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*John Adams's Montesquieuean Moment:
Enlightened Historicism in the
Discourses on Davila*

Jonathan Green

In April 1790, just as news of the French Revolution reached New England, John Adams began publishing a series of *Discourses on Davila* in a prominent New York newspaper.¹ In theory, this column was dedicated to a direct translation of Enrico Caterino Davila's *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia* (1630), an account of the sixteenth-century French Wars of Religion.² In practice, these *Discourses* were another thing altogether—an unwieldy amalgam of translation, poetic citation, philosophical musing, and political analysis. In retrospect, Adams saw just how cumbersome these articles were. In 1812, after his *Discourses* were published in book form, he dismissed the work as a “dull, heavy volume.”³ Modern interpreters

I began writing this article during a fellowship with the Center for the Study of the Presidency in Washington, DC, and I am grateful to the Center for its support. For their insightful comments on earlier iterations of this article, I am also grateful to Tom Pye, Ethan Alexander-Davey, Scott Sowerby, John Robertson, and the *Journal of the History of Ideas*' two anonymous referees. Most especially I am grateful to the late Michael O'Brien, who read and commented on this article before his untimely death last spring.

¹ Fifteen years later, these columns were collected and anonymously published as *Discourses on Davila: A Series of Papers on Political History, by an American Citizen* (Boston, 1805); reprinted in John Adams, *Works*, ed. C. F. Adams, 10 vols. (Boston, 1850–56), 6:221–399.

² Adams translated Davila's *Historia* from a French edition of the text; see Adams, *Works*, 6:227.

³ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:227.

have reiterated this harsh appraisal. Bradley Thompson, perhaps the leading present-day authority on Adams's politics, has claimed that "the work lacks order, coherence and a unifying plan."⁴

Three years before writing the *Discourses*, Adams published a more systematic treatise, his three-volume *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (1787). It is to this text, rather than the *Discourses*, that contemporary scholars typically turn in order to ascertain Adams's basic political commitments. To the extent that historians consult the *Discourses*, the work is usually presented as a gratuitous illustration of the more straightforward arguments presented in his *Defence*.⁵ There is some textual precedent for this move, too. In 1814, Adams described the *Discourses* as a "morsel . . . which you may call the fourth volume of the *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*."⁶

Adams's *Discourses* were not, to be sure, the finest specimen of historical writing penned in the eighteenth century. Its argument is winding, its verbiage is awkward, and its logic is often opaque. Yet despite its intrinsic shortcomings, historians of political thought have perhaps been too quick to pass over the *Discourses*. For when situated within its original context, the work raises a series of important questions about Adams's worldview. Why, at the outset of the French Revolution, did he turn to history-writing? Why did he forego the analytical style of his *Defence* and turn to a historical narrative in this moment of crisis? Perhaps more saliently, what led him to *this* history? What attracted Adams to Davila, the Italian chronicler of the French Wars of Religion?

Answering these questions reveals an underappreciated historicist dimension to Adams's thought. It is true, as Thompson has argued, that Adams used historical analysis to spell out the essential contours of human nature—to demonstrate that, across time and space, human beings have acted from a basically similar set of instincts, passions, and sentiments. With this knowledge of human psychology, he then attempted to build a constitutional order that could discipline these passions, reining in vice and unleashing virtue. From this perspective, his *Discourses* were intended as an illustration of the chaos and suffering that proceeds from the passions,

⁴ C. Bradley Thompson, "John Adams's Machiavellian Moment," *The Review of Politics* 57, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 389–417, at 393.

⁵ See, for instance, C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1998); and David Siemers, "John Adams's Political Thought," in *A Companion to John Adams and John Quincy Adams*, ed. David Waldstreicher (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 102–24.

⁶ Adams to John Taylor, 9 April 1814, in *Works*, 10:96.

when unfettered. And yet, for Adams, history was not only a general lens into human nature: it was also an existential category, a constituent of the particular character of individual nations. From his engagement with Montesquieu in the late 1780s, Adams learned to study not only the formal structure of laws, but also their animating spirit, their *esprit*. This distinction implied a form of instability that stems not from unregulated passions, but from an incongruity between a nation's institutions and its people's character. This meant, in turn, that history should be seen as a category that sets limits to politics. At the outset of the Revolution, Adams saw that if the constitutional aims of the French legislators were incommensurate with their compatriots' traditions, customs, and mores, the movement would descend into anarchy. From *this* perspective, his *Discourses* can be read as an inquiry into whether the French nation possessed an ancient constitution that could ground a revival of republican self-government in the late eighteenth century. Adams was sensitive, then, to both human nature and historical circumstance—or as he put it, to “the constitution of nature and the course of providence.”⁷

I.

Writing in the *Review of Politics* two decades ago, Bradley Thompson brought attention to an unpublished document in Adams's miscellanea that, he claimed, “provides a key to decoding” Adams's political thought. “Buried among his unpublished papers is a set of rough notes from which Adams pieced together much of the *Defence*,” he announced. “Never published as part of the *Defence*, this note . . . reveals in dramatic fashion the scientific tradition from which Adams developed his theory of political architecture, and it helps the reader to unlock a new entrance into the organization, purpose and meaning of this obscure treatise.”⁸ In this fragment, Adams had outlined two opposing methodologies for constitutional theorists. The first was a speculative form of reasoning championed by the French *philosophes*, who “have soberly and publicly advanced that experience and examples have nothing to do in some of the sciences, particularly one of the most important of the whole circle, that of government.”⁹ Advocates of this approach begin with axiomatic suppositions about the nature

⁷ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:395.

⁸ Thompson, “Adams's Machiavellian Moment,” 394.

⁹ “John Adams: Literary Notes and Drafts,” *Microfilms of the Adams Family Papers*, reel 188.

of liberty, justice, and equality, and proceed to deduce political directives from them. Since these theorists' dictates often diverge from everyday political realities, Adams dismissed this approach as dangerous and utopian.

"The true method of pursuing the study of the arts and sciences," for Adams, begins not with a priori theses, but with concrete data gleaned from empirical analysis of the real world. It proceeds from the assumption, "early comprehended by the ancients, that observation and experience are the only means of acquiring a knowledge of nature." Among modern philosophers, Adams pointed to the revival of this tradition in Francis Bacon, "the first among the moderns who abandoned a vague and obscure philosophy—who, leaving words for things, sought in the observation of nature a real knowledge founded in fact." This methodological shift allowed him "to form the design of rebuilding science from the foundations which he had laid on the rock of nature." The aim of Adams's political writings, in turn, was to show that fundamental questions of constitutional design could be solved with the inductive tools of the natural sciences. "That . . . distemper under which the arts and sciences have so long labored," he wrote, "will never be cured until experience and fact shall be more consulted, and vain imagination and preposterous conjecture laid aside."¹⁰ It was Machiavelli who inspired Adams in this enterprise, according to Thompson. Unlike his medieval forebears, who saw politics as a normative pursuit, Machiavelli sought only to understand how, empirically, human beings conduct themselves in political situations. Thompson argued that Adams, like Machiavelli, "encouraged the political scientist to study man as he really is rather than as he ought to be."¹¹

How, exactly, could Adams investigate what man is, by nature? According to Thompson, Machiavelli taught Adams that although circumstances are variable, human nature is essentially fixed in time. "In all cities and in all peoples there are the same desires and the same humors, and there always have been."¹² It followed, therefore, that a comparative historical analysis of diverse peoples in different times and places could illuminate the basic passions that inhere in all men. It was this approach, Thompson argued, that animated Adams's *Defence*. By comparing ancient and modern regimes and searching for their commonalities, Adams was able to assemble a reliable view of human nature, and to craft political institutions accordingly.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Thompson, "Adams's Machiavellian Moment," 399.

¹² Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1:xxxix.

Although Thompson's Machiavellian interpretation of Adams was neat and persuasive, it had to negotiate a conspicuous problem. In the unpublished notes on the *Defence*, Adams gave little evidence that Machiavelli's epistemology, in particular, influenced his constitutionalism. In the manuscript uncovered by Thompson, Adams reviewed the experimental method of Bacon, Descartes, Gassendi, Boyle, Mariotte, Leibniz, Thomasius, Newton, Locke, and Montesquieu—but made no mention of the Florentine. Perhaps to preempt this objection, Thompson situated Bolingbroke, the mid-eighteenth-century statesman and political theorist, as a mediating agent between Machiavelli and Adams. An avowed disciple of Machiavelli, Bolingbroke's influence—especially his notion of history-writing as a didactic exercise—is evident throughout Adams's *Works*.¹³ “He who studies history as he would philosophy,” Bolingbroke wrote in his *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (1752), “will soon form to himself a general system of ethics and politics on the surest foundations, on the trial of these principles and rules in all ages, and on the confirmation of them by universal experience.” He insisted, however, that only histories that “reduce all the abstract speculations of ethics, and all the general rules of human policy, to their first principles” could provide a true understanding of human nature.¹⁴ It was this “philosophical” form of historical analysis, according to Thompson, that Adams sought to emulate in his *Defence*.

Among the works that Bolingbroke praised in his *Letters* was Davila's *Historia*, and it was here, it seems, that Adams first encountered the inspiration for his *Discourses*. Bolingbroke called Davila “a noble historian, and one whom I should not scruple to confess equal in many respects to Livy.”¹⁵ Adams was so moved by this endorsement that he inscribed, by hand, the following passage from Bolingbroke's *Letters* on the title page of his copy of the *Historia*:

Man is the subject of every history; and to know him well, we must see him and consider him, as history alone can present him to us, in every age, in every country, in every state, in life and in death. History therefore, of all kinds, of civilized and uncivilized, of ancient and modern nations, in short all history that descends

¹³ See, for example, Adams, *Works*, 3:264; for Bolingbroke's indebtedness to Machiavelli, see Herbert Butterfield, *The Statecraft of Machiavelli* (New York: Collier, 1962), 135–65.

¹⁴ Bolingbroke, *Letters on the Study and Use of History*, in *The Works of the Late Right Honourable Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke*, 8 vols. (London, 1809), 3:354, 408.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:420.

to a sufficient detail of human actions and characters, is useful to bring us acquainted with our species, nay, with ourselves.¹⁶

Adams turned to Davila, then, in order to understand human nature. As Thompson explained, “Davila’s history of the French civil wars provided Adams with an experimental laboratory in which to see the cause and effect relationship between constitutional organization and human action.”¹⁷ At the onset of the French Revolution, Adams—convinced that legislators needed to be reminded of the immutable features of human nature—sprang into action and, in imitation of Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy*, penned his *Discourses on Davila*.

II.

On April 28, 1790, the *Gazette of the United States*, a prominent Federalist newspaper, published the first installment in an anonymous series of *Discourses on Davila*. This column began inauspiciously enough—“The French nation, known in antiquity under the appellation of the Franks, were originally from the heart of Germany . . .”—but before long, its author began to draw “useful reflection in morals and policy.” Observing the rivalries that animated the Wars of Religion, Adams surmised “that a form of government, in which every passion has an adequate counterpoise, can alone secure the public from the dangers and mischiefs of such rivalries, jealousies, envies and hatreds” as plagued sixteenth-century France. In further essays he located an incisive critique of egalitarianism in Davila—“nature has decreed that a perfect equality shall never long exist between any two mortals”—and explored the constitutional implications of this insight.¹⁸ In the end Adams provided the *Gazette* with thirty-one *Discourses*—twenty annotated translations of Davila’s *Historia* and eleven original essays—from 1790 to 1791.¹⁹

In these years, the arguments of his *Discourses* must have been especially vivid. The first Federal Congress assembled in New York in March 1789, charged with putting into effect the Constitution devised in Philadelphia two years earlier. The national government was saddled with debts

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3:420; see also Alfred Iacuzzi, *John Adams, Scholar* (New York: Vanni, 1952), 150.

¹⁷ Thompson, “Adams’s Machiavellian Moment,” 407.

¹⁸ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:227, 232, 284, 288.

¹⁹ A thirty-second essay was printed in April 1791, but not included in the authorized version of the *Discourses* published in 1805; see Iacuzzi, *Scholar*, 266–67.

Gazette of the United States.

PUBLISHED WEDNESDAYS AND SATURDAYS BY JOHN FENNO, No. 41, BROAD-STREET, NEAR THE EXCHANGE, NEW-YORK.

[No. 34, of Vol. II.]

SATURDAY, AUGUST, 7, 1790.

[Whole No. 138.]

DISCOURSES ON DAVILA.—No. XVII.

Seu maior, maior do trãdo, avôz confusão, Se maior a injustiça, não dá a justiça.

THE Guisus, in their fierce conversations with the King, insinuated, that if the Constatable resided at Court, he would be assuming; would think to govern his Majesty like an infant, and even to hold him under the ferule and the rod. They represented his intimate connections with the Bourbons, the eternal enemies of a crown, to which they had however long aspired. Finally, they suggested, that he could not confide in the Constatable, without exposing his life, and the lives of his brothers, to the discretion of people, whose ambition the Kings his predecessors had always dreaded; and whom they have ever held in a state of humiliation, and a distance from Court. Penetrating genius easily inspires suspicions into contracted minds. Nothing more was wanting to persuade a weak King, to seek a pretext, honourably to die, in the Constatable. As soon as the ceremony of the obsequies of Henry III. was completed, the King overwhelming him with caresses, signified a wish, that he being able, to suffer, for his sake, to acknowledge his merit, nor the value of the services which he had rendered the Kings, his ancestors, he had resolved to discharge him from the cares and burthen of government, to dispose of his estate to his great age; that he would no longer require of him, any excessive application to business, but would reserve him for some occasions of state; that he should always attend him, not as a servant and a subject, but as a venerable father; and that he would give him leave to retire, wherever he saw fit. The Constatable comprehended that what he had been taught the Kings, by the Guisus, through the King, and the Queen of Scots; that it would be useless to remonstrate; and that it was better to receive as a recompense, orders, which his reluctance might convert into oblige. He then sought the King; recommended to him his sons and his nephews, and retired to his castle at Chantilly, ten leagues from Paris, where, he had more than once before, supported victories of fortune.

As soon as the Queen mother and the Guisus, had banished the Constatable, they studied to disembarass themselves of the Prince de Condé.

It was easy to foresee, that his fiery temper, and animosity against the Guisus, would tempt him to attempt all the means imaginable, to change the form of government absolutely.

It may be remarked, that these expressions intimate an idea of reformation of government, and regeneration of nations, like those which prevail at this time, in France, and in many other countries, after the example of America. One would conjecture, that the Prince de Condé, had it in contemplation to establish committees of correspondence, to call a convention, or national assembly; to deliberate on a national plan of government, to be adopted by the nation at large. There are, indeed, in history, some traces of a party, who wished for a republican government, about this time; but unfortunately, their ideas of a republic, appeared to have been the same, with those which prevail too much at present, in France. Two hundred and fifty years of experience, have not yet brought the nation to advert to the true principles in nature, upon which government is founded. The Marquis of Condorcet, the friend of Turgot and Robespierre, is too great in geometry, is not more accurate in the science of government, than Edme de la Beette, the friend of De Thou and Montaigne. The same reformation is wanting now, that was so necessary in 1550. Whether a sovereignty in one single assembly, constituted by a double representation, as the present difficulty is, would have answered then or will succeed now, are questions that hereafter may deserve consideration. It ended formerly, after an hundred years of civil wars, in the simple absolute monarchy of Louis XIVth. Time must determine whether the continued deliberations and exertions of the National Assembly, will finally obtain a balance in their government. This is the point, on which their success will turn, if they fall in this, simple monarchy, or what is more to be dreaded, simple despotism, after long struggles will finally return. If the wild ideas of annihilating the nobility should spread far, and be long persisted in, the men of letters and the National Assembly, as democrats as they

may think themselves, will find no barrier against despotism. The French, as well as the Greeks, at this time our respectable guests, and all other nations, civilized and uncivilized, have their beloved families, and nothing but despotism ever did or ever can prevent them from being agitated by the people. These beloved families in France are the nobility. Five eighths of the present National Assembly are noble. The first French election will show the world the attachment of the people to those families. In short, the whole power of the nation will fall into their hands, and a commoner will stand no chance for an election; after a little time, unless he enlists himself under the banner and the regiment of some nobleman. For the commoners, the project of one assembly, is the most impolitic imaginable. It is the highest flight of aristocracy. To the royal authority it is equally fatal as to the commons. In what manner the nobility ought to be reformed, modified, methodized, and wrought by representation or otherwise, into an independent branch of the legislature, of what form of government would have been best for France, under Francis III. and whether the same is not now necessary, under Louis XVth, are questions too deep and extensive, perhaps for us to determine. But we are very competent to demonstrate two propositions, first, that sovereignty in a single assembly, cannot secure the peace, liberty, safety of the people. Secondly, that a federative republic, or in other words, a confederation of the republics of Paris, with the republics of the provinces, will not be sufficient to secure the tranquillity, liberty, property or lives of the nation. As some future time, it neither by itself, or in any other manner, can be of more importance, nor augmentments more agreeable should engage us, we may throw together a few thoughts, upon these questions. This will be done without the smallest appearance of ever being confuted; for altho we should fail to produce arguments to convince our readers, we know with infallible certainty, that time will demonstrate, and demonstrate for us, the truth of both the propositions.

(To be continued.)

FOR THE GAZETTE OF THE UNITED STATES.

MR. FENNO,

I HAVE observed, with some concern, a recommendation of Mr. Webster, in the Tables No. 137, advising the Executive of Feuding to be used by people of sedentary employments, students, government, should at least, be rational—they should be virtuous—they should be, if possible, useful. I should be glad to know in what the rationale of Feuding consists, or of what use it is? Perhaps we will be told it is of use to enable a man to avenge himself when insulted, or defend himself when attacked. But in all good governments the laws are sufficient to protect all good citizens. I would therefore recommend students and persons engaged in sedentary employments as a substitute for Feuding, to provide themselves with a few tools of any mechanical branch that they would choose, and which would afford some exercise to the body. No country in the world is better calculated for machinery than America. A student tolerably well versed in Mathematics, and possessed of some of the common tools of the World to the days of Noah Webster.

A disposition to ape the follies and absurdities of Europe has too long prevailed in America; and it is to be lamented that the Intruders of our youth should make such a estimate of time, as to devote recreations inconsistent with the laws and constitution of our country, and inimical to the morals of the people. If our youth learn to fence, they must wear swords; because it is folly to learn a thing for which they will have no use. Thus provided with swords, they will soon find an opportunity of reducing their theory to practice; either by insulting some other person, or conceiving themselves affronted upon the slightest occasion. Edge tools should not be put in the hands of fools or madmen; they are only safe in the hands of men of sense and experience, who have seen enough of the world to despise its vanities; but men of this description do not desire them. They are then only proper in the hands

of those whose profession is War—by such let them be worn; but let us not imitate those parts of Europe, where every Journeyman Barber to be met with has, instead of a Curling Tong, a long Rapier by his side. How contemptible and ridiculous is it to see a nation, in profound peace, with every one his sword to his side, as if they were a nation of Infidels, where every man's hand was raised against the hand of his neighbor!

Q. uasiam dicitur huius insti.

FRANCE.

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY.

THIS day the great question on the right of making peace and war was finally determined. The most remarkable speech previous to passing the decree was that of M. le Comte de Mirabeau, who said, that it was not merely his opinion, nor the plan of his decree, that he would defend, but what was far dearer to him, his character, which had been suspected as unfaithfully to liberty.

He said, many reports had been circulated to his prejudice; but he valued them not. In order to be useful, he first must be searched for truth, and that truth he had spoken, at the hazard of displeasing. He then proceeded to defend his plan, and replied to the principal objections raised by M. Barnave.

M. Barnave, M. le Marquis de la Fayette, and several other members, then demanded to be heard, but the majority of the Assembly, thinking there had been enough said, searched for the subject, determined to close the debate. And after a number of plans of decrees had been read, the following plan of M. de Mirabeau, prevailed.

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, DECREES.

1st. That the right of peace and war being vested in the nation, war shall not be resolved upon, but by a decree of the Legislative body, which shall be made on the explicit notification of the King, and which decree shall be afterwards sanctioned by his Majesty.

2d. That the care of guarding the Kingdom from external attacks and impending danger, the maintaining its rights and possessions, is committed to the King by the constitution of the State—to him also belonged the maintenance of political connections abroad, the conduct of negotiations, the appointment of Ambassadors, the power of raising armaments, and making preparations for war, in proportion to those made by neighbouring states; the power of distributing the sea and land forces, as he may judge proper, and of directing their operation in time of war.

3d. That in case of hostilities impending, or actually begun, an ally to assist, or a right to preserve by force of arms, the King shall be bound to give notification thereof without delay to the Legislative Body, and to make known the causes and motives thereof. And if the Legislative body is not sitting at the time, it shall be called immediately by the King.

4th. That upon such notification being made by the King, the Legislative Body are of opinion that, on the commencing of such hostilities, the Minister, or other agent of the Executive Power, is culpable, the author of such aggression shall be prosecuted as a State criminal. The National Assembly hereby declaring, that the nation renounces for ever all ambition by conquest, and will not employ the forces against the liberties of any people.

5th. That if upon such notification the Legislative Body shall resolve that war ought not to be made, the Executive Power shall be bound immediately to take the necessary steps to prevent or stop hostilities, the Ministers being always held to be responsible for delays.

6th. That in case of an impending war, the Legislative Body shall prolong the Session; and in time of war there shall be no recess. This article is referred to the Committee of Constitution to be amended.

7th. That every declaration of war shall be made in these terms "By the King, in name of the nation."

8th. That during the course of a war, the Legislative Body shall have a power of requiring the Executive power to negotiate a peace.

9th. That it belongs to the King to negotiate and sign all necessary conventions and treaties with foreign Powers for the general good of the State; declaring hereby, that treaties of peace,

FIGURE 1. *Gazette of the United States*, 7 August 1790; note the seventeenth installment of Adams's *Discourses* (left-hand and center columns) and the reportage from Paris (right-hand column), announcing that the *Assemblée nationale* has assumed the right to declare war.

accumulated during the War for Independence, and beset with factional divisions engendered during the debates over ratification. In France, meanwhile, Louis XVI—faced with an imminent financial crisis and mounting discontent with his administration—summoned the *États généraux* to Versailles for the first time in almost two centuries. In June 1789, members of the commons wrested legislative power from the other two estates, declared themselves an *Assemblée nationale*, and announced plans to draft a democratic constitution for France. Over the next year this *Assemblée* penned the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, and began devising a new political order that could realize its egalitarian ideals.

Adams could not have released his *Discourses* in a more serendipitous moment. In the same months that he unfurled his articles in the pages of the *Gazette*, this paper was among the leading sources of news on the Revolution in the United States.²⁰ Indeed, Adams's column often appeared next to this reportage, so that his ruminations on sixteenth-century France and updates from revolutionary Paris were printed side-by-side in the *Gazette* (see fig. 1). As the Revolution radicalized, Adams's political interjections grew more frequent. When he eventually announced the political motivations behind his column in his thirteenth installment, they must have come as no surprise to his readers:

As the whole history of the civil wars of France, given us by Davila, is no more than a relation of rivalries succeeding each other in a rapid series, the reflections we have made will assist us, both to understand that noble historian, and to form a right judgment of the state of affairs in France at the present moment. They will suggest also to Americans, especially to those who have been unfriendly, and may be now lukewarm to their national constitution, some useful inquiries, such as these, for example: Whether there are not emulations of a serious complexion among ourselves? . . . What is the natural remedy against the inconveniences and dangers of these rivalries? Whether a well-balanced constitution, such as that of our Union purports to be, ought not to be cordially supported by every good citizen, as our only hope of peace and our ark of safety, 'til its defects, if it has any, can be corrected?²¹

²⁰ For the *Gazette*, see Walt Brown, *John Adams and the American Press* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1995), 39–49.

²¹ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:269.

The *Discourses* were, in other words, none other than an attack on the democratic aspirations of the French revolutionaries, and of the Marquis de Condorcet in particular.

It was Condorcet's mentor, the Baron Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, who had spurred Adams to write his *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* three years earlier. In 1784, Richard Price, a dissenting political activist in London, published a letter he received from Turgot as a pamphlet for popular consumption. In this letter, Turgot had complained that the constitutions of the American states were undemocratic, resting on an implicit foundation of aristocratic class consciousness. "I am not satisfied, I own, with any constitutions which have as yet been framed by the different American States," he wrote:

Instead of bringing all the authorities into one, that of the nation, they have established different bodies, a house of representatives, a council, a governor, because England has a house of commons, a house of lords, and a king. They undertake to balance these different authorities, as if the same equilibrium of powers which has been thought necessary to balance the enormous preponderance of royalty, could be of any use in republics, formed upon the equality of all the citizens.²²

In 1787 Adams—then the United States' representative to the Court of St. James—penned his *Defence* in order to vindicate the bicameral constitutions of the American states against Turgot and Price. When the *Defence* arrived in Paris, Turgot's followers realized that it threatened to derail their nascent Revolution, diverting it from radical democratic reform towards a more moderate course. They suppressed its translation and publication—with some assistance, it seems, from the American ambassador to Paris, Thomas Jefferson—and mounted a series of aggressive attacks against Adams.²³

Among these critical works was Condorcet's *Lettres d'un bourgeois de New Haven á un citoyen de Virginie* (1787).²⁴ Unlike his teacher, Condorcet's main scruple with Adams was not constitutional but epistemological.

²² Turgot to Price, 22 March 1778, reprinted in Adams, *Works*, 4:279.

²³ For this episode, see Joyce Appleby, "The Jefferson-Adams Rupture and the First French Translation of John Adams's *Defence*," *American Historical Review* 73 (April 1967): 1084–91.

²⁴ Condorcet, *Lettres d'un bourgeois de New Haven* (Paris, 1787); trans. and repr. in *The Political Theory of Condorcet*, ed. Iain McLean and Fiona Sommerlad, 2 vols. (University of Oxford: Social Studies Faculty Centre, Working Paper 1/1991), 2:26–73.

The empiricism of the *Defence*, he argued, was meaningless. By observing only historically realized forms of government, Adams had restricted the scope of his political imagination. The study of what man is, by nature, cannot show what he ought to be. “Those who ardently support the division of the legislative power into three sections have . . . accumulated examples, citations and comparisons to justify what is the case, but have never tried to discover what could or should be done,” Condorcet wrote:

By citing ancient and modern moralists, they prove that men are ambitious, that they love power and that they have passions, but they never consider whether the danger which results from these vices, or the power they have in some countries, might not stem more from bad laws than from nature, and in particular from bad laws which, by forming complicated constitutions, divided men instead of uniting them.²⁵

As an alternative, he endorsed a mode of political reasoning that deduced constitutional forms from the universal principles of justice—“the legal system which most conforms with the natural rights of man and which is based on reason alone and not on . . . customs and conventions.” Just as mathematicians deduce infallible conclusions from the fundamental principles of arithmetic, Condorcet believed that certain political knowledge was also attainable, and that his “method of destroying the abuses which are part of all human institutions is more in conformity with reason, and has more certain results . . . than the ordinary method.”²⁶

It was Condorcet’s self-assured rationalism that provoked Adams to write his *Discourses*: he penned the work to challenge the notion that pure reason, divorced from experience, could set the terms for an ideal constitution.²⁷ This placed him at odds not only with Condorcet, but with his allies in the United States as well. Soon after Adams began printing his *Discourses*, his barbs met their targets. Indeed, his *Discourses* provoked such outrage from the French revolutionaries and their American allies that Adams was forced to discontinue his column prematurely. Two decades later, he recalled that

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:69.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:54, 30.

²⁷ For this debate between Adams and Condorcet, see C. Bradley Thompson, “John Adams and the Coming of the French Revolution,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 16 (Autumn 1996): 361–87.

. . . it was then my intention to examine [Condorcet's] letters at large; but the rage and fury of the Jacobinical journals against these discourses, increased as they proceeded, intimidated the printer, John Fenno, and convinced me, that to proceed would do more hurt than good. I therefore broke off abruptly.²⁸

Adams's provocations not only angered his opponents; in time, they exposed him as the author of the *Discourses* as well. What American would, in the heat of the Revolution, pour scorn on the revolutionaries' egalitarian zeal and work to undermine their democratic ambitions? For the *Gazette's* well-connected readers, Adams was the obvious suspect. He was a close friend of the paper's publisher; he was an adept translator, well read in literature and philosophy; and he was one of the United States' leading constitutional theorists. Though he did not admit his authorship of the *Discourses*—perhaps out of fear that such charged political writings were unbecoming of a vice president—by early 1791 Adams was widely regarded as the anonymous essayist.

This revelation did little to improve Adams's reputation among his peers. When he read the *Discourses*, Jefferson accused Adams of “apostasy to hereditary monarchy and nobility.”²⁹ He was not alone in this assessment. In 1812, Adams placed a handwritten note in his copy of the *Discourses*, boasting that at the outset of the Revolution he

. . . had the courage to oppose . . . the universal opinion of America, and, indeed, of all mankind. Not one man in America then believed him. He knew not one and has not heard of one since who then believed him. The work, however, powerfully operated to destroy his popularity. It was urged as full proof, that he was an advocate for monarchy, and laboring to introduce a hereditary president in America.³⁰

With the benefit of hindsight, Adams recognized that his “*Defence of the Constitutions* and *Discourses on Davila* were the cause of that immense unpopularity which fell like the tower of Siloam upon me.”³¹ Madison

²⁸ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:272.

²⁹ Jefferson to Washington, 8 May 1791, in *The Writings of George Washington*, 12 vols. (Boston, 1834–37), 10:160.

³⁰ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:227.

³¹ Adams to Jefferson, 13 July 1813, in *Works*, 10:54.

agreed. It was Adams's *Discourses*, he told Jefferson, that "distinguished him for his unpopularity."³²

III.

If Davila's *Historia* were a guide to human nature, where does it lead? For Adams, the generally applicable lessons of the French Wars of Religion were threefold. First, the various combatants' drive for approbation and distinction illustrated, for Adams, that human beings possess a natural yearning for emulation and an intrinsic disdain of neglect. "A desire to be observed, considered, esteemed, praised, beloved and admired by his fellows, is one of the earliest, as well as keenest dispositions discovered in the heart of man," he commented, while the fear of censure "is as real a want of nature as hunger—and the neglect and contempt of the world as severe a pain as the gout or stone." With reference to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), he insisted that "nature" has instilled within men "the desire of reputation, in order to make us good members of society."³³ Adams went on:

Spectemur agendo expresses the great principle of activity for the good of others. Nature has sanctioned . . . another law, that of promoting the good, as well as respecting the rights of mankind, and has sanctioned it by other rewards and punishments. The rewards in this case, in this life, are esteem and admiration of others; the punishments are neglect and contempt. . . . It is a principal end of government to regulate this passion, which in its turn becomes a principal means of government.³⁴

Yet the same passions that undergird human society can, when enflamed, undermine it. The human desire for distinction often spills over into vanity, leading not to cooperation but discord. The aristocratic infighting that plagued early modern France was clear evidence of this danger.³⁵ Adams

³² Madison to Jefferson, 13 July 1791, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian Boyd, 38 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950–), 20:298.

³³ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:232, 234. Adams transcribed large passages from Smith into his *Discourses*; see *Works*, 6:257–62.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 6:234. Adams seems to have taken this phrase from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.13.120.

³⁵ As Darren Staloff notes, Adams's appraisal of the early modern era—in which strife between aristocratic factions, rather than monarchical absolutism, featured as the central

explained that “whenever it becomes disputable, between two individuals or families, which is the superior, a fermentation commences, which disturbs the order of all things until it is settled, and each one knows his place in the opinion of the public. The question of superiority between the Guises and Montmorencis had the usual effects of such doubts.”³⁶

Second, Adams believed that this passion for public honor—the *speciemur agendo*—leads to natural inequality in all human communities. This drive both exacerbates and structures the natural differences that obtain between human beings:

Nature, which has established in the universe a chain of being and universal order . . . has ordained that no two objects shall be perfectly alike, and no two creatures perfectly equal. Although, among men, all are subject by nature to equal laws of morality, . . . yet no two men are perfectly equal in person, property, understanding, activity, and virtue, or ever can be made so by any power less than that which created them.³⁷

As a result, Adams argued, egalitarianism is an enterprise that runs contrary to nature. “We are told that our friends, the National Assembly of France, have abolished all distinctions,” he wrote. “But be not deceived, my dear countrymen. Impossibilities cannot be performed. Have they leveled all fortunes and equally divided all property? Have they made all men and women equally wise, elegant, and beautiful? Have they annihilated the names of Bourbon and Montmorenci, Rochefoucauld and Noailles, Lafayette and La Moignon, Necker and De Calonne, Mirabeau and Bailly? Have they committed to the flames all the records, annals and histories of the nation?”³⁸ Adams believed that because such distinctions were ineradicable, the same forms of aristocratic rivalry that animated Davila’s *Historia* were still present in eighteenth-century French society. Violent baronial infighting had been curtailed in the centuries since the Wars of Religion; but if rekindled, factionalism could quickly drag France back into the anarchy of the sixteenth century.

threat to liberty—echoed the contemporaneous histories of Hume, Gibbon, and Robertson; see Staloff, “John Adams and Enlightenment,” in *A Companion to John Adams*, ed. Waldstreicher, 36–59, at 44–51.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:286.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6:285–86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 6:270.

Both these observations led Adams to his third, most explicitly political, conclusion. Because man is competitive and unequal, only a mixed constitutional regime—that is, one that acknowledges natural inequalities and gives representation to distinct socioeconomic groups—can discipline its citizens’ passions, and channel their virtues toward prominence. A unicameral democracy, by contrast, unfetters the passions, leading to discord. “Nature,” he explained, “has wrought the passions into the texture and essence of the soul. . . . It is of the highest importance to education, to life, and to society, not only that they should not be destroyed, but that they should be gratified, encouraged, and arranged on the side of virtue.”³⁹ Different classes incline towards different virtues and vices. The aristocratic faction in any nation tends towards vanity and rivalry, but also possess the capacity for altruism and magnanimity. The *demos*, contrariwise, is often given to ephemerality and impulsiveness, but can also (if politically organized) check the destabilizing ambitions of the aristocracy. As a legislator, Adams hoped to balance the vices of these different classes against one another, thereby achieving a harmonious, orderly equilibrium. He prefaced his *Discourses* with an epigram from Pope’s *Essay on Man* (1734), which counseled that

. . . jarring interests, of themselves, create
 Th’ according music of a well mix’d State.
 Such is the world’s great harmony that springs
 from order, union, full consent of things,
 Where small and great, where weak and mighty, made
 To serve, not suffer, strengthen, not invade;
 More powerful each, as needful to the rest,
 And in proportion as it blesses, blest.⁴⁰

This, for Adams, was the most serious lesson of the Wars of Religion. He warned the *Assemblée* that “if a balance of passions and interests is not scientifically concerted, the present struggle in Europe will be little beneficial to mankind, and produce nothing but another thousand years of feudal fanaticism, under new and strange names.” France stood at a precipice in 1790, poised to regress into the chaos and violence of Davila’s *Historia*, if its new constitution were not properly crafted. “The balance of a well-ordered government will alone be able to prevent that emulation from

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 6:246.

⁴⁰ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:223.

degenerating into dangerous ambition, irregular rivalries, destructive factions, wasting seditions, and bloody, civil wars.”⁴¹

Such conclusions were, of course, anathema to the revolutionaries and their allies. Consider, for instance, the argument that Mary Wollstonecraft mounted against them in 1794. Unlike Condorcet, who rejected Adams's empiricism outright, Wollstonecraft adopted a more sophisticated critique; rather than dismissing his method, she inverted it. It was proper to turn to history for political guidance, she argued. But a clear-sighted view of the historical record showed that human nature is not fixed but fluid, contingent on the social conditions under which men live. For Wollstonecraft, strong currents of moral progress animated the course of history, and these trends reached their apogee in the French Revolution:

Contemplating then these stupendous events with the cool eye of observation, the judgment . . . will continually perceive that it is the uncontaminated mass of the French nation, whose minds begin to grasp the sentiments of freedom, that has secured the equilibrium of the state. . . . We shall be able to discern clearly that the revolution was . . . the natural consequence of intellectual improvement, gradually proceeding to perfection in the advancement of communities, from a state of barbarism to that of polished society.⁴²

Since Adams studied only early modern France, his investigation uncovered only the version of human nature that existed under oppressive feudal regimes. Yet the early modern era was tragic for Wollstonecraft precisely because it had stunted the democratic masses' capacity for self-rule. Treated as slaves, the *Tiers état* could not help but act slavishly. The Revolution, despite its regrettable violence, had liberated them. Whereas Adams's historical analysis was instructive in a positive sense—teaching what human beings are, by nature—Wollstonecraft's was negative in form, an account of the various “natures” that men had shed over the course of historical time.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6:279.

⁴² Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* . . . (London, 1794), vi–viii. It is unclear whether Adams was Wollstonecraft's direct target; but when he read this book he understood his *Discourses* as its provocation, and filled his copy with hundreds of pages of frustrated marginalia. See Daniel O'Neill, “John Adams versus Mary Wollstonecraft on the French Revolution and Democracy,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68, no. 3 (July 2007): 451–76.

Adams's *Discourses* had little patience for such emancipationist histories. If it were true that the civilizing process had given rise to a new version of human nature, the democrats in the *Assemblée* should be its foremost exemplars. But observe the revolutionaries, he protested. "Go to Paris: how do you find the men of letters? United, friendly, harmonious, meek, humble, modest, charitable? Prompt to mutual forbearance? Unassuming? Ready to acknowledge superior merit? Zealous to encourage the first symptoms of genius? Ask Voltaire and Rousseau, Marmontel and De Mably."⁴³ The cupidity of these intellectuals convinced Adams that historians like Wollstonecraft were motivated by naïve optimism, rather than impartial observation. Davila taught him that human nature is constant, whether in "primitive conditions" or a more refined "stage of civilization."⁴⁴

IV.

Adams's study of "universal history" taught him that all men are governed by unruly passions and that, as a result, mixed constitutional government is best suited to human nature.⁴⁵ But his particular study of French history suggested another basic truth. In addition to mixed government, certain historical preconditions must be realized for a nation to enjoy ordered liberty. Republican virtue must inhere in its people's character—and character, for Adams, was forged in the crucible of history. This dimension of his *Discourses*, wholly overlooked in Thompson's analysis, is revealed in his selection of Davila's *Historia*.⁴⁶

Enrico Caterino Davila was born in Padua, in 1576, to a family of expatriate Spanish noblemen. His parents named him after Catherine de Medici, the queen mother of France, and sent him to Paris to serve in her court as a young boy. While in her service Davila witnessed the last fifteen years of the French Wars of Religion, a violent and protracted conflict between the Medicis, their rivals in the House of Guise, the Bourbons, shifting alliances of Huguenots, and various interloping foreign armies. Decades later, after a career in the Venetian civil service, he recounted the war in

⁴³ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:276.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6:232.

⁴⁵ John Adams, *A History of the Dispute with America*, in *Works*, 4:14.

⁴⁶ His historicism is also overlooked in Darren Staloff, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of Enlightenment and the American Founding* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 132–233; J. P. Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York: Basic, 1984), 69–99; and Robert Webking, *The American Revolution and the Politics of Liberty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 78–91.

his *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia*. Almost overnight, the work was heralded as a magisterial success. French and Spanish translations appeared in a few years, soon followed by Latin, English, and German editions. By the time Adams encountered the work in the late eighteenth century, it was firmly entrenched as the definitive history of the Wars of Religion.

Davila's *Historia* was primarily a tale of aristocratic rivalry, rather than religious fervor. His protagonists found themselves thrown into a world in which the caprices of a blind *fortuna* had eclipsed divine providence, and in which a callous *raison d'état* had supplanted an earlier, Christian deference to considerations of the *summum bonum*. Why did Adams turn to Davila's *Historia*? A cynic might answer that Davila told the kind of history he wanted to read—a tale of faction and treachery and cunning, of noblemen striving for fame, of the chaos that proceeds from unchecked ambition. His *Defence* had claimed that “the most useful erudition for republicans is that which exposes the causes of discord,” and Davila fit this criterion.⁴⁷ By penetrating to the true causes of the French Wars of Religion, he was able to “unravel the secret springs” of human psychology.⁴⁸

But if this were the only benefit of Davila's *Historia*, then his particular subject—namely, early modern France—would have been irrelevant to Adams's purposes. He might have written an appraisal of medieval Spain, or a series of discourses on Cicero, in response to the stirrings of revolution in Paris. Yet Adams turned to French history to address a French crisis, and surely this is significant. History is not only a specimen for dissection: it is also a constituent of the unique character of particular nations—of their customs, habits, values, and traditions. A close reading of the *Discourses* shows that Adams was attuned to this second, more existential dimension of history as well.

At the end of his first essay, Adams promised his readers that in his next installment, he would part from Davila's narrative to offer some original philosophical reflections. “Before we proceed in our *Discourses on Davila*,” he wrote, “it will assist us in comprehending his narration . . . to turn our thoughts for a few moments to the constitution of the human mind.”⁴⁹ But in his next two essays, Adams ignored this promise, continuing to translate and comment on Davila.⁵⁰ It was not until his fourth article that

⁴⁷ Adams, *Defence*, in *Works*, 5:11.

⁴⁸ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:365.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6:232.

⁵⁰ This error was corrected in the version of the *Discourses* printed in his *Works* in 1850, such that the extent of Adam's fascination with France's ancient constitution was partially occluded; for the original, see Adams, *Discourses on Davila* (Boston, 1805), 8–25.

Adams agreed to “attempt the promise at the close of our first number,” and turned to philosophical reflection.⁵¹ Why was he so undisciplined? A probable cause can be detected in the comments that Adams inserted into his first three essays.

In the opening passage of his *Historia*, Davila claimed that the first generations of Frenchmen, “thinking the monarchical state the most convenient to a people who aspire to augment their power and extend their conquests, . . . resolved to choose a king who should unite in his single person all the authority of the nation.”⁵² Here, Adams broke his translation to complain that

. . . Davila is incautious and incorrect; for the Franks, as well as Saxons and other German nations, though their governments were monarchical, had their grandees and people, who met and deliberated in national assemblies, whose results were often, to say the least, considered as laws. Their great misfortune was, that, while it never was sufficiently ascertained, whether the sovereignty resided in the king or in the national assembly, it was equally uncertain whether the king had a negative on the assembly; whether the grandees had a negative on the king or the people; and whether the people had a negative on both or either. This uncertainty will appear hereafter, in Davila himself, to mark its course in bloody characters; and the whole history of France will show, that from the first migration of the Franks from Germany to this hour, it has never been sufficiently explained and decided.⁵³

The vexed question of the ancient constitution of France was the subject of repeated speculation in Adams’s next three installments. He parsed the “Salique laws, [which] have been considered, from the establishment of the monarchy, the primitive regulations and fundamental constitutions of the kingdom,” and considered whether they contained the rudiments of a mixed constitution.⁵⁴ Elsewhere he lamented the ambiguities in Davila’s narrative. “Here again we meet with another inaccuracy,” he complained,

. . . another proof of that confusion of law, and that uncertainty of the sovereignty, which for fifteen hundred years has been to

⁵¹ Adams, *Discourses* (1805), 25.

⁵² Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:228.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 6:229.

France the fatal source of so many calamities. Here the sovereignty or whole power of the nation, is asserted to be in the states general; whereas only three pages before, he had asserted that the whole authority of the nation was united in the king.⁵⁵

And throughout his translation, Adams highlighted how constitutional authority vacillated erratically between the various arms of government:

As the judicial courts had no independence, and there was no regular judicature for impeachments, there could be no rational responsibility. The king could inflict none but arbitrary punishments; there was no tribunal but the States-General and their committees, and among these the ministers had as many friends as the king. The ministers, therefore, thought themselves, and, as the constitution then stood, they really were, so nearly equal to the King in power, that they might do as they pleased with impunity. They presumed too far, and the King was justly offended; but had no remedy except in the assassination or dismissal of his ministers; he chose the latter; though, in the sequel we shall see many instances, in similar cases, of the former.⁵⁶

In these passages, Adams was not inferring general political principles from a random historical specimen. Rather, he was attempting to ascertain how, historically, the French nation had been constituted—whether mixed government was native to the French tradition, whether the political virtues necessary for self-government resided in the people's character, and whether there was precedent for a return to self-government in the present.

It was Montesquieu, it seems, who brought Adams to this historicist line of questioning.⁵⁷ Throughout the 1780s Adams had studied Montesquieu's *De l'esprit de lois* (1748), grappling with his unique approach to institutional analysis. In this work, Montesquieu argued that in order to understand a regime, one must study the particular character of the citizens that live under it.⁵⁸ Since laws reflect the culture in which they are embedded, they must be viewed in relation

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6:230–31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:287.

⁵⁷ In the late 1780s, Adams was also re-engaging with other philosophical historians, especially Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon, in an attempt to flesh out his moral and constitutional theory; see Staloff, "Adams and Enlightenment," 44–51.

⁵⁸ For the concept of character in Montesquieu, see Michael Oakeshott, "The Investigation of the 'Character' of Modern Politics," in *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, ed. Shirley Letwin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 29–44.

. . . to the people for whom they are framed, . . . to the principal occupation of the natives, . . . to the degree of liberty which the constitution will bear; to the religion of the inhabitants, to their inclinations, riches, numbers, commerce, manners, and customs. . . . All these together constitute what I call the spirit of laws.⁵⁹

Abstract formal analysis can provide a basic knowledge of the way a nation organizes its politics, Montesquieu argued. But such an approach cannot reveal the spirit, or *esprit*, of a constitution—the unique passions that animate it. To understand them, one must turn to a historical analysis of the nation in question, investigating how its customs, habits, values, and traditions have evolved over time.

When Adams first encountered this style of analysis in the mid-1780s, he was less than enthusiastic, for it seemed to concede the *philosophe* claim that human nature is malleable.⁶⁰ In his *Defence*, he explicitly rejected Montesquieu's suggestion that republican governments are best suited for societies in which patriotism, or civic virtue, is the predominant passion. He insisted that republicanism is either suited to human nature, or it is not; vague invocations of *esprit* were beside the point. "The words 'virtue' and 'patriotism' might have been enumerated among those of various and uncertain signification" in Montesquieu's writings, he protested. It was incoherent to define virtue as "the absence only of ambition and avarice," since these evils are ingrained in human nature, and thus present in all societies. But it was tautological to claim that "virtue in a republic is a love of the republic," since "men in general love their country and its government."⁶¹ Though Montesquieu's praise for England's mixed constitution was welcome, Adams believed that his attempt to correlate specific forms of government with unique national characters was misguided.

Adams's unpublished miscellanea indicate that, despite these misgivings, he kept up his engagement with Montesquieu throughout the late 1780s. In his personal notebook, around the time he began writing his *Discourses*, he wrote the following under the heading "Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, book II, sec. 3":

⁵⁹ Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (London, 1750), bk. 1, chap. 3.

⁶⁰ For the divergent trajectories of Montesquieu's followers in France and America, see Judith Shklar, "Montesquieu and the New Republicanism," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 265–79.

⁶¹ Adams, *Defence*, in *Works*, 6:205–8.

It is true that in democracies the people seem to do what they please; but political liberty does not consist in an unconstrained freedom. In government, that is, in societies directed by laws, liberty can consist only in the power of doing what we ought to will, and in not being constrained to do what we ought not to do. We must have continually present to our minds the difference between independence and liberty. Liberty is a right of doing whatever the laws permit; and if a citizen could do what they forbid, he would no longer be possessed of liberty, because all his fellow citizens would have the same power.⁶²

In the passage in question, Montesquieu had claimed that “the more an aristocracy borders on democracy, the nearer it approaches perfection.”⁶³ When aristocracies become withdrawn from the people and insensitive to them, the risk of social turmoil is greater. Montesquieu’s worry was that a constitution’s form might diverge from the character of the people it governs, engendering resentment and even revolution.

For Adams, reconsidering this argument as the *États généraux* converged on Versailles, the philosophical distinction between human nature and national character became clearer. It was possible, in principle, to maintain that all men are endowed with similar passions, but that the character of particular nations is nevertheless contingent on their unique histories—that, through a slow process of habituation, a nation’s traditions, customs, and habits will shape the character of its people. Children born in republics will be encouraged to venerate liberty and exercise self-restraint; children born into despotism or anarchy, by contrast, will develop a very different national character. Recognizing this, Adams came to see the advantages of a regime in which law and spirit, *lois* and *esprit*, cohere—in which a nation’s legal constitution matches the organic constitution of its citizens. It was precisely this recognition that allowed him to distinguish between liberty and license (“liberty” and “independence”) in the passage above. To bestow a republican constitution on a formerly subjugated nation, and yet leave its character unchanged, is to court disaster. Such reforms lead not to ordered liberty, but to anarchic license. Mixed constitutionalism, therefore, is not a universal panacea, but can only be usefully enacted under particular historical circumstances—namely, when a nation possesses the requisite virtues for it. And this is why Adams, at first news

⁶² “Adams: Literary Notes and Drafts,” reel 188.

⁶³ Montesquieu, *Spirit*, trans. Nugent, bk. 2, chap. 3.

of the French Revolution, was led to the question of France's ancient constitution. It was not enough for the *Assemblée nationale* simply to devise and implement a new scheme for mixed constitutional government. For if their people's character was not suited to self-government, this document would be a dead letter.⁶⁴

Among Adam's peers, the more conspicuous advocate of this historicist case against the Revolution was Edmund Burke. According to Burke, the *Assemblée* committed a grave error when it abolished the first and second estates. Rather than reviving these institutions and "resuscitating the ancient constitution,"

. . . the parliament saw one of the strongest acts of innovation, and the most leading in its consequences, carried into effect before their eyes; and an innovation through the medium of despotism; that is, they suffered the king's ministers to new-model the whole representation of the *Tiers Etat* and, in a great measure, that of the clergy too, and to destroy the ancient proportions of the orders.⁶⁵

Once the Revolution became unmoored from precedent and entered the realm of speculation, chaos was inexorable. "Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere," Burke wrote. "It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters."⁶⁶ Just as Adams looked to constitutional design to ensure order, Burke saw the traditions of the French nation as a potential restraint against the unruly impulses of its constituent members.

Burke's argument was only sensible, of course, on the assumption that France possessed an ancient constitution that could be revived in the late eighteenth century—the precise question that vexed Adams in the opening sections of his *Discourses*. Adams seems to have recognized the kinship between his own position and Burke's. Years later, he claimed that it was his writings that convinced Burke to turn against the Revolution, and to pen his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).⁶⁷ As a matter of

⁶⁴ Ironically, this was an insight that Adams's opponents shared: see, for example, Condorcet's *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (Paris, 1795), which tried to show that unicameralism was native to the French tradition.

⁶⁵ Edmund Burke, *Letter from Mr. Burke, to a Member of the National Assembly . . .* (London, 1791), 60–61.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶⁷ See *The Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas Copeland, 10 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958–78), 6:25.

fact Adams was incorrect; Burke could not have read his *Discourses* before composing the *Reflections*.⁶⁸ But his pretense is nonetheless telling. If Adams viewed his opposition to the Revolution in strictly empiricist terms, his claim to have inspired the *Reflections* would have been nonsensical.

Throughout his *Discourses*, Adams never explicitly stated whether eighteenth-century France could, in fact, lay claim to a native tradition of mixed government.⁶⁹ That he saw this question as worth investigating, however, attests to an important shift in his worldview. Throughout his career, written constitutions were the primary bridle that Adams encouraged legislators to use in crafting social order. In his *Discourses*, however, he came to realize that a nation's character could serve a similar role. Statesmen, therefore, must be sensitive not only to general constitutional principles, but also to their societies' particular histories.⁷⁰ For just this reason, Burke famously preferred the concrete rhetoric of historical right to the abstract rhetoric of natural right. In his *Discourses*, Adams often spoke in a similar idiom. "Americans," he wrote, "rejoice that from experience you have learned wisdom; and instead of whimsical and fantastical projects, you have adopted a promising essay towards a well-ordered government. Instead of following any foreign example . . . contemplate the means of restoring decency, honesty and order in society." It is conspicuous, moreover, that the tools that Adams recommended for this task were not universal, but specific to the Anglo-American tradition:

In your Congress at Philadelphia . . . in 1776, you laid down the fundamental principles for which you were about to contend. . . . You declared "that, by the immutable laws of nature, the principles of the English constitution and your several charters or compacts, you were entitled to life, liberty, and property; that your ancestors were entitled to all the rights, liberties, and immunities of free and natural born subjects in England; that you, their descendants, were entitled to the exercise and enjoyment of all

⁶⁸ Burke began publicly opposing the Revolution in February 1790, two months before Adams's *Discourses* appeared in the *Gazette*; see "Chronological Table," in Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clark (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 17–21.

⁶⁹ In his later essays, he certainly seemed pessimistic; see *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:287, 340–41.

⁷⁰ Eric Slauter has argued that the designers of the American Constitution were sensitive to this need as well, and that they tailored it to the unique character of their fellow citizens; see Slauter, *The State as a Work of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

such of them as your local and other circumstances enabled you to exercise and enjoy. . . . That you were entitled to the common law of England, and more especially to the great and inestimable privilege of being tried by your peers of the vicinage, according to the course of that law. That it is indispensably necessary to good government, and rendered essential by the English constitution, that the constituent branches of the legislature be independent of each other.”⁷¹

Adams was well read in eighteenth-century debates over the origins of England’s unique constitutional settlement: he counted Hume’s *History of England*, Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, and de Lolme’s *Constitution de l’Angleterre* among his favorite books. Through these authors, he came to believe that the rights for which the American revolutionaries had contended were rooted in an established Anglo-American tradition of ordered liberty and bicameralism. But it was Montesquieu who alerted him to the importance of this fact, who taught him that constituting a nation is a process more delicate than simply theorizing and implementing a viable political order. The constitution must be normalized among the people it governs. The character of a nation, then, is just as important as the form of its institutions.

V.

In his *New Haven* letters, Condorcet opined that the American constitution “was not grown but planted,” that it took “no force from the weight of centuries but was put together mechanically in a few years.” When Adams read these words, he scrawled a frustrated bit of marginalia in his copy of the letters: “Fool! Fool!”⁷² It was this intuition—the sense that lasting constitutions run deeper than mere parchment—that led Adams to Davila, and to the ancient constitution of France, at the outbreak of the Revolution. True, he saw the *Historia* as an implicit argument for mixed government—as an illustration of the chaos that proceeds from the passions, when unfettered. But he also used Davila’s *Historia* to investigate the ways in which French history shaped the French nation’s character, and to appraise the options available to the revolutionaries in his own day.

⁷¹ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:277–78.

⁷² See J. Salwyn Schapiro, *Condorcet and the Rise of Liberalism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1934), 223.

Adams's historicism did not, to be sure, entail a rejection of nature as a guiding principle: it was not an attempt to locate political norms in the flux of historical time, and it emphatically did not countenance the notion that human nature is perfectible. The historicism of his *Discourses*, rather, was an attempt to sound the gap between theory and praxis—to see whether the designs of the *Assemblée* were grown from, or planted in, French soil.

In *The Machiavellian Moment*, J. G. A. Pocock called Adams's *Defence* “the last major work of political theory written within the unmodified tradition of classical republicanism.”⁷³ Adams, he argued, was attempting to solve the same basic dilemma that had animated political theorists from the Renaissance to the late eighteenth century. This was the problem of political instability in time, the question of how to maintain order under the conditions of a blind *fortuna*. This dilemma may indeed have preoccupied Adams in his *Defence*. But in the years afterwards, Montesquieu alerted him to another form of instability, one that proceeds not from the passions, but from a disjuncture of law and custom. By the time he wrote his *Discourses*, he was sensitive to the danger of a divergence between *esprit* and *lois*, in his own nation and in France. How to maintain coherence between “the constitution of nature and the course of providence”?⁷⁴ As Adams recognized, *this* was a moment not in time, but in history.

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⁷³ Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 523.

⁷⁴ Adams, *Discourses*, in *Works*, 6:395.

