commentators embracing the idea of Greek independence³². For Conservatives, the Radical embrace of rebellious nationalism was dangerous for the European balance of power and presented the threat of Russian domination of the eastern Mediterranean. Worse still, the rebellious attitudes it encouraged had the potential to destabilise 'constitutional' states such as Britain. If ancient Greek history and culture were being invoked to encourage rebellion, Conservatives had to respond by offering their own interpretation of Greek history. In doing so they drew upon a longer tradition of 'anti-democratic' writing that highlighted the dangers of especially Athenian models of Greek democracy³³. However this developing Conservative critique went beyond the issue of democracy to examine the broader excesses of the classical Greek past.

Early eighteenth-century writing often focused on the apparently unstable nature of Athenian politics and the inability of the political system to promote compromise and conciliation. Thomas Hearne's *Ductor Historicus* is a good example of this writing, arguing that the political conditions in Athens generated circumstances where the leadership was unwilling to make peace with the Spartans. The consequence was a protracted conflict which did much to destroy the Greek 'golden age'³⁴. While Winckelmann, and Shaftesbury before him, saw Greek artistic achievement as a product of Greek liberty, Conservatives regarded Greek democracy and factionalism as a major factor in the destruction of Greek prosperity and, therefore, Greek culture. Some Conservative writers linked the growth of Greek imperialism to developments in Greek democracy. In this view the demagogic nature of Greek politics encouraged leaders to seek military glory and conquest in order to secure their position at home. This encouraged bitter and costly wars, such as the long Peloponnesian conflict, and took away the freedom of other states. Mably's famous *Observations on the History of Greece* regarded imperialism as one of the worst products of the Greek political system³⁵. This was a work written during the increasing tension between Britain and France in the Americas and the bitter struggle of the Seven Years Wars. The parallels between the cost of ancient imperialism in the Peloponnese and modern imperialism in the Americas would have been obvious to Mably's readers.

John Gillies offered readers a similar opportunity to draw parallels between recent events in America and the collapse of the Greek political system. Gillies argued that regulated monarchical government was the safest political system and that history should be marshalled to defend it. Corcyra again featured as a warning against the excesses of the democratic party, with Gillies noting how fifty of the city's leading citizens were dragged from the Temple of Juno and slaughtered³⁶. The reader could draw obvious parallels with the American Revolution with the aristocracy being driven away in bloodshed by the 'democratic party'.

William Mitford's *History of Greece* represented an even more important attack on established Whig historical presumptions³⁷. Mitford's work soon became the most celebrated 'revisionist' history of Athenian democracy, offering an explicitly Conservative interpretation of democratic excess. In Mitford's view, the destruction of the Solonic constitution forced the wealthy and educated to place themselves in the hands of the multitude, undermining the rights of property and person. The only real check upon their power came from the elite clubs, the *synnomosia*, who provided a degree of balance. For Mitford, the Thirty Tyrants of Athens and the Committee of Public Welfare in Paris were the product of the same dangerous democratic tendency. In contrast to modern France and ancient Athens, England's constitution rendered life, liberty and property more secure as the popular element of public life was wisely constrained. This approach reflected a gradual shift in Conservative thought that had been developing since the beginning of the eighteenth century. Rather than denying that a 'mixed' or 'balanced' was

possible, Conservatives were now arguing that such a system was the only way in which popular elements of the constitution could be guided and restrained.

Following the French revolution many Conservative historians echoed the views of Mitford and Gillies. William Young renewed the attack on the Greek ‘golden age’ by highlighting the dangerous demagoguery of Pericles³⁸. For Young, Pericles brought on the disastrous Peloponnesian war to secure his own position and authority - just as the leaders of revolutionary France had begun the Revolutionary wars against their neighbours. The guilty parties were the reformists who had attempted to conciliate radical opinion for their own interests. Aristides was the villain who had extended the franchise, thus leading to the predictable demagogic rule of Pericles and Ephialtes. Young saw social changes as the root of the problem and, in particular, the greed and ambition of the rising commercial classes. Post-Cleisthenic Athens declined into democracy because of the replacement of the old land-owning aristocracy by a commercial class unbounded by traditional civic values and virtue. The parallels with political and economic developments in modern Britain were clear. Britain’s transformation into the world’s foremost commercial and industrial state was well underway³⁹.

Some saw the instability of democracy as a reflection of different national cultures and political traditions. This was a line of argument developed by those who attempted to assert that Britain’s ancient Anglo-Saxon constitution represented a fundamentally different pattern of political development from that of the French, who had suffered from a long period of despotism⁴⁰. A similar approach could be taken to understand ancient Greece. Sparta’s victory in the Peloponnesian war was taken to demonstrate the inherent inferiority of Athenian democracy and as a hopeful portent for Britain in its war against revolutionary France. As in France, the evils of democracy had deep roots in the Athenian political system. Bisset traced the problem back to the earliest days of Greece, depicting Thersites as a dangerous demagogue and Achilles a self-interested manipulator of public life⁴¹. The demagogues of later times were propped up by the pretend philosophers the Sophists, again an obvious parallel with the radical political philosophy of revolutionary France. The true greatness of the Greek world lay in its ability to repel and tyrannical and alien threat, namely that of the Persians. This achievement was the work of the aristocratic and military parts of the Greek polis, namely Miltiades in the first Persian war and Aristides and Themistocles in the second.

REJECTING ANCIENT MODELS?

By the 1790s some historians, such as C.F. Volney, were questioning whether the modern world could learn anything from the Greeks and urged a re-evaluation of their cultural and well as political ‘achievements’⁴². Volney criticised the self-conscious admiration of antiquity prevalent in many historical and political tracts and pointed to the darker side of Greek life. For Volney, Greece did not present a model of liberty but rather one that rested on slavery and brutality. Even the artistic and cultural achievements were a symbol of decadence and excess rather than genuine vitality. The decadence and luxury that went with the celebration of this culture of excess demoralised the population of Athens and forced an unnecessary strain on the Treasury – a strain that resulted in a cycle of even greater exploitation and imperialism and even greater hostility from neighbouring states. Again the parallels with modern France were there for all to see. The needless luxury and excess of Versailles, the endless foreign wars and exploitative and punitive taxation were the elements which brought about revolution. Others went further; De Bonald’s work condemned the Greeks as ‘degenerate Egyptians’. For De Bonald the Greeks had an unsophisticated understanding of politics and lacked an understanding of the importance of a

balanced constitution and a separation of powers. De Bonald saw monarchy as important in shaping civic consciousness - something Greece inherently lacked⁴³.

The first quarter of the nineteenth century saw the debate about Greece intensify, not least because of the growth of philhellenic movements in Britain and Europe and the popularity of Byron⁴⁴. Philhellenism was not limited to radicals - the monarchist Chateaubriand's famous for his *Essai sur les Révolutions*, was an outspoken supporter of the Greek national cause⁴⁵. Much of the debate revolved around whether the modern Greeks were 'ready' for liberty and independence or whether centuries of Ottoman rule had taken away their ancient spirit. Some radical travellers and historians even went as far as trying to find Greek people of 'pure' blood who remained relatively independent from Turkish despotism⁴⁶. Many of the more famous lines in Byron's *Childe Harold* appealed to similar sentiments, with the poem veering between hopelessness and a belief that the modern Greeks would be able to find the spirit of their ancestors to 'create a new Thermopylae'⁴⁷. However experiences of the violent reality of the Greek revolution caused many to re-evaluate their romantic views of Greece. Sir William Gell's writings brought home the brutality and ruthlessness of civil war and seemed to confirm Conservative warnings that rebellion led only to political chaos and brutality⁴⁸.

TOWARDS A PRE-HISTORY OF CONSERVATISM?

While modern Conservative thought in Britain is often seen as being born with Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, a survey of eighteenth-century historical writing indicates that the key tenets of British Conservative thought were already well developed by 1789. Debates about the fate of the Roman republic, and later Periclean Athens, were used to reflect on contemporary political problems and to critique the dominant Whig aristocracy in Britain. Whigs could admire the great Augustan ideas of Rome, while Radicals saw much to admire in Athenian democracy and the cultural achievements it apparently fostered. Conservatives saw history as an opportunity to offer a revisionist critique to the idealisation of these forms of government. History was the antidote to the dangers of abstract philosophy.

The dynamics of this debate and the influence of individual writers are difficult to assess and quantify. Hobbes' attitude to statecraft was clearly an important influence in early writing and his translation of Thucydides highlighted the importance of the strong central state. Hume's work on the problems of political factionalism ensured that the problem of managing political dissent continued to become a central concern for eighteenth century historians. Landmark works by Hooke, Mably, Gillies and Mitford provided distinctively Conservative reinterpretations of the ancient history. Cicero's position as disinterested exponent of civic virtue was challenged, Pericles was widely viewed as a demagogue and democracy was regarded as key factor in the decline of Greek civilisation. Parallels were drawn between the excesses of imperialism, commercial greed and state expropriation in the ancient world with that of the modern. Contemporary events shaped historical writing. Imperial conflicts with France and the eventual French revolutionary wars could be 'understood' through knowledge of Greek and Roman history. The violence of the Greek and French revolutions only strengthened the hand of Conservatives who have warned, since Hobbes, of the terrors that awaited the breakdown of the authority of the central state.

Conservative thought was constantly evolving. By the second half of the eighteenth century most Conservative historians favoured the idea of a balanced, or at least a mixed, constitution as a way of controlling popular excess. Conservatives were also trying to free themselves of the constraints of Greek history; there was an increasing tendency to question whether a society that relied on slavery and

appropriation of private property really was a model of liberty. These models seemed ill at ease with a modern society that was abolishing slavery and developing a laissez-faire economy. With Volney and De Bonald came a more critical view of Greece and one that would be an important influence in the historical writing of the nineteenth century. The veneration of the Greek and Roman past would increasingly come under critical scrutiny.

Note

¹ Chinard 1940; Miles 1974. See also Ayres 1997.

² For a classic assessment see Parker 1937.

³ Spencer 1954; Woodhouse 1969; St. Clair 1972; Constantine 1984.

⁴ For a recent review see Macgregor Morris et al. 2009.

⁵ This article will largely exclude eighteenth-century discussions of ancient political economy as these were in their infancy. See Morley 1998.

⁶ See Kinneging 1997.

⁷ Burke 1790; Blake 1998.

⁸ Browing 1984.

⁹ See Canavan 1960; Courtney 1963; O’Gorman 1973; Dreyer 1979.

¹⁰ Schlatter 1945.

¹¹ Wassermann 1954.

¹² Thuc. 3.81.

¹³ Thuc. 3.84.

¹⁴ Hooke 1738-1771. This work was influenced by Catrou 1725-1737. Also see Macgregor Morris et al. 2007.

¹⁵ Hooke 1738-1771.

¹⁶ Ferguson 1783.

¹⁷ Stanyan 1707-1739.

¹⁸ Wortley Montague 1759.

¹⁹ Middleton 1741.

²⁰ For background see Weinbrot 1978.

²¹ Owen Aldridge 1968; Miles 1974.

²² For an overview of this debate see Ward 1964; Turner 1986.

²³ Dennis 1722.

²⁴ Cibber 1747.

²⁵ Littleton 1733.

²⁵ Blackwell 1753-1763.

²⁷ Momigliano 1969.

²⁸ Stuart, Revett 1762-1816; Watkin 1982; Lawrence 1938-1939; Wiebenson 1969; Crook 1972.

²⁹ Potts 1982 and 1994.

³⁰ Osborn 1963; Tsigakou 1981; Constantine 1984; Stoneman 1987.

³¹ See for example, Robert Wood’s influence on the search for Troy. Wood 1767.

³² For a fuller treatment of this issue see Macgregor Morris 2001.

³³ Tolbert Roberts 1994.

³⁴ Hearne 1714.

³⁵ Mably 1766.

³⁶ Gillies 1786, p. 201.

³⁷ Mitford 1784-1790.

³⁸ Young 1793, revised 1804.

³⁹ Walmsley 1969; Reid 1989.

⁴⁰ For the Anglo Saxon constitution debate see Vernon 1993.

⁴¹ Bisset 1796.

⁴² Volney 1791; Volney 1795.

⁴³ De Bonald 1786.

⁴⁴ See Penn 1938.

⁴⁵ Chateaubriand 1797. See also Malakis 1928.

⁴⁶ Douglas 1812.

⁴⁷ Byron 1812-1818.

⁴⁸ Gell 1827.

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British Conservative Thought and the Classical Imagination, c. 1720-1820

The revolutions that swept Europe and America in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries produced an inevitable, and often bloody, backlash. A new body of conservative thinkers responded to the revolutionary ideas of the *philosophes* using classical thought and history to challenge the assumptions and arguments of radicals. This article examines the ways in which conservative and counter-revolutionary thinkers sought to recast antiquity as a justification for the *Ancien Régime*, and deconstruct the classical models of the revolutionaries. It traces the development of anti-revolutionary thought, from the conservative histories of the early eighteenth-century, to the impassioned debates which accompanied the revolutions themselves, and the new conservative historical writing that endured long after age of revolution had passed. The article argues that discipline of ancient history was a key tool for constructing the basis of modern political conservatism.

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