



Foreword to Burke’s “Thoughts and Details on Scarcity”

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Edmund Burke’s literary executors French Laurence and Walker King issued “Thoughts and Details on Scarcity” in 1800, three years after Burke’s death in 1797. The document—reproduced in entirety here though without their informative Preface²—comes principally from a memorial Burke wrote to Prime Minister William Pitt in 1795, but almost half comes from other draft material, intended for the public but to be framed as letters addressed to Burke’s friend Arthur Young.³

The material began as a timely warning against interventionist measures in the face of dearth, including a locally administered minimum-wage scheme (referred to as a “tax” by Burke, because employers pay more for labor). But the interpolations from the letters are more of the nature of general political economy. The final document, “Thoughts and Details on Scarcity,” then, is an admixture—“Details,” the more specific facts from the memorial, including testimony of Burke the farmer, which work as illustration of the “Thoughts,” formulated especially in the material that the executors had drawn from the subsequent draft letters.

We have made a few very minor corrections to Burke’s text, and we include most of the footnotes added by Francis Canavan for the Liberty Fund edition (Burke 1999), which relate the text to affairs of the moment. We thank Liberty Fund for their kind permission to reproduce Canavan’s notes.

Why do we draw attention to “Thoughts and Details on Scarcity”?

Adam Smith’s “liberal plan” or “liberal system” (WN, 664, 538–539) is cen-

1. George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030.

2. To find their Preface online, go [here](#).

3. In the Liberty Fund edition of the work (Burke 1999), editor Francis Canavan indicates the three interpolations (pages 64–72, 73–76, 90–92) added to the original memorial to Pitt.

tered on the idea of liberty, which is a flipside of commutative justice. Liberty is others not messing with one's stuff, or as Smith puts it "allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way" (WN, 664; cf. 687). A presumption of liberty is central to the original political meaning of "liberal."

Presupposed by that liberalism, however, is a stable, integrated, functional polity. Smith's "science of a legislator" (468) is a philosophy of *policy reform*, within a settled and integrated system of political authority.

Burke is famous for decrying the French Revolution and worrying about the destabilization of political systems. He often speaks to matters outside of what Smithian liberalism presupposes. Many of Burke's writings concern not policy reform so much as *polity* reform. On the basis of his writings in this domain he may aptly be considered conservative—although one should not imagine that Burke favors the conservation of constitutional or fundamental political institutions per se, that is, even terrible ones. And when polity reform seems ripe, he may favor it, as he came to favor letting the American colonies go their own way.

But conservatism in polity reform may coexist with liberalism in policy reform. Burke was indeed a liberal. Burke's *policy* sensibilities were liberal, seen throughout his life and career, notably in "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity."

In philosophy and political ideology, David Hume, Smith, and Burke are three peas in a pod (see, e.g., Miller 1981, 196–203). But Hume and Smith operated in philosophy, speculation, scholarship, science, offering among other things "the science of a legislator." Burke operated in practical legislating and advising. Burke was "that insidious and crafty animal, vulgarly called a statesman or politician, whose councils are directed by the momentary fluctuations of affairs" (WN, 468). Burke did, of course, also have a foot in philosophy, as well as one in journalism, publishing, and propaganda.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1856, 145) suggested that Britain, especially in contrast to France, was exceptional in the coordination between these two groups of players, the philosophers and the politicians: "In England writers on the theory of government and those who actually governed co-operated with each other, the former setting forth their new theories, the latter amending or circumscribing these in light of practical experience." The present document by Edmund Burke helps us appreciate the outlook common to liberals at work in both realms, and it might inspire such cooperation today in all countries.

When reading Burke, we should mind whether he is treating polity reform or policy reform, and we should keep track of his multiple roles: Sometimes, somewhat the philosopher who treats what is relatively timeless, but also the politico or publicist, tending the timely and fluctuating.

Even in the latter, though, there's a timelessness in the manner of his words and deeds.

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Thoughts and Details on Scarcity

Edmund Burke

Of all things, an indiscreet tampering with the trade of provisions is the most dangerous, and it is always worst in the time when men are most disposed to it:—that is, in the time of scarcity. Because there is nothing on which the passions of men are so violent, and their judgment so weak, and on which there exists such a multitude of ill-founded popular prejudices.

The great use of Government is as a restraint; and there is no restraint which it ought to put upon others, and upon itself too, rather than on the fury of speculating under circumstances of irritation. The number of idle tales spread about by the industry of faction, and by the zeal of foolish good-intention, and greedily devoured by the malignant credulity of mankind, tends infinitely to aggravate prejudices, which, in themselves, are more than sufficiently strong. In that state of affairs, and of the publick with relation to them, the first thing that Government owes to us, the people, is *information*; the next is timely coercion:—the one to guide our judgment; the other to regulate our tempers.

To provide for us in our necessities is not in the power of Government. It would be a vain presumption in statesmen to think they can do it. The people maintain them, and not they the people. It is in the power of Government to prevent much evil; it can do very little positive good in this, or perhaps in any thing else. It is not only so of the state and statesman, but of all the classes and descriptions of the Rich—they are the pensioners of the poor, and are maintained by their superfluity. They are under an absolute, hereditary, and indefeasible dependance on those who labour, and are miscalled the Poor.

The labouring people are only poor, because they are numerous. Numbers in their nature imply poverty. In a fair distribution among a vast multitude, none can have much. That class of dependant pensioners called the rich, is so extremely small, that if all their throats were cut, and a distribution made of all they consume in a year, it would not give a bit of bread and cheese for one night's supper to those who labour, and who in reality feed both the pensioners and themselves.

But the throats of the rich ought not to be cut, nor their magazines plundered; because, in their persons they are trustees for those who labour, and their hoards are the banking-houses of these latter. Whether they mean it or not, they do, in effect, execute their trust—some with more, some with less fidelity and judgment. But on the whole, the duty is performed, and every thing returns, deducting some very trifling commission and discount, to the place from whence it arose.

When the poor rise to destroy the rich, they act as wisely for their own purposes as when they burn mills, and throw corn into the river, to make bread cheap.

When I say, that we of the people ought to be informed, inclusively I say, we ought not to be flattered: flattery is the reverse of instruction. The *poor* in that case would be rendered as improvident as the rich, which would not be at all good for them.

Nothing can be so base and so wicked as the political canting language, “The Labouring *Poor*.” Let compassion be shewn in action, the more the better, according to every man’s ability, but let there be no lamentation of their condition. It is no relief to their miserable circumstances; it is only an insult to their miserable understandings. It arises from a total want of charity, or a total want of thought. Want of one kind was never relieved by want of any other kind. Patience, labour, sobriety, frugality, and religion, should be recommended to them; all the rest is downright *fraud*. It is horrible to call them “The *once happy* labourer.”

Whether what may be called moral or philosophical happiness of the laborious classes is increased or not, I cannot say. The seat of that species of happiness is in the mind; and there are few data to ascertain the comparative state of the mind at any two periods. Philosophical happiness is to want little. Civil or vulgar happiness is to want much, and to enjoy much.

If the happiness of the animal man (which certainly goes somewhere towards the happiness of the rational man) be the object of our estimate, then I assert, without the least hesitation, that the condition of those who labour (in all descriptions of labour, and in all gradations of labour, from the highest to the lowest inclusively) is on the whole extremely meliorated, if more and better food is any standard of melioration. They work more, it is certain; but they have the advantage of their augmented labour; yet whether that increase of labour be on the whole a *good* or an *evil*, is a consideration that would lead us a great way, and is not for my present purpose. But as to the fact of the melioration of their diet, I shall enter into the detail of proof whenever I am called upon: in the mean time, the known difficulty of contenting them with any thing but bread made of the finest flour, and meat of the first quality, is proof sufficient.

I further assert, that even under all the hardships of the last year, the labouring people did, either out of their direct gains, or from charity, (which it seems is now an insult to them) in fact, fare better than they did, in seasons of common plenty, 50 or 60 years ago; or even at the period of my English observation, which is about 44 years. I even assert, that full as many in that class, as ever were known to do it before, continued to save money; and this I can prove, so far as my own information and experience extend.

It is not true that the rate of wages has not increased with the nominal price of provisions. I allow it has not fluctuated with that price, nor ought it; and the

Squires of Norfolk¹ had dined, when they gave it as their opinion, that it might or ought to rise and fall with the market of provisions. The rate of wages in truth has no *direct* relation to that price. Labour is a commodity like every other, and rises or falls according to the demand. This is in the nature of things; however, the nature of things has provided for their necessities. Wages have been twice raised in my time, and they bear a full proportion, or even a greater than formerly, to the medium of provision during the last bad cycle of twenty years. They bear a full proportion to the result of their labour. If we were wildly to attempt to force them beyond it, the stone which we had forced up the hill would only fall back upon them in a diminished demand, or, what indeed is the far lesser evil, an aggravated price of all the provisions, which are the result of their manual toil.

There is an implied contract, much stronger than any instrument or article of agreement, between the labourer in any occupation and his employer—that the labour, so far as that labour is concerned, shall be sufficient to pay to the employer a profit on his capital, and a compensation for his risk; in a word, that the labour shall produce an advantage equal to the payment. Whatever is above that, is a *direct tax*; and if the amount of that tax be left to the will and pleasure of another, it is an *arbitrary tax*.

If I understand it rightly, the tax proposed on the farming interest of this kingdom,² is to be levied at what is called the discretion of justices of peace.

The questions arising on this scheme of arbitrary taxation are these—Whether it is better to leave all dealing, in which there is no force or fraud, collusion or combination, entirely to the persons mutually concerned in the matter contracted for; or to put the contract into the hands of those, who can have none, or a very remote interest in it, and little or no knowledge of the subject.

It might be imagined that there would be very little difficulty in solving this question; for what man, of any degree of reflection, can think, that a want of interest in any subject closely connected with a want of skill in it, qualifies a person to intermeddle in any the least affair; much less in affairs that vitally concern the agriculture of the kingdom, the first of all its concerns, and the foundation of all its prosperity in every other matter, by which that prosperity is produced?

The vulgar error on this subject arises from a total confusion in the very

1. Burke may have mistakenly written Norfolk when he meant Suffolk, where the Justices of the Peace recommended that the wages of laborers should be adjusted in proportion to the price of corn.

2. The reference is to the so-called Speenhamland system, which inspired Burke to write this memorandum to William Pitt. In 1782, Parliament had enacted Gilbert's Act, which authorized local governments to grant allowances in aid of wages. Subsidizing the wages of the poor was not even then a new departure in English law. On this basis, in 1795 the magistrates of Berkshire, a county adjacent to Burke's Buckinghamshire, met in the Pelican Inn in Speenhamland, and adopted a scheme to ensure laborers a living wage. A minimum wage was fixed, which varied with the price of corn; if the wages actually paid fell below that, they would be supplemented from the poor rates.

idea of things widely different in themselves;—those of convention, and those of judicature. When a contract is making, it is a matter of discretion and of interest between the parties. In that intercourse, and in what is to arise from it, the parties are the masters. If they are not completely so, they are not free, and therefore their contracts are void.

But this freedom has no farther extent, when the contract is made; then their discretionary powers expire, and a new order of things takes its origin. Then, and not till then, and on a difference between the parties, the office of the judge commences. He cannot dictate the contract. It is his business to see that it be *enforced*; provided that it is not contrary to pre-existing laws, or obtained by force or fraud. If he is in any way a maker or regulator of the contract, in so much he is disqualified from being a judge. But this sort of confused distribution of administrative and judicial characters, (of which we have already as much as is sufficient, and a little more) is not the only perplexity of notions and passions which trouble us in the present hour.

What is doing, supposes or pretends that the farmer and the labourer have opposite interests;—that the farmer oppresses the labourer; and that a gentleman called a justice of peace, is the protector of the latter, and a controul and restraint on the former; and this is a point I wish to examine in a manner a good deal different from that in which gentlemen proceed, who confide more in their abilities than is fit, and suppose them capable of more than any natural abilities, fed with no other than the provender furnished by their own private speculations, can accomplish. Legislative acts, attempting to regulate this part of œconomy, do, at least, as much as any other, require the exactest detail of circumstances, guided by the surest general principles that are necessary to direct experiment and enquiry, in order again from those details to elicit principles, firm and luminous general principles, to direct a practical legislative proceeding.

First, then, I deny that it is in this case, as in any other of necessary implication, that contracting parties should originally have had different interests. By accident it may be so undoubtedly at the outset; but then the contract is of the nature of a compromise; and compromise is founded on circumstances that suppose it the interest of the parties to be reconciled in some medium. The principle of compromise adopted, of consequence the interests cease to be different.

But in the case of the farmer and the labourer, their interests are always the same, and it is absolutely impossible that their free contracts can be onerous to either party. It is the interest of the farmer, that his work should be done with effect and celerity: and that cannot be, unless the labourer is well fed, and otherwise found with such necessaries of animal life, according to its habitudes, as may keep the body in full force, and the mind gay and cheerful. For of all the instruments of his trade, the labour of man (what the ancient writers have called the *instrumentum vocale*)

is that on which he is most to rely for the re-payment of his capital. The other two, the *semivocale* in the ancient classification, that is, the working stock of cattle, and the *instrumentum mutuum*, such as carts, ploughs, spades, and so forth, though not all inconsiderable in themselves, are very much inferior in utility or in expence; and without a given portion of the first, are nothing at all. For in all things whatever, the mind is the most valuable and the most important; and in this scale the whole of agriculture is in a natural and just order; the beast is as an informing principle to the plough and cart; the labourer is as reason to the beast; and the farmer is as a thinking and presiding principle to the labourer. An attempt to break this chain of subordination in any part is equally absurd; but the absurdity is the most mischievous in practical operation, where it is the most easy, that is, where it is the most subject to an erroneous judgment.

It is plainly more the farmer's interest that his men should thrive, than that his horses should be well fed, sleek, plump, and fit for use, or than that his waggon and ploughs should be strong, in good repair, and fit for service.

On the other hand, if the farmer ceases to profit of the labourer, and that his capital is not continually manured and fructified, it is impossible that he should continue that abundant nutriment, and cloathing, and lodging, proper for the protection of the instruments he employs.

It is therefore the first and fundamental interest of the labourer, that the farmer should have a full incoming profit on the product of his labour. The proposition is self-evident, and nothing but the malignity, perverseness, and ill-governed passions of mankind, and particularly the envy they bear to each other's prosperity, could prevent their seeing and acknowledging it, with thankfulness to the benign and wise disposer of all things, who obliges men, whether they will or not, in pursuing their own selfish interests, to connect the general good with their own individual success.

But who are to judge what that profit and advantage ought to be? certainly no authority on earth. It is a matter of convention dictated by the reciprocal conveniences of the parties, and indeed by their reciprocal necessities.—But, if the farmer is excessively avaricious?—why so much the better—the more he desires to increase his gains, the more interested is he in the good condition of those, upon whose labour his gains must principally depend.

I shall be told by the zealots of the sect of regulation, that this may be true, and may be safely committed to the convention of the farmer and the labourer, when the latter is in the prime of his youth, and at the time of his health and vigour, and in ordinary times of abundance. But in calamitous seasons, under accidental illness, in declining life, and with the pressure of a numerous offspring, the future nourishers of the community but the present drains and blood-suckers of those who produce them, what is to be done? When a man cannot live and maintain his

family by the natural hire of his labour, ought it not to be raised by authority?

On this head I must be allowed to submit, what my opinions have ever been; and somewhat at large.

And, first, I premise that labour is, as I have already intimated, a commodity, and as such, an article of trade. If I am right in this notion, then labour must be subject to all the laws and principles of trade, and not to regulations foreign to them, and that may be totally inconsistent with those principles and those laws. When any commodity is carried to market, it is not the necessity of the vender, but the necessity of the purchaser that raises the price. The extreme want of the seller has rather (by the nature of things with which we shall in vain contend) the direct contrary operation. If the goods at market are beyond the demand, they fall in their value; if below it, they rise. The impossibility of the subsistence of a man, who carries his labour to a market, is totally beside the question in this way of viewing it. The only question is, what is it worth to the buyer?

But if authority comes in and forces the buyer to a price, who is this in the case (say) of a farmer, who buys the labour of ten or twelve labouring men, and three or four handicrafts, what is it, but to make an arbitrary division of his property among them?

The whole of his gains, I say it with the most certain conviction, never do amount any thing like in value to what he pays to his labourers and artificers; so that a very small advance upon what *one* man pays to *many*, may absorb the whole of what he possesses, and amount to an actual partition of all his substance among them. A perfect equality will indeed be produced;—that is to say, equal want, equal wretchedness, equal beggary, and on the part of the partitioners, a woeful, helpless, and desperate disappointment. Such is the event of all compulsory equalizations. They pull down what is above. They never raise what is below: and they depress high and low together beneath the level of what was originally the lowest.

If a commodity is raised by authority above what it will yield with a profit to the buyer, that commodity will be the less dealt in. If a second blundering interposition be used to correct the blunder of the first, and an attempt is made to force the purchase of the commodity (of labour for instance), then one of these two things must happen, either that the forced buyer is ruined, or the price of the product of the labour, in that proportion, is raised. Then the wheel turns round, and the evil complained of falls with aggravated weight on the complainant. The price of corn, which is the result of the expence of all the operations of husbandry, taken together, and for some time continued, will rise on the labourer, considered as a consumer. The very best will be, that he remains where he was. But if the price of the corn should not compensate the price of labour, what is far more to be feared, the most serious evil, the very destruction of agriculture itself, is to be apprehended.

Nothing is such an enemy to accuracy of judgment as a coarse discrimina-

tion; a want of such classification and distribution as the subject admits of. Encrease the rate of wages to the labourer, say the regulators—as if labour was but one thing and of one value. But this very broad generic term, *labour*, admits, at least, of two or three specific descriptions: and these will suffice, at least, to let gentlemen discern a little the necessity of proceeding with caution in their coercive guidance of those whose existence depends upon the observance of still nicer distinctions and sub-divisions, than commonly they resort to in forming their judgments on this very enlarged part of economy.

The labourers in husbandry may be divided: 1st. into those who are able to perform the full work of a man; that is, what can be done by a person from twenty-one years of age to fifty. I know no husbandry work (mowing hardly excepted) that is not equally within the power of all persons within those ages, the more advanced fully compensating by knack and habit what they lose in activity. Unquestionably, there is a good deal of difference between the value of one man's labour and that of another, from strength, dexterity, and honest application. But I am quite sure, from my best observation, that any given five men will, in their total, afford a proportion of labour equal to any other five within the periods of life I have stated; that is, that among such five men there will be one possessing all the qualifications of a good workman, one bad, and the other three middling, and approximating to the first and the last. So that in so small a platoon as that of even five, you will find the full complement of all that five men *can* earn. Taking five and five throughout the kingdom, they are equal: therefore, an error with regard to the equalization of their wages by those who employ five, as farmers do at the very least, cannot be considerable.

2dly. Those who are able to work, but not the complete task of a day-labourer. This class is infinitely diversified, but will aptly enough fall into principal divisions. *Men*, from the decline, which after fifty becomes every year more sensible, to the period of debility and decrepitude, and the maladies that precede a final dissolution. *Women*, whose employment on husbandry is but occasional, and who differ more in effective labour one from another than men do, on account of gestation, nursing, and domestic management, over and above the difference they have in common with men in advancing, in stationary, and in declining life. *Children*, who proceed on the reverse order, growing from less to greater utility, but with a still greater disproportion of nutriment to labour than is found in the second of these sub-divisions; as is visible to those who will give themselves the trouble of examining into the interior economy of a poor-house.

This inferior classification is introduced to shew, that laws prescribing, or magistrates exercising, a very stiff, and often inapplicable rule, or a blind and rash discretion, never can provide the just proportions between earning and salary on the one hand, and nutriment on the other: whereas interest, habit, and the tacit

convention, that arise from a thousand nameless circumstances, produce a *tact* that regulates without difficulty, what laws and magistrates cannot regulate at all. The first class of labour wants nothing to equalize it; it equalizes itself. The second and third are not capable of any equalization.

But what if the rate of hire to the labourer comes far short of his necessary subsistence, and the calamity of the time is so great as to threaten actual famine? Is the poor labourer to be abandoned to the flinty heart and griping hand of base self-interest, supported by the sword of law, especially when there is reason to suppose that the very avarice of farmers themselves has concurred with the errors of Government to bring famine on the land.

In that case, my opinion is this. Whenever it happens that a man can claim nothing according to the rules of commerce, and the principles of justice, he passes out of that department, and comes within the jurisdiction of mercy. In that province the magistrate has nothing at all to do: his interference is a violation of the property which it is his office to protect. Without all doubt, charity to the poor is a direct and obligatory duty upon all Christians, next in order after the payment of debts, full as strong, and by nature made infinitely more delightful to us. Pufendorf, and other casuists do not, I think, denominate it quite properly, when they call it a duty of imperfect obligation. But the manner, mode, time, choice of objects, and proportion, are left to private discretion; and perhaps, for that very reason it is performed with the greater satisfaction, because the discharge of it has more the appearance of freedom; recommending us besides very specially to the divine favour, as the exercise of a virtue most suitable to a being sensible of its own infirmity.

The cry of the people in cities and towns, though unfortunately (from a fear of their multitude and combination) the most regarded, ought, in *fact*, to be the *least* attended to upon this subject; for citizens are in a state of utter ignorance of the means by which they are to be fed, and they contribute little or nothing, except in an infinitely circuitous manner, to their own maintenance. They are truly "*Fruges consumere nati.*"³ They are to be heard with great respect and attention upon matters within their province, that is, on trades and manufactures; but on any thing that relates to agriculture, they are to be listened to with the same *reverence* which we pay to the dogmas of other ignorant and presumptuous men.

If any one were to tell them, that they were to give in an account of all the stock in their shops; that attempts would be made to limit their profits, or raise the price of the labouring manufacturers upon them, or recommend to Government, out of a capital from the publick revenues, to set up a shop of the same commodities, in order to rival them, and keep them to reasonable dealing, they would

3. "Born to consume the fruits [of the earth]." Horace *Epistles* 1.2.27.

very soon see the impudence, injustice, and oppression of such a course. They would not be mistaken; but they are of opinion, that agriculture is to be subject to other laws, and to be governed by other principles.

A greater and more ruinous mistake cannot be fallen into, than that the trades of agriculture and grazing can be conducted upon any other than the common principles of commerce; namely, that the producer should be permitted, and even expected, to look to all possible profit which, without fraud or violence, he can make; to turn plenty or scarcity to the best advantage he can; to keep back or to bring forward his commodities at his pleasure; to account to no one for his stock or for his gain. On any other terms he is the slave of the consumer; and that he should be so is of no benefit to the consumer. No slave was ever so beneficial to the master as a freeman that deals with him on an equal footing by convention, formed on the rules and principles of contending interests and compromised advantages. The consumer, if he were suffered, would in the end always be the dupe of his own tyranny and injustice. The landed gentleman is never to forget, that the farmer is his representative.

It is a perilous thing to try experiments on the farmer. The farmer's capital (except in a few persons, and in a very few places) is far more feeble than commonly is imagined. The trade is a very poor trade; it is subject to great risks and losses. The capital, such as it is, is turned but once in the year; in some branches it requires three years before the money is paid. I believe never less than three in the turnip and grass-land course, which is the prevalent course on the more or less fertile, sandy and gravelly loams, and these compose the soil in the south and south-east of England, the best adapted, and perhaps the only ones that are adapted, to the turnip husbandry.

It is very rare that the most prosperous farmer, counting the value of his quick and dead stock, the interest of the money he turns, together with his own wages as a bailiff or overseer, ever does make twelve or fifteen *per centum* by the year on his capital. I speak of the prosperous. In most of the parts of England which have fallen within my observation, I have rarely known a farmer, who to his own trade has not added some other employment or traffic, that, after a course of the most unremitting parsimony and labour (such for the greater part is theirs), and persevering in his business for a long course of years, died worth more than paid his debts, leaving his posterity to continue in nearly the same equal conflict between industry and want, in which the last predecessor, and a long line of predecessors before him, lived and died.

Observe that I speak of the generality of farmers who have not more than from one hundred and fifty to three or four hundred acres. There are few in this part of the country within the former, or much beyond the latter, extent. Unquestionably in other places there are much larger. But, I am convinced, whatever

part of England be the theatre of his operations, a farmer who cultivates twelve hundred acres, which I consider as a large farm, though I know there are larger, cannot proceed, with any degree of safety and effect, with a smaller capital than ten thousand pounds; and that he cannot, in the ordinary course of culture, make more upon that great capital of ten thousand pounds, than twelve hundred a year.

As to the weaker capitals, an easy judgment may be formed by what very small errors they may be farther attenuated, enervated, rendered unproductive, and perhaps totally destroyed.

This constant precariousness and ultimate moderate limits of a farmer's fortune, on the strongest capital, I press, not only on account of the hazardous speculations of the times, but because the excellent and most useful works of my friend, Mr. Arthur Young, tend to propagate that error (such I am very certain it is), of the largeness of a farmer's profits. It is not that his account of the produce does often greatly exceed, but he by no means makes the proper allowance for accidents and losses. I might enter into a convincing detail, if other more troublesome and more necessary details were not before me.

This proposed discretionary tax on labour militates with the recommendations of the Board of Agriculture: they recommend a general use of the drill culture.⁴ I agree with the Board, that where the soil is not excessively heavy, or incumbered with large loose stones (which however is the case with much otherwise good land), that course is the best, and most productive, provided that the most accurate eye; the most vigilant superintendance; the most prompt activity, which has no such day as to-morrow in its calendar; the most steady foresight and pre-disposing order to have every body and every thing ready in its place, and prepared to take advantage of the fortunate fugitive moment in this coquetting climate of ours—provided, I say, all these combine to speed the plough, I admit its superiority over the old and general methods. But under procrastinating, improvident, ordinary husbandmen, who may neglect or let slip the few opportunities of sweetening and purifying their ground with perpetually renovated toil, and undissipated attention, nothing, when tried to any extent, can be worse, or more dangerous: the farm may be ruined, instead of having the soil enriched and sweetened by it.

But the excellence of the method on a proper soil, and conducted by an husbandman, of whom there are few, being readily granted, how, and on what conditions, is this culture obtained? Why, by a very great encrease of labour; by an augmentation of the third part, at least, of the hand-labour, to say nothing of the horses and machinery employed in ordinary tillage. Now, every man must be sensible how little becoming the gravity of Legislature it is to encourage a Board,

4. To drill is to sow seeds or seedlings along a shallow furrow.

which recommends to us, and upon very weighty reasons unquestionably, an enlargement of the capital we employ in the operations of the land, and then to pass an act which taxes that manual labour, already at a very high rate; thus compelling us to diminish the quantity of labour which in the vulgar course we actually employ.

What is true of the farmer is equally true of the middle man; whether the middle man acts as factor,⁵ jobber, salesman, or speculator, in the markets of grain. These traders are to be left to their free course; and the more they make, and the richer they are, and the more largely they deal, the better both for the farmer and consumer, between whom they form a natural and most useful link of connection; though, by the machinations of the old evil counsellor, *Envy*, they are hated and maligned by both parties.

I hear that middle men are accused of monopoly. Without question, the monopoly of authority is, in every instance and in every degree, an evil; but the monopoly of capital is the contrary. It is a great benefit, and a benefit particularly to the poor. A tradesman who has but a hundred pound capital, which (say) he can turn but once a year, cannot live upon a *profit* of 10 *per cent.* because he cannot live upon ten pounds a year; but a man of ten thousand pounds capital can live and thrive upon 5 *per cent.* profit in the year, because he has five hundred pounds a year. The same proportion holds in turning it twice or thrice. These principles are plain and simple; and it is not our ignorance, so much as the levity, the envy, and the malignity of our nature, that hinders us from perceiving and yielding to them: but we are not to suffer our vices to usurp the place of our judgment.

The balance between consumption and production makes price. The market settles, and alone can settle, that price. Market is the meeting and conference of the *consumer* and *producer*, when they mutually discover each other's wants. Nobody, I believe, has observed with any reflection what market is, without being astonished at the truth, the correctness, the celerity, the general equity, with which the balance of wants is settled. They who wish the destruction of that balance, and would fain by arbitrary regulation decree, that defective production should not be compensated by increased price, directly lay their *axe* to the root of production itself.

They may even in one year of such false policy, do mischiefs incalculable; because the trade of a farmer is, as I have before explained, one of the most precarious in its advantages, the most liable to losses, and the least profitable of any that is carried on. It requires ten times more of labour, of vigilance, of attention, of skill, and let me add, of good fortune also, to carry on the business of a farmer with success, than what belongs to any other trade. Seeing things in this light, I

5. One who acts for another as an agent, deputy, or representative; more narrowly, an agent who buys or sells for another; a commission merchant.

am far from presuming to censure the late circular instruction of Council to Lord Lieutenants⁶—but I confess I do not clearly discern its object. I am greatly afraid that the enquiry will raise some alarm as a measure, leading to the French system of putting corn into requisition. For that was preceded by an inquisition somewhat similar in its principle, though, according to their mode, their principles are full of that violence, *which here* is not much to be feared. It goes on a principle directly opposite to mine: it presumes, that the market is no fair *test* of plenty or scarcity. It raises a suspicion, which may affect the tranquillity of the public mind, “that the farmer keeps back, and takes unfair advantages by delay;” on the part of the dealer, it gives rise obviously to a thousand nefarious speculations.

In case the return should on the whole prove favourable, is it meant to ground a measure for encouraging exportation and checking the import of corn? If it is not, what end can it answer? And, I believe, it is not.

This opinion may be fortified by a report gone abroad, that intentions are entertained of erecting public granaries, and that this enquiry is to give Government an advantage in its purchases.

I hear that such a measure has been proposed, and is under deliberation, that is, for Government to set up a granary in every market town, at the expence of the state, in order to extinguish the dealer, and to subject the farmer to the consumer, by securing corn to the latter at a certain and steady price.

If such a scheme is adopted, I should not like to answer for the safety of the granary, of the agents, or of the town itself, in which the granary was erected—the first storm of popular phrenzy would fall upon that granary.

So far in a political light.

In an economical light, I must observe, that the construction of such granaries throughout the kingdom, would be at an expence beyond all calculation. The keeping them up would be at a great charge. The management and attendance would require an army of agents, store-keepers, clerks, and servants. The capital to be employed in the purchase of grain would be enormous. The waste, decay, and corruption, would be a dreadful drawback on the whole dealing; and the dissatisfaction of the people, at having decayed, tainted, or corrupted corn sold to them, as must be the case, would be serious.

This climate (whatever others may be) is not favourable to granaries, where wheat is to be kept for any time. The best, and indeed the only good granary, is the rick-yard of the farmer, where the corn is preserved in its own straw, sweet, clean, wholesome, free from vermin and from insects, and comparatively at a trifle of expence. This, with the barn, enjoying many of the same advantages, have been

6. A circular letter sent by the Council through the Home Secretary to the Lords Lieutenant asking them to hold magistrates' meetings in their counties to ascertain the produce of the recent harvest.

the sole granaries of England from the foundation of its agriculture to this day. All this is done at the expence of the undertaker, and at his sole risk. He contributes to Government; he receives nothing from it but protection; and to this he has a *claim*.

The moment that Government appears at market, all the principles of market will be subverted. I don't know whether the farmer will suffer by it, as long as there is a tolerable market of competition; but I am sure that, in the first place, the trading government will speedily become a bankrupt, and the consumer in the end will suffer. If Government makes all its purchases at once, it will instantly raise the market upon itself. If it makes them by degrees, it must follow the course of the market. If it follows the course of the market, it will produce no effect, and the consumer may as well buy as he wants—therefore all the expence is incurred gratis.

But if the object of this scheme should be, what I suspect it is, to destroy the dealer, commonly called the middle man, and by incurring a voluntary loss to carry the baker to deal with Government, I am to tell them that they must set up another trade, that of a miller or a mealman, attended with a new train of expences and risks. If in both these trades they should succeed, so as to exclude those who trade on natural and private capitals, then they will have a monopoly in their hands, which, under the appearance of a monopoly of capital, will, in reality, be a monopoly of authority, and will ruin whatever it touches. The agriculture of the kingdom cannot stand before it.

A little place like Geneva, of not more than from twenty-five to thirty thousand inhabitants, which has no territory, or next to none; which depends for its existence on the good-will of three neighbouring powers, and is of course continually in the state of something like a *siege*, or in the speculation of it, might find some resource in state granaries, and some revenue from the monopoly of what was sold to the keepers of public-houses. This is a policy for a state too small for agriculture. It is not (for instance) fit for so great a country as the Pope possesses, where, however, it is adopted and pursued in a greater extent, and with more strictness. Certain of the Pope's territories, from whence the city of Rome is supplied, being obliged to furnish Rome and the granaries of his Holiness with corn at a certain price, that part of the papal territories is utterly ruined. That ruin may be traced with certainty to this sole cause, and it appears indubitably by a comparison of their state and condition with that of the other part of the ecclesiastical dominions not subjected to the same regulations, which are in circumstances highly flourishing.

The reformation of this evil system is in a manner impracticable; for, first, it does keep bread and all other provisions equally subject to the chamber of supply, at a pretty reasonable and regular price, in the city of Rome. This preserves quiet among the numerous poor, idle, and naturally mutinous people, of a very great capital. But the quiet of the town is purchased by the ruin of the country, and the

ultimate wretchedness of both. The next cause which renders this evil incurable, is, the jobs which have grown out of it, and which, in spite of all precautions, would grow out of such things, even under governments far more potent than the feeble authority of the Pope.

This example of Rome which has been derived from the most ancient times, and the most flourishing period of the Roman empire (but not of the Roman agriculture) may serve as a great caution to all Governments, not to attempt to feed the people out of the hands of the magistrates. If once they are habituated to it, though but for one half-year, they will never be satisfied to have it otherwise. And, having looked to Government for bread, on the very first scarcity they will turn and bite the hand that fed them. To avoid that *evil*, Government will redouble the causes of it; and then it will become inveterate and incurable.

I beseech the Government (which I take in the largest sense of the word, comprehending the two Houses of Parliament) seriously to consider that years of scarcity or plenty, do not come alternately or at short intervals, but in pretty long cycles and irregularly, and consequently that we cannot assure ourselves, if we take a wrong measure, from the temporary necessities of one season; but that the next, and probably more, will drive us to the continuance of it; so that in my opinion, there is no way of preventing this evil which goes to the destruction of all our agriculture, and of that part of our internal commerce which touches our agriculture the most nearly, as well as the safety and very being of Government, but manfully to resist the very first idea, speculative or practical, that it is within the competence of Government, taken as Government, or even of the rich, as rich, to supply to the poor, those necessaries which it has pleased the Divine Providence for a while to with-hold from them. We, the people, ought to be made sensible, that it is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the Divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer, or which hangs over us.

So far as to the principles of general policy.

As to the state of things which is urged as a reason to deviate from them, these are the circumstances of the harvest of 1795 and 1794. With regard to the harvest of 1794, in relation to the noblest grain, wheat, it is allowed to have been somewhat short, but not excessively; and in quality, for the seven and twenty years, during which I have been a farmer, I never remember wheat to have been so good. The world were, however, deceived in their speculations upon it—the farmer as well as the dealer. Accordingly the price fluctuated beyond any thing I can remember; for, at one time of the year, I sold my wheat at 14l. a load, (I sold off all I had, as I thought this was a reasonable price), when at the end of the season, if I had then had any to sell, I might have got thirty guineas for the same sort of grain. I sold all that I had, as I said, at a comparatively low price, because I thought it a good

price, compared with what I thought the general produce of the harvest; but when I came to consider what my own *total* was, I found that the quantity had not answered my expectation. It must be remembered, that this year of produce, (the year 1794) short, but excellent, followed a year which was not extraordinary in production, nor of a superior quality, and left but little in store. At first this was not felt, because the harvest came in unusually early—earlier than common, by a full month.

The winter, at the end of 1794, and beginning of 1795, was more than usually unfavourable both to corn and grass, owing to the sudden relaxation of very rigorous frosts, followed by rains, which were again rapidly succeeded by frosts of still greater rigour than the first.

Much wheat was utterly destroyed. The clover grass suffered in many places. What I never observed before, the rye-grass, or coarse bent, suffered more than the clover. Even the meadow-grass in some places was killed to the very roots. In the spring, appearances were better than we expected. All the early sown grain recovered itself, and came up with great vigour; but that, which was late sown, was feeble, and did not promise to resist any blights, in the spring, which, however, with all its unpleasant vicissitudes passed off very well; and nothing looked better than the wheat at the time of blooming:—but at that most critical time of all, a cold dry east wind, attended with very sharp frosts, longer and stronger than I recollect at that time of year, destroyed the flowers, and withered up, in an astonishing manner, the whole side of the ear next to the wind. At that time I brought to town some of the ears, for the purpose of shewing to my friends the operation of those unnatural frosts, and according to their extent I predicted a great scarcity. But such is the pleasure of agreeable prospects, that my opinion was little regarded.

On threshing, I found things as I expected—the ears not filled, some of the capsules quite empty, and several others containing only withered hungry grain, inferior to the appearance of rye. My best ears and grains were not fine; never had I grain of so low a quality—yet I sold one load for 21l. At the same time I bought my seed wheat (it was excellent) at 23l. Since then the price has risen, and I have sold about two load of the same sort at 23l. Such was the state of the market when I left home last Monday. Little remains in my barn. I hope some in the rick may be better; since it was earlier sown, as well as I can recollect. Some of my neighbours have better, some quite as bad, or even worse. I suspect it will be found, that wherever the blighting wind and those frosts at blooming time have prevailed, the produce of the wheat crop will turn out very indifferent. Those parts which have escaped, will, I can hardly doubt, have a reasonable produce.

As to the other grains, it is to be observed, as the wheat ripened very late, (on account, I conceive, of the blights) the barley got the start of it, and was ripe first. The crop was with me, and wherever my enquiry could reach, excellent; in some places far superior to mine.

The clover, which came up with the barley, was the finest I remember to have seen.

The turnips of this year are generally good.

The clover sown last year, where not totally destroyed, gave two good crops, or one crop and a plentiful feed; and, bating the loss of the rye-grass, I do not remember a better produce.

The meadow-grass yielded but a middling crop, and neither of the sown or natural grass was there in any farmer's possession any remainder from the year worth taking into account. In most places, there was none at all.

Oats with me were not in a quantity more considerable than in commonly good seasons; but I have never known them heavier, than they were in other places. The oat was not only an heavy, but an uncommonly abundant crop. My ground under pease did not exceed an acre, or thereabouts, but the crop was great indeed. I believe it is throughout the country exuberant.

It is however to be remarked, that as generally of all the grains, so particularly of the pease, there was not the smallest quantity in reserve.

The demand of the year must depend solely on its own produce; and the price of the spring-corn is not to be expected to fall very soon, or at any time very low.

Uxbridge is a great corn market. As I came through that town, I found that at the last market-day, barley was at forty shillings a quarter; oats there were literally none; and the innkeeper was obliged to send for them to London. I forgot to ask about pease. Potatoes were 5s. the bushel.

In the debate on this subject in the House, I am told that a leading member of great ability, *little conversant in these matters*, observed, that the general uniform dearness of butcher's meat, butter, and cheese, could not be owing to a defective produce of wheat; and on this ground insinuated a suspicion of some unfair practice on the subject, that called for enquiry.

Unquestionably the mere deficiency of wheat could not cause the dearness of the other articles, which extends not only to the provisions he mentioned, but to every other without exception.

The cause is indeed so very plain and obvious, that the wonder is the other way. When a properly directed enquiry is made, the gentlemen who are amazed at the price of these commodities will find, that when hay is at six pound a load, as they must know it is, herbage, and for more than one year, must be scanty, and they will conclude, that if grass be scarce, beef, veal, mutton, butter, milk, and cheese, *must* be dear.

But to take up the matter somewhat more in detail—if the wheat harvest in 1794, excellent in quality, was defective in quantity, the barley harvest was in quality ordinary enough; and in quantity deficient. This was soon felt in the price of malt.

Another article of produce (beans) was not at all plentiful. The crop of pease

was wholly destroyed, so that several farmers pretty early gave up all hopes on that head, and cut the green haulm as fodder for the cattle, then perishing for want of food in that dry and burning summer. I myself came off better than most—I had about the fourth of a crop of pease.

It will be recollected, that, in a manner, all the bacon and pork consumed in this country, (the far largest consumption of meat out of towns) is, when growing, fed on grass, and on whey, or skimmed milk; and when fattening, partly on the latter. This is the case in the dairy countries, all of them great breeders and feeders of swine; but for the much greater part, and in all the corn countries, they are fattened on beans, barley meal, and pease. When the food of the animal is scarce, his flesh must be dear. This, one would suppose, would require no great penetration to discover.

This failure of so very large a supply of flesh in one species, naturally throws the whole demand of the consumer on the diminished supply of all kinds of flesh, and, indeed, on all the matters of human sustenance. Nor, in my opinion, are we to expect a greater cheapness in that article for this year, even though corn should grow cheaper, as it is to be hoped it will. The store swine, from the failure of subsistence last year, are now at an extravagant price. Pigs, at our fairs, have sold lately for fifty shillings, which, two years ago, would not have brought more than twenty.

As to sheep, none, I thought, were strangers to the general failure of the article of turnips last year; the early having been burned as they came up, by the great drought and heat; the late, and those of the early which had escaped, were destroyed by the chilling frosts of the winter, and the wet and severe weather of the spring. In many places a full fourth of the sheep or the lambs were lost, what remained of the lambs were poor and ill-fed, the ewes having had no milk. The calves came late, and they were generally an article, the want of which was as much to be dreaded as any other. So that article of food, formerly so abundant in the early part of the summer, particularly in London, and which in a great part supplied the place of mutton for near two months, did little less than totally fail.

All the productions of the earth link in with each other. All the sources of plenty, in all and every article, were dried or frozen up. The scarcity was not as gentlemen seem to suppose, in wheat only.

Another cause, and that not of inconsiderable operation, tended to produce a scarcity in flesh provision. It is one that on many accounts cannot be too much regretted, and, the rather, as it was the sole *cause* of scarcity in that article, which arose from the proceedings of men themselves. I mean the stop put to the distillery.

The hogs (and that would be sufficient) which were fed with the waste wash of that produce, did not demand the fourth part of the corn used by farmers in fattening them. The spirit was nearly so much clear gain to the nation. It is an odd

way of making flesh cheap, to stop or check the distillery.

The distillery in itself produces an immense article of trade almost all over the world, to Africa, to North America, and to various parts of Europe. It is of great use, next to food itself, to our fisheries and to our whole navigation. A great part of the distillery was carried on by damaged corn, unfit for bread, and by barley and malt of the lowest quality. These things could not be more unexceptionably employed. The domestic consumption of spirits, produced, without complaints, a very great revenue, applicable, if we pleased, in bounties to the bringing corn from other places, far beyond the value of that consumed in making it, or to the encouragement of its encreased production at home.

As to what is said, in a physical and moral view, against the home consumption of spirits, experience has long since taught me very little to respect the declamations on that subject—whether the thunder of the laws, or the thunder of eloquence, “is hurled *on gin*,”⁷ always I am thunder-proof. The alembic,⁸ in my mind, has furnished to the world a far greater benefit and blessing, than if the *opus maximum*⁹ had been really found by chemistry, and, like Midas, we could turn every thing into gold.

Undoubtedly there may be a dangerous abuse in the excess of spirits; and at one time I am ready to believe the abuse was great. When spirits are cheap, the business of drunkenness is atchieved with little time or labour; but that evil I consider to be wholly done away. Observation for the last forty years, and very particularly for the last thirty, has furnished me with ten instances of drunkenness from other causes, for one from this. Ardent spirit is a great medicine, often to remove distempers—much more frequently to prevent them, or to chase them away in their beginnings. It is not nutritive in *any great* degree. But, if not food, it greatly alleviates the want of it. It invigorates the stomach for the digestion of poor meagre diet, not easily alliable to the human constitution. Wine the poor cannot touch. Beer, as applied to many occasions, (as among seamen and fishermen for instance) will by no means do the business. Let me add, what wits inspired with champaign and claret, will turn into ridicule—it is a medicine for the mind. Under the pressure of the cares and sorrows of our mortal condition, men have at all times,

7. See Alexander Pope’s *Epilogue to the Satires*, Dialogue 1, lines 129–31, deploring the presumptuousness of the lower classes in imitating the vices of their social superiors:

This, this, my friend, I cannot, must not bear;
Vice thus abused demands a nation’s care;
This calls the Church to deprecate our sin,
And hurls the thunder of the laws on gin.

8. An apparatus used in distilling spirits.

9. The greatest work or art, that of realizing alchemy’s dream of turning base metals into gold.

and in all countries, called in some physical aid to their moral consolations,—wine, beer, opium, brandy, or tobacco.

I consider therefore the stopping of the distillery, œconomically, financially, commercially, medicinally, and in some degree morally too, as a measure rather well meant than well considered. It is too precious a sacrifice to prejudice.

Gentlemen well know whether there be a scarcity of partridges, and whether that be an effect of hoarding and combination. All the tame race of birds live and die as the wild do.

As to the lesser articles, they are like the greater. They have followed the fortune of the season. Why are fowls dear? was not this the farmer's or jobber's fault. I sold from my yard to a jobber, six young and lean fowls, for four and twenty shillings; fowls, for which, two years ago, the same man would not have given a shilling a-piece.—He sold them afterwards at Uxbridge, and they were taken to London to receive the last hand.

As to the operation of the war in causing the scarcity of provisions, I understand that Mr. Pitt has given a particular answer to it—but I do not think it worth powder and shot.

I do not wonder the papers are so full of this sort of matter, but I am a little surprised it should be mentioned in parliament. Like all great state questions, peace and war may be discussed, and different opinions fairly formed, on political grounds, but on a question of the present price of provisions, when peace with the regicides is always uppermost, I can only say, that great is the love of it.

After all, have we not reason to be thankful to the giver of all good? In our history, and when “The labourer of England is said to have been once happy,” we find constantly, after certain intervals, a period of real famine; by which, a melancholy havock was made among the human race. The price of provisions fluctuated dreadfully, demonstrating a deficiency very different from the worst failures of the present moment. Never since I have known England, have I known more than a comparative scarcity. The price of wheat, taking a number of years together, has had no very considerable fluctuation, nor has it risen exceedingly until within this twelvemonth. Even now, I do not know of one man, woman, or child, that has perished from famine; fewer, if any, I believe, than in years of plenty, when such a thing may happen by accident. This is owing to a care and superintendance of the poor, far greater than any I remember.

The consideration of this ought to bind us all, rich and poor together, against those wicked writers of the newspapers, who would inflame the poor against their friends, guardians, patrons, and protectors. Not only very few (I have observed, that I know of none, though I live in a place as poor as most) have actually died of want, but we have seen no traces of those dreadful exterminating epidemics, which, in consequence of scanty and unwholesome food, in former times, not

unfrequently, wasted whole nations. Let us be saved from too much wisdom of our own, and we shall do tolerably well.

It is one of the finest problems in legislation, and what has often engaged my thoughts whilst I followed that profession, “What the State ought to take upon itself to direct by the public wisdom, and what it ought to leave, with as little interference as possible, to individual discretion.” Nothing, certainly, can be laid down on the subject that will not admit of exceptions, many permanent, some occasional. But the clearest line of distinction which I could draw, whilst I had my chalk to draw any line, was this: That the State ought to confine itself to what regards the State, or the creatures of the State, namely, the exterior establishment of its religion; its magistracy; its revenue; its military force by sea and land; the corporations that owe their existence to its fiat; in a word, to every thing that is *truly and properly* public, to the public peace, to the public safety, to the public order, to the public prosperity. In its preventive police it ought to be sparing of its efforts, and to employ means, rather few, unfrequent, and strong, than many, and frequent, and, of course, as they multiply their puny politic race, and dwindle, small and feeble. Statesmen who know themselves will, with the dignity which belongs to wisdom, proceed only in this the superior orb and first mover of their duty, steadily, vigilantly, severely, courageously: whatever remains will, in a manner, provide for itself. But as they descend from the state to a province, from a province to a parish, and from a parish to a private house, they go on accelerated in their fall. They *cannot* do the lower duty; and, in proportion as they try it, they will certainly fail in the higher. They ought to know the different departments of things; what belongs to laws, and what manners alone can regulate. To these, great politicians may give a leaning, but they cannot give a law.

Our Legislature has fallen into this fault as well as other governments; all have fallen into it more or less. The once mighty State, which was nearest to us locally, nearest to us in every way, and whose ruins threaten to fall upon our heads, is a strong instance of this error.¹⁰ I can never quote France without a foreboding sigh—ΕΣΣΕΤΑΙ‘ΗΜΑΡ!¹¹ Scipio said it to his recording Greek friend amidst the flames of the great rival of his country.¹² That state has fallen by the hands of

10. That of the fixing of prices by government.

11. The first words of a passage in Homer (*Iliad* 6.448–49), in which Hector tells his wife that he knows that Troy is doomed:

The day will come when sacred Troy will perish,
And Priam and his people shall be slain.

12. The Roman general Scipio, who had finally and fully conquered Carthage, repeated Hector’s words, “The day will come,” when his Greek friend, the historian Polybius, asked him why he wept when he saw Carthage in flames. He feared for Rome, too, says Polybius, “when he reflected on the fate of all things

the parricides of their country, called the Revolutionists, and Constitutionals, of France, a species of traitors, of whose fury and atrocious wickedness nothing in the annals of the phrenzy and depravation of mankind had before furnished an example, and of whom I can never think or speak without a mixed sensation of disgust, of horror, and of detestation, not easy to be expressed. These nefarious monsters destroyed their country for what was good in it: for much good there was in the constitution of that noble monarchy, which, in all kinds, formed and nourished great men, and great patterns of virtue to the world. But though its enemies were not enemies to its faults, its faults furnished them with means for its destruction. My dear departed friend,¹³ whose loss is even greater to the public than to me, had often remarked, that the leading vice of the French monarchy (which he had well studied) was in good intention ill-directed, and a restless desire of governing too much. The hand of authority was seen in every thing, and in every place. All, therefore, that happened amiss in the course even of domestic affairs, was attributed to the Government; and, as it always happens in this kind of officious universal interference, what began in odious power, ended always, I may say without an exception, in contemptible imbecillity. For this reason, as far as I can approve of any novelty, I thought well of the Provincial Administrations. Those, if the superior power had been severe, and vigilant, and vigorous, might have been of much use politically in removing government from many invidious details. But as every thing is good or bad, as it is related or combined, government being relaxed above as it was relaxed below, and the brains of the people growing more and more addle with every sort of visionary speculation, the shiftings of the scene in the provincial theatres became only preparatives to a revolution in the kingdom, and the popular actings there only the rehearsals of the terrible drama of the republic.

Tyranny and cruelty may make men justly wish the downfall of abused powers, but I believe that no government ever yet perished from any other direct cause than its own weakness. My opinion is against an over-doing of any sort of administration, and more especially against this most momentous of all meddling on the part of authority; the meddling with the subsistence of the people.

FINIS

human." *Histories* 38.22.1–3.

13. His son Richard, who had died the year before, on August 2, 1794.

About the Author



Edmund Burke (1729–1797) was an author, statesman, and publicist, born in Dublin. He was an MP in the House of Commons between 1766 and 1794. His writings include *A Vindication of Natural Society*, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, and *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*.

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