

Edmund Burke on Government: Virtue, Honour, Property

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Edmund Burke struggled with the influence of King George III, the idleness of the Peers and the gentry who did not endeavor to fulfill their political duty in the latter half of the 18th-century Britain. Insisting repeatedly what 'good government' was, who should govern the state, Burke was aware of the need for the new class of the governor, mainly the land owners, instead of King. The aim of this study is to explain what for Burke the image of the good governor was, and why Burke considered the land owners as suitable for the good governor. Two points in particular are emphasized in this analysis. First, as the subtitle of this dissertation suggests, the key to understand Burke's government is his frequent use of the terms of virtue and honour, and his recognition of property as nursery for virtue (such a view of political world by him is referred to as the politics of virtue in this paper). Second, it is argued that Burke's view of government can only be understood accurately in contrast with the politics of interests, the intention of which is to bring forth an equilibrium among powers and interests of the individuals. These two kinds of the politics opposite each other, for there should be a free person in a free sphere for virtue to be brought to action. On the contrary, interest ought to be at the same time liberated and regulated within a certain political structure. Burke scholars indeed have pointed out the elitist and paternalist aspect of his political thought, but never succeeded in making clear the nature of his elitism and paternalism. The theory of elitism attaches importance to virtue and honour. That is why most of the scholars have been neglecting his frequent reference of virtue and honour relatively, and failed to understand his political meaning dated back to ancient Rome. It is worth stressing that Burke considered the ideas of virtue and honour as the center of political discourse, while the thinkers standing on the politics of interests depoliticized the terms and used them mainly at the social dimension. That is to say, Burke dealt with virtue of the govern, while the thinkers treated virtue of the governed. The dissertation is structured on the following three sub-questions; 1) What meaning Burke gave to virtue and honour? 2) What institution Burke considered as stimulating for virtuous actions? 3) Why Burke described 'good government' in the terms of virtue and honour? The answer to the first sub-question lies in the way of allocating the role of pursuing honour to the govern and of conferring honour to the governed (ch.2), and his conception of the political reward of virtuous actions not as money or royal favour but as honour (ch.3). The answer to the second one is given by focusing on his ideas of national representation (ch.4), political party (ch.5) and property (ch.6). The last one is answered by considering mainly the government in the 18th-century British India, where the politics of virtue and the one of interests were in a state of confrontation (ch.7). In conclusion, the author suggests that Burke's view of government is characterized by the theory of practice of government which explored for required good government, stemming from practice issues. In other words, it is the theory of leadership, which was forsaken by the politics of the interests.