

The End of Enlightenment and the First Globalisation

Written by Richard Whatmore

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RICHARD WHATMORE, JUL 16 2020

The book *Terrorists, Anarchists and Republicans* tells a story of republican crisis at the end of the eighteenth century. It is sometimes assumed that there was a renaissance of republican theory during this era. There are certainly theoretical developments with regard to how to create a republic in a large state, as evinced by events in North America in the 1780s and France in the 1790s. Yet the traditional republics, all small in size, had to battle to survive in increasingly impossible circumstances. All of them, other than San Marino, ceased to exist or experienced major upheaval before the end of the Napoleonic Wars. Attempts to create a new small republic through nationalist-inspired rebellion, as in Ireland in 1798, equally led to nought. What are the consequences of these developments for international relations? It might be assumed that there is little significance because of the division between specialists in international relations and historians of political thought. Yet among practitioners of the history of political thought it is accepted that there has been a turn towards international relations (see Armitage, 2004).

One of the strongest assertions that the history of political thought has relevance for international relations lies in the work of Istvan Hont (Hont, 2006, 1-154). Hont argued forcefully that we urgently ought to return to eighteenth-century understandings of politics. Hobbes, he argued, was the last Renaissance theorist because he found solutions to problems in pure politics. After Marx, the aspiration was to abolish politics and the state through the productiveness of socialist and communist economies. Between solely political solutions and purely economic solutions lies political economy. Hont held that the study of international relations had declined since the authors – from Davenant, Mandeville and Fénelon to Hume, Rousseau and Smith to Kant, Constant and Hegel – had accepted that any difficulty with and between human communities can only be solved by politics in the old sense of natural jurisprudence and political economy in conjunction with one another.

What were the consequences of such a perspective? The first was that the Treaty of Westphalia was doomed to fail because of changes in the capacity of states to pursue global commerce. In a simple sense Westphalia created enlightenment, if the latter term is employed to signify putting an end to the wars of religion that had caused carnage across the European continent. How could existing borders be maintained, however, when commerce, as David Hume notoriously put it, became a reason of state? Trade was never esteemed an affair of state till the last century; and there scarcely is any ancient writer on politics, who has made mention of it. Even the Italians have kept a profound silence with regard to it, though it has now engaged the chief attention, as well of ministers of state, as of speculative reasoners. The great opulence, grandeur, and military achievements of the two maritime powers seem first to have instructed mankind in the importance of an extensive commerce. (Hume, 1987, 88)

Hume's maritime powers were the Dutch Republic and England. Their rise revealed means of maintaining states through the aggressive pursuit of commerce, backed up by armed force if necessary, that were, during Hume's lifetime, being adopted by all other European powers. Hume argued that the rules of international relations were turned upside down when states began to compete with one another for the control of markets. This was vital because of the military revolution. States had to invest in the latest military technology to maintain themselves and went into the field with vast armies. Paying for technology to prevent defeat in war relied upon generating revenues through commerce. The capacities of states to do this was transformed when, from the late seventeenth century, immediate revenue generation through public credit became possible. Paying national debts over long periods depended in turn up economic success, because extensive trade meant more markets and revenues for the state and a greater level of trust among creditors. Such forces translated into a lust for empire, practically realisable both

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because of the gulf in power between commercial and non-commercial states and the pressure upon states to expand their markets.

In such circumstances, few states in Europe were safe. A whole host of traditional powers, from Sweden and the Dutch Republic to Venice, Genoa and Poland-Lithuania declined. Smaller states and especially the republics entered a prolonged period of crisis. Traditional survival strategies for such states, from economic specialisation to alliances to confederation and above all national patriotism or manliness (*virtù*), were no longer sufficient, such was the gulf in power. Many states ceased to exist. Others found their domestic politics perpetually interfered with by larger commercial powers, who suddenly had an interest in the markets of their neighbours. One of the most commonplace assertions in the eighteenth century was that for every state except the global superpowers (such as Britain or France), sovereignty had ceased to exist. A new form of empire was in vogue, entailing the economic exploitation of a territory by political control rather than direct ownership or military invasion. Rome became less relevant. Modern Carthages found new means of becoming rich and establishing empire.

The price of such developments was ceaseless war between the larger states for commercial dominion. In addition to the risk of being abolished as states, smaller states found their own domestic politics to be far more complicated and turbulent, being dependent on the views of the ambassadors from the major powers. New forms of xenophobia developed in which foreigners and rival states were blamed for the economic health of your own state. In free states where governments were elected, it was discovered that if the people could be persuaded to blame foreigners rather than national politicians then elections were easily won. The war for trade generated enormous profits for particular groups in society. One of the most identifiable was termed 'the monied interest', those whose wealth derived from investment in government stocks or who were able to exploit the commercially dependent elements of empire for enormous personal gain (as I write the statues of some of these figures are being associated with the sins of the past and taken down).

A major worry of contemporaries was that the monied interest were dangerous in politics because their wealth was so liquid. Rather than relying on the immoveable wealth of land, they could move their assets across borders and ruin the economies of states in so doing. More deadly still was that the monied interest could easily become what Adam Smith famously called a 'mercantile system', a corrupt nexus of bankers and merchants and the politicians they bribed, who made legislation for their own profit rather than the good of society as a whole. Smith said that the 'unnatural and retrograde order' of modern Europe, the addiction to war and empire, could be blamed upon the mercantile system (Smith, 1976, Book III, ch. 1, vol. I, 380)

Such views meant that almost every theorist of the eighteenth century argued that they were living through an unparalleled period of upheaval and crisis in which global wars would be fought for trade and empire for the first time in history. Few were optimistic for the future. Alongside the rapid decline of weaker states globally and their incorporation into empires, new forms of enthusiasm and fanaticism which had characterised the wars of religion were now abroad in domestic political life. Hume worried that fanaticism, in the form of a lust for empire and a lust for liberty, had translated from theology into everyday politics. Modern Puritans, he worried at the end of his life, were once again turning the world upside down.

All of these themes can be seen in the history of two especially weak and dependent states, the republic of Geneva and the colony of Ireland. These states were entwined for a short but intense period in the hope of addressing the problems of globalisation. Geneva had long been divided into factions. At the centre of ancient trade routes, Geneva was famed for piety and production, especially in watches and smith-work. A small number of rich families, often with second homes beyond the city walls, as in so many of the republics of Europe, began to control the governing councils of the city, whose male members served also as leading magistrates. The investments of such families linked them ever more closely to the French economy and accusations were made that they had become a nobility, ruling for their own benefit rather than the *res publica*.

From the 1750s a group calling themselves the *représentants*, because they repeatedly represented their grievances to the General Council of all citizens and bourgeois, made such claims. According to the *représentants* morality was lost and the ruin of Geneva imminent because it had turned to France, luxury and Catholicism. After the

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représentants persuaded Jean-Jacques Rousseau to support them by calling the ruling magistrates tyrants in his *Lettres écrites de la montagne* (1764), they became a *cause célèbre*. After a compromise was reached in 1767, antagonism broke out once more in the early 1780s as the *représentants* demanded a return to truly popular government in the interests of all citizens. They were opposed by the magisterial party, called *négatifs* in the 1760s and *constitutionnaires* in the 1770s, who branded the *représentants* as crazed Rousseauists, seeking to foment civil war. On 5 April 1782 the people went onto the streets seeking to replace the magistrates. The *représentants* had not wanted revolution but they accepted the need to take control. They imprisoned certain magistrates and started the process of creating a new constitution.

Rousseau, with characteristic independence of mind, had always predicted that if revolution did occur at Geneva it would be crushed by France. The French foreign minister, Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes, made the decision that a popular republic on the borders of France in which his friends the magistrates no longer ruled, could not be stomachable. A combined French, Bernese and Savoyard force of 12,000 troops invaded and mounted a siege. In anti-revolutionary propaganda the Genevan rebels were branded mad democrats, anarchists and terrorists, destructive of the fundamental institutions of states.

Inside the city the decision had been taken to become republican martyrs. The *représentants* placed gunpowder in the cathedral of St Pierre and magisterial houses. As soon as the canons were fired into the city, or the mortars landed, Geneva would be turned to the ground. A message would be sent to the world that Calvin's city was gone and all independent republics could not survive in modern conditions.

In practice the leaders of the *représentants* who were in charge of the revolution decided that the destruction of the ancient city was too high a price to pay. In the early hours of 1 July 1782 they fled by boat, leaving the gates open for the foreign troops to enter. Geneva, it was accepted, was no longer independent. It had been turned into a French protectorate. Proof lay for many in the erection of a theatre to entertain the troops. This violated traditional Calvinist morals.

The leading *représentants*, meanwhile, left for Britain. They had strong links with Charles Stanhope, known as Lord Mahon, had lived at Geneva in the 1760s. Stanhope's friend William Petty, 2nd Earl of Shelburne had become prime minister on 4th July 1782. The *représentants*, through a lawyer called François d'Ivernois, proposed to Shelburne that they would move the industrious part of Geneva into Britain. They offered to create a city of watchmakers, bringing wealth to a New Geneva in a new country. Shelburne was delighted and gave wholehearted support, including the then vast sum of £50,000. As Irish landowner, Shelburne pushed the Genevans towards the colony as it was deemed both in need of and ripe for economic development. The city of New Geneva was mapped out at the confluence of the 'Three Sisters' rivers, the Barrow, Nore and Suir, just outside Waterford. A hundred families travelled from old Geneva. They became Irish subjects of the crown in 1783. Buildings were erected and optimism at first prevailed.

The project was shattered by Shelburne's fall from power, for making peace with the new North American republics and with France. Subsequent governments were less supportive and allowed the local Irish landowners – later termed the Protestant Ascendancy – to take advantage of the project, taking the funds for themselves, slowing down the building, and refusing to release funds to the Genevan migrants. By 1785 the Genevans had given up. New Geneva was turned into a barracks. In 1798 it became a prison for United Irishmen who had rebelled against the British crown. New Geneva Barracks was notorious for the lamentable condition of the inmates and the horrific executions that occurred there. Erected as an asylum for republicans, it became a republican graveyard.

The themes of *Terrorists, Anarchists and Republicans*, then, are failure and tragedy. The attempt by one of the most famous independent republics to maintain itself in the face of French power failed entirely. The attempt to survive under the skirts of France's rival Britain came to nought too. Republicanism, rather than being a doctrine with a future, appeared an ideology of the past. It might have been able to create a new state in North America, where geopolitics meant that the addiction to large armies and empire could (initially) be avoided. Yet republics in Europe were doomed unless – as in the case of France in supporting what became the United States – foreign monarchies would favour the rebels with troops and money. The idea of domestic rebellion or revolution occurring without external support was farcical. Creating liberty normally meant recruiting foreign investors and abettors, however

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monstrous they might be, first.

From an eighteenth-century perspective we continue to live in a world experiencing the end of enlightenment. Few states are sovereign in the senses understood in early modern times. Indeed, current debates about self-rule and being in control of your own national destiny would have been seen as entirely fake by our ancestors. The tragedy of the period in many respects was not only the collapse of the diverse old Europe of republics and theocracies and small and large states with their own (sometimes despotic) cultures. Rather, it was that something that was not expected happened in the period up to 1815. This was that the most corrupt mercantile system, the demise of which had been predicted by every major theorist from Bolingbroke to Montesquieu to Kant, ended up being so good at combining war and empire that it became the model polity in the nineteenth century. This state was Britain and it was redefined as liberal, without finding solutions to the problem that it might also be a mercantile system whose legislation was the product of what Bentham called 'sinister interests'. Hopes of emancipating colonies, of *doux-commerce* and perpetual peace appeared ever more utopian. At some point, it was hoped, the old logic of commercial topsy-turviness would come to pass and Britain would decline and collapse. This has now happened. Most depressing is that British or French dominion has been replaced by the rule of new mercantile systems with the capacity to destroy the planet.

The eighteenth-century perspective upon international relations may be bleak. It is, however, clear sighted. The rise of Caesar figures, the growth of empires, the manipulation of public information and electorates, the obsession with the dangerous 'other', and indeed the kinds of domestic turbulence that leads to violence and revolution – all of these were explicable and entirely to be expected because of the end of enlightenment and the failure to prevent new wars of religion from breaking out in secular politics in conditions of globalisation.

Notes

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Richard Whatmore is Professor of Modern History at the University of St Andrews and Co-Director of the Institute of Intellectual History. His books include *Republicanism and the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press, 2000), *Against War and Empire* (Yale University Press, 2012), *What is Intellectual History?* (Polity Press, 2015) and *Terrorists, Anarchists, and Republicans. The Genevans and the Irish in time of Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2019).