# EUROPE'S ASIA: EMPIRE, DIFFERENCE AND THE MORAL GEOGRAPHY OF EUROPEAN POLITICAL THOUGHT c.1500-1800

A paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, Monash University, 24-26 September 2007,

#### Bruce Buchan

# School of Arts, Media and Culture Griffith University

#### **ABSTRACT**:

Much has been written of late about the geographical contexts of Western political thought, particularly in reference to the problem of empire throughout the Enlightenment period (c.1650-1800). The Enlightenment has been identified as crucial to the development of Europe's 'Empire of Uniformity' - a term that captures the claims that some Europeans made to the right to subject other peoples to European values and institutions. In this paper however, I will argue that European engagement with Asia in the Early-Modern Enlightenment periods (c.1500-1800) was more powerfully shaped by perceptions of 'difference' than by aspirations to 'uniformity'. European perceptions of Asian 'difference' in particular were intimately entwined with European self-perceptions. For both European travellers and political theorists, images of Asia were used to sustain increasingly assertive self-images of the 'superiority' of European civilisation. In this way, European geographical awareness of Asia served as a grounding for moral claims about the relative levels of civilisation that Asian nations were thought to exemplify, and were taken as sufficient justification for European pretensions to superiority and empire. Such claims illustrate how the development of European empires incorporated an awareness of the diversity of human communities alongside claims to a right to empire.

#### Introduction

European engagement with Asia in the Early-Modern and Enlightenment periods (c.1500-1800) was filtered through key assumptions in European political thought. Throughout this period, both European travellers to Asia and European political theorists sought to make sense of Asia as a place apart from Europe, different from it in history, customs, society, laws, and politics, but also as a place with which Europeans ought to be closely engaged through commerce and empire (Clarke 1997: 50-3; Gunn 2003: 167-8). European perceptions of Asian 'difference' were thus entwined with powerful domestic concerns, and above all with how Europeans wished to see themselves (Batchelor 2003: 79-92). In this paper, I will argue that European travellers and political theorists throughout the Early-Modern and Enlightenment periods used images of Asia to sustain increasingly assertive self-images of the 'superiority' of European civilisation. In using the term 'moral geography', I want to explore the process by which Europeans construed geographical entities - such as Asia and Europe as a grounding for moral claims about the relative levels of civilisation that peoples and nations in those regions were thought to exemplify (Wolff 1994: 284-331). These claims were taken as sufficient justification for European pretensions to superiority and empire over peoples deemed less civilised.

The paper begins with a discussion (section 1) of the themes of 'recognition' and 'difference' in contemporary political thought and their application to the vexed issue of the relationship between empire and political theory. Recent research has been divided on whether European Enlightenment thought (c.1650-1800) was heavily implicated in the contemporaneous development of European empires. Some have argued for instance that those empires were upheld by an 'Empire of Uniformity' in Enlightenment thought, a term that captures

the claims that some Europeans made to the right to subject other peoples to European values and institutions. Others however, have argued that Enlightenment thought was imbued with a strong anti-imperialist flavour and acknowledged the irreducible diversity of human communities. I will argue in Sections 2 and 3 however, that European commercial and imperial engagement with Asia in the Early-Modern and Enlightenment periods (c.1500-1800) was more powerfully shaped by perceptions of 'difference' than by aspirations to 'uniformity'. These images and representations, I will argue, were deployed to buttress the self-image of Europe as the realm of civility, sophistication and good government. Even when conventional European views of Asia as mired in 'oriental despotism' were revised, as they were by Edmund Burke, the assumption of European superiority and the claim to empire was reinforced.

I have adapted the term 'moral geography' from Edmund Burke's campaign (discussed in Section 4) to regulate the affairs of the British East India Company (EIC). The EIC, Burke (1991: 346) claimed, had put aside the universal rights and liberties due to all peoples - European and Asian – and resorted to what he called a 'geographical morality' in which, '...actions in Asia do not bear the same moral qualities as the same actions would bear in Europe', and acted as if 'the duties of men, in public and private situations' were to be determined by 'climates, degrees of longitude and latitude...'. The claim that Burke took such violent exception to was not that different peoples should be governed differently, for Burke was well aware of the need for political institutions to be adapted to the traditions and customs of different communities. Rather, he objected to the view that in governing Asian populations, Europeans could put aside what he saw as the universal principles embodied in the 'law of nature and nations' because these only applied in the relatively more civilised realm of Europe (Burke 1991:

109). At issue here is a key problem in the conceptualisation of how European empires in Asia (and elsewhere) actually operated. Also at issue is much contested implication of Western political thought in imperial projects.

## 1. Empires of Uniformity/ Empires of Difference

Political theorists (eg. Tully 1993; Pocock 1999) are now well engaged with questions of the relationship between Europe's traditions of political thought, and European imperial expansion. Many political theorists (eg. Young 1990; Phillips 1993; Young 2000) have applied and adapted recent debates over the representation of difference in contemporary feminist critiques of liberal political thought to the analysis of the discursive strategies of imperial government throughout the early modern period. For some, a distinctive liberal indifference to difference emerged from the experience of empire. The 'benign neglect' of cultural diversity in Western liberalism, Will Kymlicka (1995: 54-5) argues, originated from,

...liberals who went to administer or study British colonies [and] found that the liberalism they learned in England simply did not address some of the issues of cultural diversity they faced.

Confronted by the imperial and governmental problems of cultural diversity, he claims, liberals simply stopped thinking about it and retreated to the comfortable territory of universalism. This account pays scant regard to the conceptual limitations within Western political thought that, as Pagden (1982; 10-14) argues, militated against any genuine 'recognition of difference' in the New World throughout the early-modern period.

James Tully (1995: 37) has argued further that Western political thought provided the resources for a sweeping denial of difference that he

calls the 'empire of uniformity'. Tully (1995: 15-16) contends that Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment European political thought focussed on establishing 'the equality of independent, self-governing nation states and the equality of individual citizens' in Europe (and later in white settler societies), while systematically denying recognition to the different cultural identities of Indigenous peoples throughout European empires. He contends that overcoming this legacy of denial of difference requires a genuine (and mutual) constitutional recognition of Indigenous cultural identities. The problem however, lies in what kind of recognition.

Conventionally, Western political thought offers what could be called 'recognition as familiarity' that Tully dismisses as part of an 'imperial attitude' in which the apparently different other is rendered familiar by translating it into the experience and language of the colonial observer. What Tully aims for is 'recognition as acceptance', in which the different other is accepted on their own terms, and is not evaluated and acknowledged in terms of their familiarity with the observer's perspective. Tully's (1995: 62-70) argument thus draws attention to the imperial structure of Western political thought which has endured long after the collapse of the political empires of European powers. This is what Tully means by speaking of the 'empire of uniformity', a rationalising attitude that subjects and evaluates non-European cultural identity to a single European standard of recognition.

Helliwell and Hindess (2002: 139-52) argue in contrast however, that presenting the problem in terms of the empire of uniformity masks the ways in which imperial administration often did 'acknowledge cultural and other kinds of difference'. The problem as Helliwell and Hindess (2002: 140) see it, is not one of an imperial indifference to difference,

but how cultural and other differences were treated in Western political thought. On the nature of this treatment, opinion remains divided. According to Bhikhu Parekh (1993: 20-33; Parekh 1995: 89) the 'universalist' pretensions of European thought did not prevent acknowledgment of cultural diversity, but 'defined its nature and permissible range in narrow terms'. Uday Singh Mehta (1999: 33) goes much further in arguing that the Western 'imperial gaze' is 'never really surprised by the stranger' whose difference is 'recognised as... familiar' by being reduced to the category of the child or deviant. More recently, Sankar Muthu and Jennifer Pitts have each argued for a more benign interpretation of the relationship between empire and Western political thought. For Muthu (2003: 279), the European Enlightenment (c.1650-1800) was characterised by an acceptance of human cultural and political diversity. Pitts (2005: 26) similarly argues that great eighteenth century thinkers such as Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and Jeremy Bentham, were all largely hostile to empire while 'tolerant' of and 'broad-minded' in their attitude toward non-European peoples.

In different ways, these thinkers have each drawn attention to the ways that Western political thought 'recognised' difference. The key point however, is not that differences were denied, but represented as 'primitive' or 'backward' in contrast to European standards of progress, development or civilisation. My aim in the remainder of this paper is to show that throughout the Early-Modern and Enlightenment period, Europeans buttressed their claims for commercial and imperial engagement with Asia with images of Asian 'difference'. I shall begin in the following section with a discussion of some themes in the Enlightenment European imagination of Asia.

### 2. The Enlightenment's Imagined Other

Asia, the 'East', or the 'Orient' had long been portrayed in European thought as a realm of fantastic empires with fabulous riches supporting enormous populations and thriving cities (Lach and van Kley 2000: 243-59). It was not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that more reliable and regular sources of information about Asia flowed into Europe from missionaries, traders, travellers, and from diplomatic engagements and military conflicts throughout the region. From this period, Asia gradually lost its largely mythical qualities for Europeans, and came to be seen as both a more complex but potentially just as threatening region (Marshall 2003: 4-7). Asia came to be seen as more internally differentiated, characterised by the sophistication of the Chinese Empire in the far east, or the Islamic faith of the Ottoman Empire in the near east; by the supposedly barbarous customs of the Tartars in the far north, or the ancient but decayed civilisations of India in the far south.

early-modern period, European Throughout the political intellectual history was marked by the emergence of new, increasingly secular and popular forms of government, matched by new ideas about what constituted good government. These new ideas coincided with the effort some European nations made to extend their influence and control beyond Europe, prompting further contact and exchange between Europe and Asia. The growing awareness of the many contact became one ramifications of this of the defining characteristics of the European Enlightenment (Raynal 1782: 1). Early European images of 'globalisation' however, imbibed an implicitly Eurocentric moral geography. The rest of the world was important because Europe had discovered it and integrated it into the developing European commercial economy, providing untold benefits to all people, inside and outside Europe.<sup>1</sup> This view of Europe as a progressive global force integrating other backward regions into new

networks of commerce under European imperial superintendence owed much to conventional tropes in European thought. These tropes were given their greatest visual form in the frescoed ceilings of the Wurzburg *Residenz* of the Prince-Bishop, Carl Philipp von Greiffenklau.

The ceilings of the central staircase in the *Residenz* were painted between 1750 and 1753 by Giambattista Tiepolo, the acknowledged master of the Grand Style of Baroque painting in Europe. They are an elaborately designed and beautifully executed series of ceiling paintings, masterpieces of allegorical representation and cunning three-dimensional imagery. The subject of this masterpiece, 'Apollo and the Continents', shows a massive central ceiling fresco in which Apollo and other God-like figures seem to float over the vast empty space above the central staircase. Around the edge of this imposing spectacle however, Tiepolo painted four panels representing the four continents – Europe, Asia, Africa, and America – as allegorical figures, each of them female, and each surrounded by the goods their continent has to offer.

The figures in the Europe panel speak eloquently of the Enlightenment's self-image. The figures are all richly dressed. They cluster around a seated 'Europe', and they are surrounded by the gifts of their evident refinement and civility, symbols of Christianity, a globe, a telescope, musicians, artists, tamed animals, carefully crafted walls and columns. Significantly, in the foreground, a figure in military uniform reclines on the muzzle of a cannon. Two other continents are represented in various stages of savagery. The naked 'America' rides upon the back of a huge crocodile, surrounded by the untamed wildness of savage nature, while a semi-naked black 'Africa' rides upon the back of a camel, but offers fabrics, spices, and ivory. 'Asia' however, is different again. She sits sumptuously and fully clothed on the back of an

elephant, fitted out as if for war. She is surrounded by richly dressed but warlike figures, and in the foreground is the naked torso of a male figure whose hands are bound by chains. The message here is clear: Asia is rich and powerful, but tyrannous and cruel.

Tiepolo's images were far from fanciful examples of Baroque extravagance; nor were they merely mythical figures designed to elicit a purely imaginative engagement in the viewer. They were an impressive embodiment of the European Enlightenment's moral geography in which Europe represented the summit of civilisation, and the other continents represented various levels of savagery or barbarism (Wolff 1994: 93-4). The images drew explicitly on long established conventions of European vision in which, not only were all the continents female, but in which Europe and Asia represent rival models of civilisation. One of the most striking forerunners of this image can be found in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1593), a book of symbolic forms and conventions to be observed in artistic representation. Ripa's (1709: 53 fig 209) image of Asia 'signifies', he suggests, that it '...produces delightful things necessary for human Life... that she distributes... to other parts of the World.' Ripa's (1709: 47 fig 185) image of Europe however, '...shews it...' he tells his readers '...to be the principal Part of the World, for Religion, Arts and Arms.' Between Tiepolo's and Ripa's imagery lies the atmosphere of threat, of cruelty and tyranny that Europeans came to associate with Asia. Nowhere is this European attitude to Asian cruelty more evident than in the articulation of the notion of 'oriental despotism' to which I now turn.

# 3. Commerce, Civility and the Idea of Oriental Despotism

A significant early source of European information about Asia was the stream of reports from Venetian ambassadors at the Sultan's court in Turkey. As Valensi (1987: 10-14) has argued, these reports were

produced by men schooled in the precepts of Renaissance humanism, thus imbibing the revival of classical literature and philosophy in the Italian universities. While reports from the early sixteenth century tended however, to paint a favourable picture of Turkish society and government, Valensi (1987: 71-7, 91-96) suggests that from the 1570's the ambassadors reports become more dismissive and hostile. The explanation lies in the development of a self-image of Venetian (and European) good government incorporating regular laws, standards of civility, and personal freedom, which was built in part by projecting an image of Turkish weakness, corruption, decadence, and despotism.<sup>2</sup>

Another potent source of information from Asia was supplied in the reports of Jesuit missions to China and Japan, many of which painted an optimistic picture of Asian wealth and sophistication to sustain interest in their missions (Guy 1990: 69). As Joan-Pau Rubiés (2000: 108; Rodrigues 2001: 10) suggests however, the Jesuits relied on implicit assumptions in European thought in ascertaining what they thought was positive in Eastern societies,

The belief that sustained the Jesuits' enterprise was that the [relatively] more civil and rational peoples of the East would be better prepared for conversion [than those in Africa or America]... by "civil" and "rational" they [meant]... those peoples who enjoyed regular trade and wealthy cities... accepted... centralized government [and]... could also command sophisticated techniques such as a system of writing.

As a teacher at Jesuit colleges, the great political theorist of the Counter-Reformation, Giovanni Botero, was no doubt familiar with such sources of information. Indeed, in his early work, *The Greatness of Cities* Botero ([1588] 1956: 267) took a very positive view of China. In his later *The Reason of State* however, Botero ([1589] 1956: 85) classified various

'eastern' governments (including the Ottoman Turks, China, and the Persian kings of 'Ormuz') as cruel and tyrannical, and thus subject to frequent rebellions. 'On the other hand', he wrote,

The kingdoms of Spain, Portugal, and France, the principalities of Germany and the other states of Christendom... [have] fewer wars and rebellions than among these [eastern] barbarous peoples; this is because cruel laws and customs make men cruel, while humane ones make them humane.

This kind of assessment of the failings of Asian government in comparison to European government became a commonplace in European political thought, though it could be used for remarkably different purposes. Thomas Smith's ([1583] 1906: 132-3) *De Republica Anglorum* for example, used this negative view to bolster an image of a free England, while Jean Bodin ([1606] 1962: 201) defended the idea of absolutist sovereignty in France by contrasting it to the 'verie tyrant[s]' in Asia who ruled by making 'freemen' into 'slaves'. So common did this view of Asian tyranny and slavery become that by 1650, John Milton ([1650] 1991: 11) could quip that 'the people of Asia... are noted by wise Authors much inclinable to slavery.'

Dutch exploitation and virtual monopolisation of the spice trade in the 'East Indies' throughout the seventeenth century showed how much wealth could be obtained in Asia, but European efforts to extend their control of trade were often successfully resisted by rulers in India, China and Japan.<sup>3</sup> European economic and political weakness in Asia in the early-modern period however, was counter-balanced by an increasingly assertive self-image of European 'civilisation' buttressed by images of a wealthy and populous, but tyrannous and only semicivilised Asia. The Dutch East India Company ambassador, Johan Nieuhof for example, was intrigued by Asian customs, but was

particularly impressed by the wealth and complexity of Asian trade. Indeed, Nieuhof's ([1732] 1988: 178-9) testimony makes it clear that far from conquering and dominating Asian trade, as more recent Western historians have often argued, Europeans encountered very sophisticated and highly integrated trade networks that they were eager to enter on any terms. Displaying a characteristic European attitude of the period however, the people of Asia are categorised according to their involvement in trade or 'traffick', and especially by their use of coin (1988: 179, 275-8).

Traffick was a vital ethnographic signifier in early-modern European thought (Buchan 2007: 386-405). Put simply, relations of private property signified established rules or laws that differentiated one person's property from another's. The existence of such laws themselves entailed the existence of a system of government able to proclaim and enforce such laws. Consequently, participation in traffick was used by Europeans to judge non-European political, legal, and social structures. Nieuhof's detailed description of the centrality and significance of Asian trade and traffick thus conveyed a view of Asia as sophisticated. His various references to 'laziness', 'obstinacy', deceitfulness, cruelty, or tyrannous government however, each suggested that though economically sophisticated, Asia lacked the polished virtues (civility) of superior European civilisation (Nieuhoff 1988: 166, 181, 191, 205-6; Kaempfer [1690-92] 1906: 15).

It was precisely in this sense that the English political theorist (and eager consumer of travel literature) John Locke ([1690] 1988: 299), could argue that legitimate political authority could be thought of as emanating from the 'common consent' of the more 'civiliz'd' peoples of the Earth to the use of money as the universal means of trade. This agreement, he argued, not only set the bounds of each person's

individual property, it also set the bounds of territories between the 'several States and Kingdoms' of the Earth. The implication that Locke (1988: 299) did not hesitate to draw, was that where peoples had not consented to the use of money – as in America – no property beyond the immediate possessions necessary for self-preservation could be accumulated. In this way, Locke (1988: 339) used the idea of 'untamed' America with its 'savage' Indigenous inhabitants as exemplars of the 'Pattern of the first Ages in *Asia* and *Europe'*. Locke's concession here was that Asia was not in an analogous position to 'savage' America.

Some travellers to the region argued that Asian nations observed standards of civility at least as refined as those in Europe (Kaempfer 1906: 138). Two French accounts of embassies to Siam (Thailand) in the late seventeenth century paid tribute to Siamese domestic 'civilities', but suggested that they too severely restricted public interaction(Gervaise [1688] 1989: 83-5; Loubère [1693] 1986: 54). The implication was significant. Seventeenth-century European writers were beginning to use the term 'civility' to refer to conduct adapted to and supporting a well-regulated polity, encompassing laws protecting private property, in which individuals conducted themselves with a propriety opposed to the rudeness of the uncultivated and unlearned (Hale 1993: 362-5). Civility was thus about much more than simple good manners. Civility was a term that denoted the freedom and rationality of the European way of life and informed claims to political authority, to the right to govern those deemed less civilised (Braddick 2002: 95-7).

A striking illustration of how the recognition that Asian civility could be an indication of Asian backwardness (compared to Europe) can be found in one of the greatest of English travel narratives, William Dampier's *A New Voyage Round the World* of 1697. Throughout the

narrative, Asian civility is recognised but slighted. Thus the inhabitants of Pulo Condore are described as 'very civil' but 'extraordinarily poor', while the inhabitants of Formosa are described as the 'quietest and most civil People that I ever met with, but as lacking any 'civil government' and coin (Dampier [1697] 1997: 183, 203-4). The centrepiece of the narrative is his account of the island of Mindanao. Here Dampier (1997: 147) noted that the inhabitants had different governments, spoke different languages, were almost all Muslims, but that their most notable characteristic was that because they traded 'by Sea with other Nations' they were 'therefore more civil'. Their greater civility notwithstanding, Dampier believed that Mindanayans were 'very lazy and thievish'. Their laziness in particular he saw as a failing of 'most Indians', but in the Mindanayans was attributed to the 'arbitrary' nature of 'their Prince' who by exacting heavy tribute 'damps their Industry' (Dampier 1997: 148).

Dampier's analysis of the shortcomings of Asian civility here bears striking resemblance to the later formulation of the idea of 'oriental despotism' by the French *philosophe* Montesquieu. Although not a traveller himself, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* elevates 'oriental despotism' to the status of an analytical tool. The 'peoples of the East', Montesquieu ([1748] 1989: 235) asserted, have a natural 'laziness of the spirit' and of the body which explains the 'immutability' of their customs and mores. 'The East' is the realm of domestic and political servitude, in contrast to Europe, which is identified as the home of republicanism, equality, commerce, and political liberty. In 'the East' however, women are held as slaves by husbands and fathers, social peace means 'extreme subordination' to a despotic ruler, and industry is sacrificed to the poverty of pastoralism, or to the greed, luxury and corruption of despotic rulers (Montesquieu 1989: 61, 270-1, 294-6).

The reference to corruption is telling. In Book 8 of the *Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu argued that all polities, whether democracies, aristocracies, monarchies or despotisms, are prone to corruption. Significantly however, Montesquieu (1989: 112, 119) framed the problem of corruption in terms of the decay of its original 'principles', the mores and values that animate the regime and its people, and underpin its laws. Accordingly, Montesquieu (1989: 126) identified conquests, military victories, and the greatness of regimes as the chief sources of corruption and concluded that:

...in order to preserve the principles of the established government, the state must be maintained at the size it already has and that it will change its spirit to the degree to which its boundaries are narrowed or extended.

This analysis determined Montesquieu's (1989: 127-8) criticism of the Chinese empire, which he maintained (in contrast to more favourable Jesuit reports) was a corrupt despotism maintained in vice due to its unfavourable climate.

Montesquieu's analysis here relied on the dubious proposition that Asia apparently had no 'temperate zone' calling forth human ingenuity, labour, courage, and strength, unlike Europe's 'very broad' temperate zone. The consequence is that in Europe each nation is roughly matched in courage and strength, spurring each other to greater accomplishments. In Asia however, the 'brave and active' nations of the colder north live side by side with the 'lazy and timid peoples' of the torrid equatorial zone, thereby favouring the conquest of the weak by the strong or the corruption of the strong by the weak (Montesquieu 1989: 280). Even the conquests of Europeans and Asians differ, Montesquieu (1989: 282) thought, because Europeans conquered 'as free men' for themselves, while Asians conquer as 'slaves... for a master'. 'By contrast', Montesquieu (1989: 284) asserted, 'in Asia there

reigns a spirit of servitude that has never left it, and in all the histories of this country it is not possible to find a single trait marking a free soul; one will never see there anything but the heroism of servitude.'

# 4. Burke on India: Commerce, Civilisation and Empire

In Montesquieu the Enlightenment had its most consistent theorist of 'oriental despotism' and of the dismissive Eurocentric moral geography of Asian 'backwardness'. Montesquieu's attitude to Asia however, was not universally shared. A distinguishing feature of Enlightenment thought was the notion that the different beliefs and institutions of human communities could be understood by reference to the peculiar historical and social conditions prevailing in each community (Diderot 1992: 85). Indeed, this kind of sentiment informed the work of Edmund Burke. Although generally known as a conservative thinker and politician, Burke was nonetheless a strident critic (if not an outright opponent) of the British Empire in Ireland and America, and especially in India. His interest in India grew from family connections there in the 1770's, developed throughout the extended Parliamentary campaigns of the 1780's to regulate the EIC, and culminated in his extraordinary (and ultimately unsuccessful) campaign to impeach Warren Hastings, the former EIC Governor of Bengal, in the 1780's and 1790's. In criticising what he took to be the crude 'geographical morality' of the EIC, Burke articulated a new kind of moral geography in which Asia was no longer displayed simply as a backward realm, but as a fitting object for European benevolence (Frohnen and Reid 1997: 28-9).

By the time he became involved in the campaign to regulate the affairs of the EIC, Burke had taken opportunities to familiarise himself with orientalist scholarship (Cannon 1957: 28-9). Burke argued for tighter parliamentary regulation of the EIC, which he came to see as an organization whose chief interest in maximising profits led them into

extensive governmental power in India carried on in direct conflict with the British Constitution. The quest to bring the EIC under more effective parliamentary control was described by Burke in Ciceronian terms as being for the greater 'glory' of the 'whole British nation'.4 This glory consisted in what he called the 'great superintending trust' that the British Parliament ought to conduct throughout its 'Empire' by holding its functionaries and representatives (especially the EIC) to strict account (Burke 1991: 380). The problem, Burke (1981: 389-90) argued, lay in the fact that the EIC had assumed control over peoples neither 'abject and barbarous' nor 'savages', but 'a people for ages civilized and cultivated' with their own governments, cities, economies and industries, agriculture and religion.<sup>5</sup> Most importantly, Burke (1981: 390) argued, the populations of India under EIC control were so vastly different to Europeans, but also internally 'diversified by manners, by religion, by hereditary employment, through all their possible combinations."

Burke could be boldly critical of European assumptions, and even subverted the conventional distinction derived from Montesquieu between 'barbarism' and 'civilisation'. Thus Burke (1981: 400) argued that Arabic, Mongol and Persian conquests were all much bloodier and crueller than the EIC's relatively bloodless conquest, but that the EIC introduced a more systematic plunder and spoilation. By elevating profits over all other considerations, the EIC not only exploited India, but engaged in all kinds of subversions – substituting rulers with those regarded more pliable, bank-rolling greedy local rulers and then using debt as a means of control, or conquering whole nations who dared to oppose the EIC's interests (Burke 1991: 412).

Lying behind these concerns was a fear that what the EIC represented in India was a distortion or perversion of the process of civilisation. As

J.G.A. Pocock (1987: xxxii-xxxiii) has pointed out, Burke was an early proponent of Scottish Enlightenment theories of civilisation which sought to place the emergence of commercial economies with pacified, law governed civil societies in Britain and Western Europe within long historical trajectories of development. A key to this development was the transformation of the rude virtues of savage life (based on simplicity, hardiness and a warrior ethos) into the more flexible and rational manners of civilised societies. Manners consisted in the widely accepted standards of conduct and self-regulation that made civil life possible by circumscribing violence and entrenching social virtues such as courtesy, probity, and industry. Their development hinged on the development of commercial economies which brought people into greater contact and mutual dependence while also fostering a strong self-interest in changing one's conduct. Crucially however, the benefits of civilisation were to be secured by the prior development of sovereign states able to foster and protect commerce and thereby provide the space within which civilisation could emerge (Buchan 2006: 175-92). The key to this development, as both Scottish Enlightenment thinkers and Burke insisted, was the gradual emergence of a separation of private financial interests (consigned to the economic sphere) and public political duties and responsibilities. By adapting the old republican discourse of virtue and corruption to their theories of civilisation, Scottish Enlightenment thinkers saw corruption as a subversion of the careful separations that sustained civilised society (Pocock 1987: xix-xxii).

This view of social development lies behind Burke's insistent attack on the EIC's pursuit of private interests under the guise of political power – a confusion of interests that Burke did not hesitate to label 'corruption' (Whelan 1996: 64-122). His concern was that through its involvement in India, the EIC threatened to distort the civilising process in India and

potentially in Britain also. The EIC was a product of the 'improved state of Europe' with its highly developed 'arts... laws... [and] military discipline' and these qualities, as well as the decline of Asia, had allowed it to conquer and to assume the powers of sovereignty for the purpose of trade. The danger, Burke (1991: 282-3) argued was that,

...in all other Countries, a political body that acts as a Commonwealth is first settled, and trade follows as a necessary consequence of the protection obtained by political power. But there [in India] the affair was reversed. The constitution of the Company began in commerce and ended in Empire... [becoming] that thing which was supposed by the Roman Law so unsuitable, the same power was a Trader, the same power was a Lord.

In other words, the EIC confused both the private interest of commerce with the public duty of political authority, it was, Burke asserted, '...a State in disguise of a Merchant, a great public office in disguise of a Countinghouse.'

Burke's (1991: 281) campaign thus rested on the primary assumption that for all of India's antiquity and ancient civilisation, Europe, and Britain in particular was more advanced along the scale of civilisation, and therefore they had a greater responsibility to ensure that the benefits of civilisation be extended to those deemed less civilised. The problem that a more civilised British government confronted in governing India was not only to civilise the uncivilised, but to prevent the decay of their own civilisation. This fear lay behind Burke's (1981: 491, 318-9; 145) repeated warnings of the danger that EIC corruption would destabilise Britain's Empire and corrode its Constitution.

For these kinds of reasons, Burke (1981: 462) called for a more benevolent British rule in India, one more attuned both to the virtues of

the British Constitution and to the needs of India. The different situation of India required a form of govt adapted to Indian 'principles and maxims', preserving Indian laws and institutions (Burke 1991: 302). This view clearly implied a relationship in which India was seen as a largely passive object for enlightened British benevolence, reinforced by Burke's (1981: 410-12; 1991: 215-24) repeated use of female imagery in describing the EIC's rapaciousness in India. Others have pointed to Burke's sensitivity to the 'sexually aggressive... defiling of feminine rank' and the abrogation of chivalry by the Jacobins in revolutionary France (Kramnick 1977: 137). Burke's discussion of chivalry was a product, as Pocock (1987: xxxii) suggests, of his interest in Scottish Enlightenment theories of civilisation in which the gradual replacement of barbarous mores by more chivalrous codes of conduct was a crucial phase in the development of society. Hence, Burke's (1991: 144) indictment of the insults offered by EIC functionaries to Indian women showed that they flouted the values of all 'civilized nations'. Both the EIC and the Jacobins were responsible for what he saw as a perversion of the very process of civilisation (Whelan 1997, 168-9). It was for this reason also that Burke thought Hastings' imputed corruption was more than a misdemeanour in office, but a grave threat to the substance of British civilisation in Asia and Europe.

# Conclusion

Burke did not want to dismantle the British Empire in India, rather he believed it should and could exert a civilising influence by adapting the nature of its Empire to Indian laws, customs and institutions. One of many ironies in Burke's campaign against the EIC is that the specially selected target for much of his invective, Warren Hastings, was himself an 'orientalist' who claimed to want, and in the opinion of some actually sought just such an accommodation (Moon 1947: 231, 282). Burke latched onto the implication of Hastings' defence that the EIC's

arbitrary rule was necessary given India's history and culture, and he used this as a powerful rhetorical weapon. According to Burke, there was no such thing as 'oriental despotism' in India. The view that the peoples of India were all 'in a degraded, servile state... that they are... vile, miserable slaves, all prostrate...' was a figment of European imagination (Burke 1991: 283). 'In short', Burke (1991: 265, 276) argued, Hastings' defence rested on the fiction of 'oriental despotism' perpetrated by 'Montesquieu [and the]... idle and inconsiderate Travellers...' he relied upon, all of which was, Burke maintained, 'absolutely false'. Burke (1991: 346) castigated what he called Hastings' 'geographical morality',

...we think it necessary... to declare that the laws of morality are the same everywhere, and that there is no action which would pass for an act of extortion, of peculation, of bribery, and of oppression in England, that is not an act of extortion, of peculation, of bribery, and of oppression in Europe, Asia, Africa, and all the world over.

The idea that Asia knew no form of government other than 'oriental despotism' and that therefore the EIC were warranted in using this style of government in India implied a 'geographical morality' that consigned the people of India to a perpetual slavery to British government, and limited liberty, rights and representative government to Europe alone.

Here again, Burke's attack rested on an idea of law, justice and government informed by universal principles of natural law that applied just as strongly in Britain and Europe as in India and Asia. 'All Asia' Burke (1991: 260) argued, would be 'disfranchized at a stroke' if Hastings' defence were accepted. In Burke's view, the tension between EIC government in India and the ideals of British political discourse was simply unsustainable. Although the impeachment trial

ended with Hastings' acquittal and the apparent triumph of his defence that British government in Asia required a 'moral geography' based on convictions of Indian difference, the next century would witness the sustained effort to create a British 'empire of uniformity' in India.

For Burke of course, the rejection of moral geography required a greater recognition of Indian differences, differences that made the universal political values to which he was committed more rather than less important. The final irony of Burke's campaign was that in calling for a greater recognition of Indian difference, he helped to pave the way for the greater subjection of Indian customs, institutions and ways of life to European customs, institutions and ways of life (Davies 1935: 99; Marshall 2003: 90-91). One of the most aggressive spokespersons for this empire of uniformity in Asia, Lord Macauley (n.d.: 71), was to reflect that Burke's campaign against Hastings showed the key problem of British rule in India had not been that it was insensitive to local custom and institutions, but that it had been too sensitive. Hastings' failure was not his corruption, but his inability and unwillingness to introduce 'into India'.

...the learning of the West. To make the young natives of Bengal familiar with Milton and Adam Smith, to substitute the geography, astronomy, and surgery of Europe for the dotages of the Brahminical superstition, or for the imperfect science of Ancient Greece transfused through Arabian expositions, this was a scheme reserved to crown the beneficent administration of a far more virtuous ruler.

Here as elsewhere, Macauley heralded a dramatic shift in British political thought away from the recognition of difference that both Burke and Hastings had sought in different ways (Marshall 1965: 181-3, 187; Bowen 2006: 203). Along with this shift came the consolidation of a

new kind of moral geography in which Europe's claim to superiority came to rest on its supposed monopoly over the universal values that called for uniform application by means of what came to be seen by its proponents as benevolent, civilising empire.

# **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Guy, B. (1990). 'Ad majorem Societatis gloriam: Jesuit Perspectives on Chinese Mores in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries.' In G.S. Rousseau and R. Porter, eds. Exoticism in the Enlightenment. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Batchelor, R. (2003). 'Concealing the Bounds: Imagining the British Nation Through China.' In F.A. Nussbaum, ed. *The Global Eighteenth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bodin, J. (1962). *The Six Bookes of the Commonweale* [1606]. Facsimile reprint. K. D. McRae, ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Botero, G. (1956). *The Greatness of Cities* [1588]. In G. Botero, *The Reason of State*, Translated by P. J. and D. P. Waley. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Botero, G. (1956). *The Reason of State* [1589, 1606]. In G. Botero, *The Reason of State*, Translated by P. J. and D. P. Waley. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bowen, H.V. (2006). *Business of Empire: The East India Company and Imperial Britain, 1756–1833.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Braddick, M.J. (2002). 'Civility and Authority.' In D. Armitage and M.J.Braddick, eds. *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800.*Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Buchan, B. (2006). 'Civilisation, State Sovereignty and War: the Scottish Enlightenment and International Relations.' *International Relations* 20(2): 175-92.
- Buchan, B. (2007). 'Traffick of Empire: Trade, Treaty and *Terra Nullius* in Australia and North America, 1750-1800.' *History Compass* 5(2): 386-405.
- Burke, E., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Volume V, India: Madras and Bengal 1774-1785*, P. J. Marshall (ed.), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981.
  - 'Ninth Report from the Select Committee, 25 June 1783'.
  - 'Speech on Mr. Fox's East India Bill, 1 December 1783'.
  - 'Speech on Almas Ali Khan, 30 July 1784'.
  - 'Speech on the Nabob of Arcot's Debts, 28 February 1785'.
- Burke, E., *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VI, India: The Launching of the Hastings Impeachment 1786-1788*, P. J.
  Marshall (ed.), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991.
  - 'Speech on Bill to Ammend 1784 India Act, 22 March 1786'.

- 'Speech on Rohilla War Charge, 1 June 1786'.
- 'Articles of Impeachment, 14, 21, 28 May 1787'.
- 'Speech on Opening of Impeachment, 15, 16, 18, 19 February 1788'.
- Burke, E., 'Speech in Reply, 28, 30 May, 3, 5, 7, 11, 12, 14, 16 June 1794', in P.J. Marshall (ed.), *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. VII, India: The Hastings Trial, 1789-1794*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2000.
- Cannon, (1957). 'Sir William Jones and Edmund Burke.' *Modern Philology* 54(3): 185-186.
- Clarke, J.J. (1997). *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*. London: Routledge.
- Dampier, W. (1997). *A New Voyage Round the World* [1697]. London: Hummingbird Press.
- Davies, A.M. (1935). *Warren Hastings: Maker of British India*. London: Ivor Nicholson and Davies.
- Davies, J.C., ed. (1970). *The Pursuit of Power: Venetian Ambassadors' Reports on Spain, Turkey, and France in the Age of Phillip II, 1560-1600.* New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- de la Loubère, S. (1986). A New Historical Relation of the Kingdom of Siam [1693]. Reprint, Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Diderot, D. (1992). *Observations sur le Nakaz*. In J.H. Mason and R. Wokler ed. and trans. *Denis Diderot: Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ferguson, A. (1966). *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* [1767]. D. Forbes, ed. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.
- Frohnen, B.P., and C.J. Reid (1997). 'Diversity in Western Constitutionalism: Chartered Rights, Federated Structure, and Natural-Law Reasoning in Burke's Theory of Empire.' *McGeorge Law Review* 29: 28-29.
- Furber, H., ed. (1965). *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke: Vol V July 1782 June 1789.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gervaise, N. (1989). *The Natural and Political History of the Kingdom of Siam* [1688]. Translated and edited by J. Villiers. White Lotus.
- Gunn, G.C. (2003). *First Globalization: The Eurasian Exchange, 1500-1800.* Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hale, J. (1993). *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*. London: Harper Collins.
- Helliwell, C., and Hindess, B. (2002). 'The 'Empire of Uniformity' and the Government of Subject Peoples.' *Cultural* Values 6(1&2): 139-152.
- Kaempfer, E. (1906). *The History of Japan* [1690-92], Vol 1. Glasgow: James MacLehose.
- Kramnick, I. (1977). *The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kymlicka, W. (1995). *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Lach, D.F., and E.J. Van Kley, (2000). 'Asia in the Eyes of Europe: The Seventeenth Century.' In A. Pagden, ed. *Facing Each Other: The World's Perception of Europe and Europe's Perception of the World*, Vol 1. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Locke, J. (1988). *Two Treatises of Government* [1690]. P. Laslett, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lord Macaulay, (n.d.). Warren Hastings. London: Longman Green and Co.
- Marshall, P.J. (2003). 'A Free Though Conquering People': Eighteenth Century Britain and its Empire. Aldershot: Cambridge University Press.
- Marshall, P.J. (1965). *The Impeachment of Warren Hastings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mehta, U.S. (1999). Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Milton, J. (1991). *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* [1650]. M. Dzelzainis, ed. *John Milton; Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Montesquieu, (1989). *The Spirit of the Laws* [1748]. A.M Cohler *et.al.* eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moon, P. (1947). Warren Hastings and British India. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Muthu, S. (2003). *Enlightenment Against Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nieuhof, J. (1988). *Voyages and Travels to the East Indies 1653-1670* [1732]. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Pagden, A. (1982). *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parekh, B. (1993). 'Democracy and Cultural Pluralism, or How to Decolonise Liberalism.' Paper prepared for the ECPR Workshop on 'Indices of Democratisation', Leiden.
- Parekh, B. (1995). 'Liberalism and Colonialism: A Critique of Locke and Mill.' In J.N. Pieterse and B. Parekh, eds. *The Decolonisation of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*. London: Zed Books.
- Phillips, A. (1993). *Democracy and Difference*. University Park: The Pennsylvannia State University Press.
- Pitts, J. (2005). A Turn to Empire; The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Pocock, J.G.A. (1987). 'Introduction.' In E. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* [1790]. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Pocock, J.G.A. (1999). 'Nature and History, Self and Other: European Perceptions of World History in the Age of Encounter.' In A. Calder, J. Lamb and B. Orr, eds. *Voyages and Beaches: Pacific Encounters, 1769-1840.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

- Purchas, S. (n.d.). *Purchas his Pilgrimes in Japan, Extracted From Hakluytus Posthumus*. C. Wild, ed. London: Kegan Paul.
- Raspe, (1889). *The Original Travels and Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen* [1785]. London: Trübner and Co.
- Raynal, G.T.F. (1782). A Philosophical and Political History of the Settlements and Trade of the Europeans in the East and West Indies. Book I. Edinburgh.
- Ripa, C. (1709). *Iconologia: or, Moral Emblems by Cesar Ripa*. London: P. Tempest.
- Rodrigues, J. (2001). *João Rodrigues's Account of Sixteenth-Century Japan*. M. Cooper, ed. London: Hakluyt Society.
- Rubiés, J-P. (2000). 'New Worlds and Renaissance Ethnology.' In A. Pagden, ed. *Facing Each Other*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Smith, T. (1906). *De Republica Anglorum: A Discourse on the Commonwealth of England* [1583]. Edited by L. Alston. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906.
- Tully, J. (1993). *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Contexts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tully, J. (1995). Strange Multiplicity; Constitutionalism in an Age of Diversity. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Valensi, L. (1987). *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte*. Translated by A. Denner. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Whelan, F.G. (1996). *Edmund Burke and India: Political Morality and Empire*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Wolff, L, (1994). *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Young, I.M. (2000). *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Young, I.M. (1990). *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Even the fictional Baron Munchausen aimed to 'facilitate commerce and civilisation' by cutting a canal through the Isthmus of Suez to 'pour all the wealth of India by a new channel into Europe.' (Raspe [1785] 1889: 242).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See for example, 'Report by Morosini, 1585' and 'Report by Bernardo, 1592' (Davies 1970: 139, 159).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See for example, 'Japonian Embassage to the Pope...' and 'Adams his Voyage by the South-sea to Japon' (Purchas n.d.: 41, 95).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See for example, E. Burke, 'Fox's India Bill, 1 December 1783', (Burke 1981: 381), and 'Burke to William Baker, 22 June 1784', (Furber 1965: 155).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Adam Ferguson ([1767] 1966: 143) also suggested that the long history of commerce in China and India had exerted a civilising influence, despite the prevailing atmosphere of tyranny and corruption throughout Asia. Ferguson (1966: 111) also wrote of the relative civilisation of India and China which was largely unaffected by their history of bloody but brief conquests, even conjecturing that the equinoctial sun had produced a 'degree of mildness' that could 'even assuage the rigours of despotical government'.