

both to destroy their political independence and make its own power absolute. Where a virtuous polity was presided over by proud independent citizens who gloried in their capacity to defend the state with a citizen militia, a corrupt polity was dominated by dependent clients, professional men of government and commerce—pensioners, placemen, officeholders, army and navy officers, rentiers, stock-jobbers, and speculators in public funds—who were too addicted to the pursuit of private interests, too effete, and too lacking in moral fiber to defend themselves and so had to rely on a standing army. Where a virtuous state was distinguished by its rulers' patriotism and concern with the public welfare, unfettered self-government, and a balanced constitution, a corrupt state was characterized by the selfish pursuit of private interest and power by the dominant group, arbitrary and tyrannical rule, and an unbalanced constitution. To prevent the degeneration of a virtuous government into a corrupt one, civic humanist writers stressed the utility of institutional devices such as rotation in office and frequent elections and emphasized the need both for a periodic return to the first principles on which the polity had been founded and for virtuous independent men to maintain a constant vigil against all efforts to aggrandize power on the part of the court.

For many civic humanist writers, the critical variable determining whether a polity would remain virtuous or degenerate into corruption was the relationship among property, personality, and governmental authority. In their view, a self-governing agrarian society presided over by independent freeholders was far more likely to succeed in preserving its virtue than was a commercial one. By encouraging men to prefer their own interest to that of the public and by slowly leading them into an addiction to luxury, magnificence, and vice—in short, by rendering them incapable of virtue and thereby making them susceptible to the lures of the court—a commercial society, these writers believed, was much more prone to sink into corruption and tyranny. Hence, they praised poverty, condemned riches, and were deeply suspicious of any commercial developments the effects of which were not kept thoroughly in check by the vigorous efforts of the independent agrarian sector of society. For once the degeneration process had begun, civic humanist writers argued in drawing out the implications of the history of the Roman republic, it was virtually impossible to arrest. In pointed contrast to the authors of the political economy and improvement literature discussed in the last chapter, they were skeptical of change, almost invariably thinking of it as

moving only in one direction—towards corruption and destruction of liberty and civic virtue within the polity.

For nearly a century after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, this pattern of thought with its obsessive emphasis upon virtue, independence, and corruption, its skepticism about change, and its suspicion of commercial activity—exerted a powerful appeal among English political leaders who were out of power. In the 1670s and 1680s, Whig opponents used it to warn the polity of the Crown's efforts to employ patronage to render its power absolute and destroy the balance of the ancient constitution, and they justified the Glorious Revolution of 1688 on the grounds that it had put a permanent stop to the Crown's anticonstitutional efforts and restored the ancient constitution to its pristine form. But critics of the new Whig order that emerged in the wake of the Glorious Revolution and reached its fruition under the ministry of Sir Robert Walpole during the 1720s and 1730s found increasing evidence that the forces of corruption were yet powerful.

The shifting coalition of Tories and dissident Whigs who opposed the existing regime perceived a number of trends to be enormously menacing to the old socio-political order: the rapid emergence of a market economy over the previous century; the expansion of the standing army during the quarter century of war following the Glorious Revolution; and the various developments associated with the financial revolution of the 1690s, including the growing importance of new financial institutions like the Bank of England, the proliferation of joint-stock companies, the spread of the projecting spirit, and the mounting national debt. While the spread of commerce and luxury threatened to undermine the independence and destroy the potential for virtue of the British citizenry, the growth of the standing army and the developments associated with the new financial order provided the court with vast new resources and opportunities with which to corrupt the constitution that had only recently been restored by the Glorious Revolution.

Although the nostalgic, reactionary, hierarchical, and anticommercial ideology of the opposition to Walpole continued to find relatively pure expression after 1740 in works such as Conyers Middleton (1683–1750), *History of the Life of Marcus Tullius Cicero** (London, 1741), John Brown (1715–66), *An Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times** (London, 1757–58), Edward Wortley Montagu (1713–76), *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of the Antient Republicks Adapted to the Present State of Great Britain** (London, 1759), and Catherine