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Empire and Enlightenment in Edward Gibbon's Treatment of International Relations

AS THE RECEPTION of Paul W. Schroeder's *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (1994) has recently underlined, the nature of international relations in the closing decades of the *ancien régime* is a matter of controversy, not least because of the question of how best to understand the concept of the balance of power.¹ One of the most important discussions of the concept, however, occurred in a work not commonly considered for its discussion of international relations, Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88). This article will consider Gibbon's treatment of the subject and will particularly assess his position with reference both to Enlightenment views on international relations and Britain's position in the eighteenth century.

For Gibbon, the notion of the balance of power was central to the position of western Europe in the eighteenth century. He argued that a system of states operating in a competitive system of civilized politics was necessary to progress. In his 'General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West', an essay set within *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon contrasted the centralized government of imperial Rome, with its susceptibility to autocratic abuse, with the multiple statehood of the eighteenth century:

Europe is now divided into twelve powerful, though unequal kingdoms, three respectable commonwealths, and a variety of smaller, though independent, states; the chances of royal and ministerial talents are multiplied, at least with the number of its rulers; and a Julian, or Semiramis, may reign in the North, while Arcadius and Honorius again slumber on the thrones of the South. The abuses of tyranny are restrained by the mutual influence of fear and shame; republics have acquired order and stability; monarchies have imbibed the principles of freedom, or, at least, of moderation; and some sense of honour and justice is introduced into the most defective constitutions by

I am grateful for comments made when earlier drafts of this article were read at the University of St Andrews, the German Historical Institute in London, and Peterhouse College, Cambridge.

¹ See, for example, the articles in the *International History Review*, xvi, 4 (1994).

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the general manners of the times. In peace, the progress of knowledge and industry is accelerated by the emulation of so many active rivals; in war, the European forces are exercised by temperate and indecisive contests.¹

For Gibbon, this 'happy mixture of union and independence' had been prefigured in ancient Greece and in Italy during the period of the early Roman republic, and, by the fifteenth century, was well developed in Europe. In contrast, Byzantium, isolated by language and arrogance, 'was not disturbed by the comparison of foreign merit; and it is no wonder if they fainted in the race, since they had neither competitors to urge their speed, nor judges to crown their victory'. This situation was not challenged until western European power was projected eastwards with the Crusades, when 'the nations of Europe and Asia were mingled ... and it is under the Comnenian dynasty that a faint emulation of knowledge and military virtue was rekindled in the Byzantine empire' (vi. 108-9; vii. 116).

A balance of power, therefore, was a crucial device of and for collective security – it prevented hegemony and permitted progress through emulation that was essentially competitive but that within Europe, according to Gibbon, was tempered by 'the general manners of the times'. Far from adopting any timeless geopolitical systemic account, Gibbon instead argued that the ideological context of international relations was important.

This matched a similar emphasis in domestic politics. Gibbon favoured a balance in the disposition and operation of power within communities, but it is clear that this balance reflected ideological-cultural as well as constitutional-structural factors: balance was most likely to work in virtuous communities. For Gibbon, 'the firm and equal balance of the constitution' of republican Rome somewhat confusedly 'united' the character of three different elements: popular assemblies, senate, and regal magistrate (iv. 160), and 'legislative authority was distributed in the assemblies of the people by a well-proportioned scale of property and service' (v. 263). In contrast, Theodoric failed to join, through balancing, 'Goths and Romans', and was thus unsuccessful in creating a stable state fusing Roman civilization and barbarian vigour (iv. 187). In eighth-century Rome, the successful re-creation of the 'rough model of a republican government', with its consultation and checks and balances, failed because 'the spirit was fled', so that 'independence was disgraced by the tumultuous conflict of licentiousness and oppression' (v. 263-4).

¹ Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London, 1896-1900), iv. 165-6.

Gibbon's use of the concept of balance in both domestic and international policies, however, raises several questions. The apparent precision and naturalness of the image and language of balance greatly contributed to their popularity in an age in thrall to Newton and mechanistic physics. Furthermore, balance served as an appropriate *leitmotif* for a culture that placed an emphasis on the value of moderation and, in the British context, 'politeness', the last understood as a moral and practical code of restraint. However, the notion of the balance of power offered little guide as to what criteria should be used to measure strength, assess intentions, or respond to change, while there was a central contradiction between the descriptive and normative possibilities of the theory. In international relations, it was also unclear how regional balances were related to a general balance. Regional hegemony could be seen as maintaining or threatening the balance. Gibbon wrote that Theodoric 'maintained with a powerful hand the balance of the West ... and although unable to assist his rash and unfortunate kinsman the king of the Visigoths, he ... checked the Franks in the midst of their victorious career ... the Alemanni were protected ... an inroad of the Burgundians was severely chastised' (iv. 186).

It was also unclear how regional balances were related to a general balance. Gibbon noted that 'by the departure of the Lombards and the ruin of the Gepidae, the balance of power was destroyed on the Danube' (v. 53), but, although Avar dominance there threatened Constantinople, it is unclear what the global significance of such regional balances was supposed to be.

As with other concepts, these limitations in terms of analytical rigour did not remove the value of the balance of power as a political and polemical tool; indeed, its very openness to interpretation made the concept more flexible and thus widened its use in discourse:¹ the academic desire for precision is fundamentally misleading when considering the past use and development of concepts.

Gibbon's praise of the balance of power was in keeping with the assumptions of other eighteenth-century historians. In 1769, William Robertson, in *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, presented the balance as a product of

political science ... the method of preventing any monarch from rising to such a degree of power, as was inconsistent with the general liberty ... that great secret in modern policy, the preservation of a proper distribution of power among all the members of the system into which the states of Europe

¹ J. M. Black, 'The Theory of the Balance of Power in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century: A Note on Sources', *Review of International Studies*, ix (1983), 855-61.

are formed ... From this aera [the Italian Wars of 1494-1516] we can trace the progress of that intercourse between nations, which had linked the powers of Europe so closely together; and can discern the operations of that provident policy, which, during peace, guards against remote and contingent dangers; which, in war, hath prevented rapid and destructive conquests.¹

In one sense, Gibbon's account of the fall of Rome in the west and of the subsequent rise of Islam, the Moguls, 'Timour or Tamerlane', and the Ottoman Turks was of just such conquests, a vista of a world without balance. Robertson's very successful book, especially its closing sections, was an important source for Gibbon's thinking about international relations. It also provided empirical underpinning for the notion of contemporary Europe as a system that had devised a workable alternative to hegemonic power, and an alternative that was better, not only because it facilitated internal development, but also because competitive, but restrained, emulation gave Europe an edge over non-European powers. Gibbon argued:

It is the duty of a patriot to prefer and promote the exclusive interest and glory of his native country: but a philosopher may be permitted to enlarge his views, and to consider Europe as one great republic, whose various inhabitants have attained almost the same level of politeness and cultivation. The balance of power will continue to fluctuate, and the prosperity of our own or the neighbouring kingdoms may be alternatively exalted or depressed; but these partial events cannot essentially injure our general state of happiness, the system of arts, and laws, and manners, which so advantageously distinguish, above the rest of mankind, the Europeans and their colonies (iv. 163).

• Such a perspective – a European version of universalism – was in keeping with the views of the philosophical individuals discussed in *Decline and Fall* who sought to keep values alive, despite the fall of Rome and the subsequent ebbs and flows of 'barbarian' power. For Gibbon, however, the balance of power ensured that the ebbs and flows of power would now take place in a beneficial manner and context, within a Europe that had progressed since the medieval period and that was now strong enough to resist barbarian power.

'Barbarians' played a major role in *Decline and Fall*, not simply those that had laid Rome low, but, more generally, the migrant, mobile, fluid forces that had pressed on the settled peoples of Eurasia from the

¹ William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V. With a View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century* (1769; London, 1782 ed.), i. 134-5. Robertson and Gibbon are discussed in W. Nippel, 'Gibbons "philosophische Geschichte" und die schottische Aufklärung', in W. Küttler et al., *Geschichtsdiskurs* (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), ii. 219-28.

fifth to the fifteenth centuries: Gibbon's Millenium. He presented barbarian energy and questing as a primeval force, comparing the 'rapid conquests' of Moguls and Tartars 'with the primitive convulsions of nature, which have agitated and altered the surface of the globe' (vii. 1). The military potential of barbarians was a function of the nature of their society, one 'in which policy is rude and valour is universal' (vii. 2), and their limited development:

In the state of nature every man has a right to defend, by force of arms, his person and his possessions; to repel, or even to prevent, the violence of his enemies; and to extend his hostilities to a reasonable measure of satisfaction and retaliation. In the free society of the Arabs, the duties of subject and citizen imposed a feeble restraint.

The 'savage and simple rites' of the festival of the Lupercalia 'were expressive of an early state of society before the invention of arts and agriculture'. For Gibbon, a differentiation of function was an important aspect of social development with clear military and international implications. Thus, he contrasted tenth- with eighteenth-century western Europe. In the former, government was weak and

the nobles of every province disobeyed their sovereign ... and exercised perpetual hostilities against their equals and neighbours. Their private wars, which overturned the fabric of government, formed the martial spirit of the nation. In the system of modern Europe, the power of the sword is possessed, at least in fact, by five or six mighty potentates; their operations are conducted on a distant frontier by an order of men who devote their lives to the study and practice of the military art; the rest of the country and community enjoys in the midst of war the tranquillity of peace, and is only made sensible of the change by the aggravation or decrease of the public taxes. In the disorders of the tenth and eleventh centuries, every peasant was a soldier, and every village a fortification (v. 358-9; iv. 33; vi. 98).

Nomadic and primitive peoples were even more martial because, in their marginal habitats, it was possible to recover 'the first ages of society, when the fiercer animals often dispute with man the possession of an unsettled country'. In contrast, 'in the civilised state of the Roman empire the wild beasts had long since retired from the face of man and the neighbourhood of populous cities' (i. 93). Robertson made the same linkage of martial commitment and energy with limited development. He wrote of the barbarian invaders of the Roman Empire coming from lands much of which were

covered with woods and marshes; that some of the most considerable of the barbarous nations subsisted entirely by hunting or pasturage, in both which states of society large tracts of land are required for maintaining a few

inhabitants; and that all of them were strangers to the arts and industry, without which population cannot increase to any great degree. If these circumstances prevented the barbarous nations from becoming populous, they contributed to inspire, or to strengthen, the martial spirit by which they were distinguished ... accustomed to a course of life which was a continual preparation for action; and disdaining every occupation but that of war; they undertook and prosecuted their military enterprises with an ardour and impetuosity, of which men softened by the refinements of more polished times can scarcely form any idea.¹

The barbarians were thus a threat because they were naturally more warlike. For European powers, singly or collectively, to confront and defeat them it was necessary to compensate for this barbarian advantage. This was more than simply of historical interest, because for Gibbon the clash between civilization and barbarism had not ended. It had, rather, been displaced, as the barbarians had been driven back in Europe, and – although here Gibbon is less clear – as the Europeans had become transoceanic colonists. In Asia, the struggle between civilization and the barbarians had not similarly shifted. Gibbon wrote of the latter: ‘In every age they have oppressed the polite and peaceful nations of China, India, and Persia, who neglected, and still neglect, to counterbalance these natural powers by the resources of military art’ (iv. 166).

This scarcely made allowance for one of the most dynamic of eighteenth-century powers, China. Greater domestic stability from the 1680s and demographic stability served as the basis of a tremendous period of Chinese imperial expansion that brought control over large tracts of territory inhabited by non-Chinese people. The Russians were driven from the Amur region in the 1680s and an expedition against the Moguls in 1696 was followed by control over Outer Mongolia. There was military intervention in Tibet from 1718 and Tsinghai from 1720 and they were brought under control from 1750 and 1724 respectively. In the 1750s, Chinese power was extended to Lake Balkhash; Kashgar fell in 1759. Rebellions by non-Chinese people were crushed in 1746–9, 1765, 1781–4 and 1787–8. In short, Gibbon’s notion that a multiple state system, its internal competitiveness maintained by a balance of power, was necessary in order to defeat barbarism was inaccurate.

One of the more puzzling features of *Decline and Fall* was that the well-read Gibbon revealed himself more aware of the Orient of the thirteenth century than of the contemporary world of East and South

¹ Robertson, *Charles V*, i. 5–6.

Asia. He also, however, offered the misleading Eurocentric opinion that 'from the age of Charlemagne to that of the Crusades, the world (for I overlook the remote monarchy of China) was occupied and disputed by the three great empires or nations of the Greeks, the Saracens, and the Franks' (vi. 91). Far from contemporary Asia being militarily inconsequential, there was great interest in what Gibbon termed 'the resources of military art'. Indian rulers such as Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan of Mysore, and the Maratha Mahadji Shinde were keen to train at least some of their troops on European lines and to acquire modern cannon and muskets. Indeed, it can be argued that, in part of Asia, the military process of competitive emulation seen as crucial by Gibbon was also occurring in the late eighteenth century, although in India the principal threat was no longer nomadic advances across the Hindu Kush but rather imperial Britain.

In Europe, Gibbon explained the displacement of the clash between civilization and barbarism by focusing on military development:

the military art has been changed by the invention of gunpowder; which enables man to command the two most powerful agents of nature, air and fire. Mathematics, chymistry, mechanics, architecture, have been applied to the service of war; and the adverse parties oppose to each other the most elaborate modes of attack and of defence. Historians may indignantly observe that the preparations of a siege would found and maintain a flourishing colony; yet we cannot be displeased that the subversion of a city should be a work of cost and difficulty, or that an industrious people should be protected by those arts, which survive and supply the decay of military virtue. Cannon and fortifications now form an impregnable barrier against the Tartar horse; and Europe is secure from any future irruption of Barbarians; since, before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous. Their gradual advances in the science of war would always be accompanied, as we may learn from the example of Russia, with a proportionable improvement in the arts of peace and civil policy; and they themselves must deserve a place among the polished nations whom they subdue (iv. 166-7).¹

Gibbon's argument, that military technology had permitted the European powers to break free from a cyclical process of growth and then collapse at the hands of barbarians, appeared justifiable in the eighteenth century. The Turks had still been very much a dynamic force in the 1650s-80s; indeed, insofar as there was a 'military revolution' either in the Roberts period (1560-1660) or earlier, it had not hitherto led to a decisive shift in the military balance or movement in the frontier between Christendom and Islam. By 1718, the situation

¹ 'Historians' is a reference to Voltaire's account of the siege of Turin in 1706.

had changed radically and the pressure on Christian Europe from the east, which had been such a theme of *Decline and Fall*, was reversed. The military balance between 'West' and 'East' had reversed.

The relationship was more complex than a simple one of gunpowder giving settled peoples victory over nomadic hordes. By 1683, the Ottoman was a major empire, and western Europeans had been settled long before the 'military revolution', but without enjoying military superiority over their more mobile opponents. Furthermore, the Ottomans had both muskets and cannon. Gibbon noted their development of 'a regular body' of trained infantry from the 1320s; this gave them a decided superiority over the Christians.

Yet it was European superiority in gunpowder weaponry that was partly responsible for their advances after 1683. Ottoman discipline and drill, both crucial to the rate of infantry fire, were inferior. Gibbon wrote of the janizaries that 'their valour has declined, their discipline is relaxed, and their tumultuary array is incapable of contending with the order and weapons of modern tactics' (vii. 25, 32). Qualitative European military changes, such as the bayonet, the flintlock musket, and accurate and mobile grape- and canister-firing field artillery, opened up a major gap in capability among armies armed with firearms.

This was more than a matter of technology, and Gibbon's feel for the wider context of military development was pertinent. The European advantage in military technique and infrastructure rested on the foundations of centuries of European social and institutional change.¹ Thanks to its successes against the Ottomans in 1736-9, 1768-74, and 1787-92, Russia came to control the lands to the north of the Black Sea, the traditional route of nomadic irruption. In 1783, the Crimea was annexed: the Khanate of the Crimean Tatars was no more. Marshal Saxe drew a direct comparison between the Ottomans and the Gauls, and, therefore, by extension, the Austrians and Russians, and the Romans, in his *Réveries* when he wrote of 'the number of years during which the Gauls were perpetually conquered by the Romans, without ever attempting to retrieve their losses by any alternation in their discipline, or manner of fighting. The Turks are now an instance of the same.'²

For Gibbon, European military advantage was a great one, as non-Europeans could only compensate for it if they ceased 'to be barbarous'. Europeanization, 'the progress of arts and policy' crucial to

¹ J. Black, *European Warfare, 1660-1815* (London, 1994).

² Saxe, *Réveries* (London, 1757), 47.

greater Russian strength, had therefore become the key to development, but to Gibbon this was more than a matter of simply borrowing technology, a point that also emerges in David Ralston's recent study of the process (iv. 120-1).¹ Gibbon noted the transferability of military techniques to barbarians: 'The despair of a captive, whom his country refused to ransom, disclosed to the Avars the invention and practice of military engines; but in the first attempts they were rudely framed and awkwardly managed.' In the siege of Constantinople in 626, the Avars revealed 'some progress in the science of attack', and Genghis Khan was able to employ Chinese engineers to besiege successfully the fortified towns between the Caspian and the Indian Ocean. Similarly, earlier Chinese knowledge of gunpowder did not prevent the Mogul conquest of China: the Moguls used both the techniques of siege-craft and foreign experts (v. 56, 86; vii. 9, 11-12; vi. 141).

This theme of transferability was not probed. On occasion, Gibbon emphasized a gap in military technology. 'Greek fire', which he described in detail (vi. 10-11), was presented as prefiguring gunpowder in giving the Byzantine Empire a vital technological edge over its less civilized opponents. In the earlier Arab siege of Constantinople in 668-75, 'the Saracens were dismayed by the strange and prodigious effects of artificial fire'; and in this and the second Arab siege of 716-18, 'the deliverance of Constantinople may be chiefly ascribed to the novelty, the terrors and the real efficacy of the *Greek fire*,' the use of which continued until gunpowder 'effected a new revolution in the art of war and the history of mankind'.

'Greek fire' also stopped the Russian attacks on Constantinople in 941 and 1043 (vi. 3, 9, 12). Yet, as Gibbon noted, 'Greek fire' was 'discovered or stolen by the Mahometans' and used by them against the crusaders (vi. 11-12, 156). The implications of the adoption of first 'Greek fire' and later gunpowder by non-Europeans were ignored by Gibbon in his discussion of military factors in international relations.

* * *

A more serious problem with Gibbon's analysis was that his positive account of the contemporary balance of power and its maintenance of relative stability was belied by developments in Europe. Far from being 'indecisive' (iv. 166), European conflicts led to major changes, as with Peter the Great's conquest of Sweden's Baltic provinces. Although Gibbon was correct to argue that the European powers 'stood on the same level of ... military science', their respective

¹ D. B. Ralston, *Importing the European Army: The Introduction of European Military Techniques and Institutions into the Extra-European World, 1660-1914* (Chicago, 1990).

strength was such that he was mistaken in claiming that they were also on the same level of 'relative power' (vii. 82). Russia's dominance of both the Baltic and eastern Europe was clear, while the co-operation of Austria, Prussia, and Russia in the First Partition of Poland in 1772 scarcely suggested that a balance of power existed or that, if it did, it was operating in a benign and temperate fashion.

The British envoy in Paris claimed in 1774 that the alliance was 'a connexion so contrary to every political principle, every system is unhinged ... we see the wisest courts act in direct contradiction to their essential natural interests'.¹ Of the Saxons, Gibbon wrote: 'they destroyed the reciprocal confidence which sustains the intercourse of peace and war,' and of Saxon monarchies in England, 'it has been pretended that this republic of kings was moderated by a general council and a supreme magistrate. But such an artificial scheme of policy is repugnant to the rude and turbulent spirit of the Saxons' (iv. 146-7). Yet, it could scarcely be claimed that the contemporary situation was better.

Thus, while Gibbon was writing *Decline and Fall*, the European international system appeared to be in a state of collapse, with nothing to prevent the partitioning powers from making new gains. Gibbon's view of the balance of power did not, of course, imply any equality of powers in Europe: it implied no more than a balance sufficient to prevent the re-emergence of a potential universal monarchy. The partitioning of Poland could thus be seen as less threatening than the universalist aspirations of the French Revolution or the earlier imperial position of Rome or Charlemagne. Yet, the Partitions also reflected the role of unconstrained power in eighteenth-century international relations. For Gibbon, Catherine II was a Semiramis, and the 'Europeanization' of Russia and its subsequent expansion were matters of comfort, securing Europe from fresh Asiatic irruptions. He recorded without concern that, in the tenth century,

it was asserted and believed that an equestrian statue in the square of Taurus was secretly inscribed with a prophecy, how the Russians, in the last days, should become masters of Constantinople. In our own time, a Russian armament, instead of sailing from the Borysthenes, has circumnavigated the continent of Europe; and the Turkish capital has been threatened by a squadron of strong and lofty ships of war, each of which, with its naval science and thundering artillery, could have sunk or scattered an hundred canoes, such as those of their ancestors. Perhaps the present generation may yet behold the accomplishment of the prediction (vi. 157).

¹ J. Black, *The Rise of the European Powers, 1679-1793* (London, 1990), 127.

For others, Russia was a dangerous threat, a theme to be adopted by the British government in the Ochakov crisis of 1791. Thus, the process of cultural advance emphasized by Gibbon offered little reassurance because no balance of power operated in the benign fashion he suggested: a 'Europeanized' Russia was more, not less, menacing. Given Gibbon's argument that a multipolar state system represented a major improvement on universal empire and that the balance of power was fundamental to this system, it is striking how he neglected the actual developments of the 1770s. As it turned out, the partitioning powers divided, but the weakness of the European system was readily apparent.

The system was to collapse as a consequence of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, developments nowhere anticipated in *Decline and Fall*. Successive coalitions against France were defeated, the territorial and constitutional nature of the Low Countries, Italy, Germany, and Poland were totally remoulded, the interests of third parties were arbitrarily handled by stronger powers, as at Campo-Formio and Tilsit, and by 1812 France had swollen to rule or dominate much of Europe beneath the eagles of a new empire.

The French Revolution indeed vindicated Gibbon's suggestion that the stability and civilization of contemporary Europe might be threatened, although he minimized and misjudged the source of the threat: 'this apparent security should not tempt us to forget that new enemies and unknown dangers may *possibly* arise from some obscure people, scarcely visible in the map of the world. The Arabs or Saracens, who spread their conquests from India to Spain, had languished in poverty and contempt till Mahomet breathed into those savage bodies that soul of enthusiasm' (iv. 164-5).

This focus on the potency of a new ideology was appropriate – one of the major themes of *Decline and Fall* is the early power and consequences of empires of the mind – but, in essence, Gibbon was arguing that the threat to European civilization was remote. In a footnote, he drew the attention of 'the magistrate' to the arguments of Joseph Priestley (vi. 128),¹ but, aside from that, there was no sense that the threat could come from within and real confidence that it was unlikely to come successfully from outside, from Asia.

Gibbon's optimistic contrast of contemporary and classical Europe was an aspect of his position as a man of the 'Enlightenment'. His personal preference was clearly for what could be described as an

¹ On this passage, see J. G. A. Pocock, 'Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and the World View of the Late Enlightenment', in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* (Cambridge, 1985), 155.

Enlightenment view of international relations and that rested in large part on his stress on the value of what, in the eighteenth century, would have been referred to as 'polite' conduct. In *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon frequently and often bitterly condemned the disruptive character and impact of irrational emotionalism and 'the wild democracy of passions' (v. 20): the preference for self over society, the quest for glory – Justinian sought fame in 'the poor ambition of titles, honours, and contemporary praise', and the verdict on Tamerlane, who 'followed the impulse of ambition', was largely negative (iv. 431–2; vii. 75, 68–71). For Gibbon, true fame lay elsewhere. His general perception of international relations in terms of the personal views of rulers ensured that he adopted a moralistic attitude to their use of power. The longest-lasting conflict in Classical times was presented in a misleading and unsympathetic fashion:

the conflict of Rome and Persia was prolonged from the death of Crassus to the reign of Heraclius. An experience of seven hundred years might convince the rival nations of the impossibility of maintaining their conquests beyond the fatal limits of the Tigris and the Euphrates. Yet the emulation of Trajan and Julian was awakened by the trophies of Alexander, and the sovereigns of Persia indulged the ambitious hope of restoring the empire of Cyrus (v. 39).

A similar theme of personal enmity and ambition was stressed in the account of the conflict between Tamerlane and Bajazet.

Gibbon was opposed to aggression. He clearly thought highly of Marcus Aurelius who was represented as detesting war 'as the disgrace and calamity of human nature', except when in 'the necessity of a just defence'. In contrast, in tenth-century Byzantium, 'the vanity of the Greek princes most eagerly grasped the shadow of conquest and the memory of lost dominion' (i. 78; vi. 67). Territorial expansion was presented as dangerous, not only for prudential reasons, namely that the state might become over-extended as a force within the international system, but also because it posed a threat to the character and culture of the governing order. Augustus' scepticism about the value of distant conquests was also praised by Gibbon; Trajan was criticized for seeking fame and military glory and his conquests seen as transitory; and, in contrast, the prudent cession of territory by the more pacific Hadrian was praised (i. 2, 6–7). More generally, Gibbon presented 'the decline of Rome' as 'the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness' (iv. 61), a conventional view of the period.¹

¹ P. R. Ghosh, 'Gibbon's Dark Ages: Some Remarks on the Genesis of *Decline and Fall*', *Journal of Roman Studies*, lxxiii (1983), 17.

The enervating and corrupting impact of conquest was emphasized in the case of Vandals, Visigoths, Arabs, and Moguls. Although an increase in learning followed the establishment of Arab power, in the case of both Arabs and Moguls Gibbon stressed deracination and sensuality (iv. 23, 27, 115, 396; vi. 26-34, 47; vii. 19, 52). Conquest provided an opportunity for sexual indulgence and this led to both deracination and the sapping of vital energies: this can be seen in terms both of conventional views on sexuality and of Gibbon's own psyche.

Gibbon's views on territorial expansion and aggressive war accorded with the argument of the *philosophes* that national interests, if correctly understood, were naturally compatible, and that war arose from irrational causes, such as religion and the irresponsibility and self-indulgence of leaders, and from the nature of secret diplomacy.¹ The most influential work on international relations, Emmerich de Vattel's *Le Droit des Gens* (1758), stressed the natural-law basis of international law and emphasized the liberty of nations as a feature of natural law relating to sovereign states. This entailed not the liberty to oppress others but the peaceful enjoyment of rights.²

Many natural-law theorists came from the federal states of the United Provinces and the Swiss Confederation, with their stress on legal relationships and, in most cases, their only limited interest in aggression. The *philosophes* came from a power that had ceased to seek European territorial gains. The bold and acquisitive aspirations and aggressive methods that had characterized French policy for much of Louis XIV's reign or again in 1733 and 1741 were not matched in Europe while Vergennes was foreign minister (1774-87), nor, more generally, between the 1740s and the outbreak of the French Revolutionary War, with the obvious exception of the conquest of Corsica in 1768-9 which was widely disapproved of in fashionable circles.

Gibbon could be fitted into this context by presenting him as a commentator from a power not seeking European gains. That, however, would be misleading, for it would exaggerate the degree to which he should be seen as an interpreter of contemporary Britain and neglect the degree to which he saw himself as cosmopolitan. He wrote

¹ A. D. Hytier, 'Les Philosophes et le problème de la guerre', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, cxxvii (1974), 243-58; R. Niklaus, 'The Pursuit of Peace in the Enlightenment', *Essays on Diderot and the Enlightenment in Honour of Otis Fellows* (Geneva, 1974), 231-45; H. Meyer, 'Voltaire on War and Peace', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, cxliv (1976); H. Mason, 'Voltaire and War', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, iv (1981), 125-38; Round Table on Ideas of War and Peace in the Eighteenth Century, Eighth International Congress on the Enlightenment, Bristol, 1991.

² F. S. Ruddy, *International Law in the Enlightenment: The Background of Emmerich de Vattel's 'Le Droit des Gens'* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y., 1975).

of the Anglo-French Eden treaty in 1786: 'as a citizen of the world a character to which I am every day rising or sinking I must rejoice in every agreement that diminishes the separation between neighbouring countries, which softens their prejudices, unites their interests and industry, and renders their future hostilities less frequent and less implacable.'¹

This viewpoint – and arguably, more generally, that of other 'enlightened' writers – only offered a partial assessment of eighteenth-century international relations. Other than in terms of reprehensible ambition, there was scant understanding of dynamic elements in international relations, the scope of change, and the attempt by certain powerful rulers to match diplomatic developments to their growing power. Thus, Montesquieu has been seen as displaying 'a fearful resistance to change'.² Gibbon offered little guidance to the processes at work in international relations, contemporary or past. More generally, there is the question of how far the 'enlightened' discussion of international relations was limited because of its geographical focus or its origins in intellectual circles remote from the centres of royal power. In terms of the public discourse of the period, it was difficult to find a rationale for aggressive action within the European system; but this can be presented as a weakness of that discourse.

As with the debate about the nature of domestic governance, there is a sense that the debate over international relations was flawed because those positions that were not politically correct, to use an arresting modern term, were not considered seriously. Instead, they were stigmatized in their definition as aggressive. The moral approach of commentators was further focused by the often justifiable stress on the views of the small number of individuals who directed the policies of states.³ This was very much Gibbon's approach to his dissection of international relations in the past, although he was also concerned with the general moral health of states, societies, cultures, and religions, all of which were related in his account.

History could, therefore, serve as an exemplary tale for Gibbon and his readers because politics and morality were not differentiated, either on the individual or on the communal scale. This helped to account for the commercial success of *Decline and Fall*. Gibbon's was essentially a political account, and the notion of rulership, governance, and political life as moral activities were such that the sway of empire, both

¹ *The Letters of Edward Gibbon*, ed. J. E. Norton (London, 1956), iii. 61.

² M. L. Perkins, 'Montesquieu on National Power and International Rivalry', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, ccxxxviii (1965), 76.

³ *The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe*, ed. J. Black (Edinburgh, 1987), 7–10, 225–6, 232–5.

past and present, were seen in that light by both Gibbon and his audience. Notions such as the balance of power and restraint in ambition and action thus served Gibbon not only as analytical devices, but also as exemplifying the moral approach both of his view of politics and of his didacticism. If, in his treatment of both international relations and domestic politics, Gibbon focused on the virtue of prudence and the prudence of virtue, they fortified the moral rather than the analytical character of his work. That, it can be argued, was true more generally of Enlightenment discussion of international relations – for example, the call for open diplomacy, or the radical thesis that it was necessary to transfer control over foreign policy from essentially bellicose, irrational, and selfish monarchs, to the people who would be led by reason and would love peace. The radical Tom Paine blamed war on the *ancien régime* and claimed that ‘man is not the enemy of man, but through the medium of a false system of government’,¹ but suspicion of the self-willed basis of aggressive actions was not restricted to radicals. The *London Evening Post* of 23 April 1752 commented on ‘the rash measures and false steps which men are apt to be hurried into by their passions and delusive prospects of success’. The *Times* of 26 May 1790 claimed that many wars had ‘originated in the injustice, the animosity, or the capricious passions of individuals’.

If Gibbon’s views struck a resonance precisely because they offered a dramatic account of exemplary morality for a society whose norms and self-identification were focused on the Classical world, it is appropriate to ask how far Gibbon’s attitude towards empire and its expansion was such that a parallel between imperial Rome and contemporary Britain could be maintained. The themes of overreach and decline must have appeared extraordinarily prescient to a political order worried that the crisis of empire focused in and provoked by revolution in America would lead to a latter-day collapse of a new Rome. There may well have been a contrast in Gibbon’s views of Rome and Britain² but contemporaries could be forgiven for discerning a sense of parallel.

There were few direct echoes of British, or indeed European, expansion in *Decline and Fall*. The knowledge of gunpowder weaponry was presented as responsible for the Europeans’ ‘easy victories over

¹ P. Howe, ‘Revolutionary Perspectives on Old Regime Foreign Policy’, *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe: Proceedings 1987*, 265–75; T. Paine, *The Rights of Man, Part I* (London, 1791) in *Thomas Paine, Political Writings*, ed. B. Kuklick (Cambridge, 1989), 142.

² See John Robertson, ‘Gibbon’s Roman Empire as a Universal Monarchy: The *Decline and Fall* and the Imperial Idea in Early Modern Europe’, in *Gibbon and Empire*, ed. R. McKitterick and R. Quinault (Cambridge, forthcoming).

the savages of the new world' (vii. 82). These victories ensured that in what was seen as the unlikely event of civilization collapsing in Europe before new barbarian inroads, 'Europe would revive and flourish in the American world, which is already filled with her colonies and institutions.' Gibbon added a footnote that made reference to the American revolution: 'America now contains about six millions of European blood and descent; and their numbers, at least in the North, are continually increasing. Whatever may be the changes of their political situation, they must preserve the manners of Europe; and we may reflect with some pleasure that the English language will probably be diffused over an immense and populous continent' (iv. 166).

The process of European expansion was not presented without criticism, but Gibbon was convinced of its general benefit, 'since the first discovery of the arts, war, commerce, and religious zeal have diffused among the savages of the Old and New world these inestimable gifts ... every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge, and perhaps the virtue, of the human race.' Gibbon added a footnote:

The merit of discovery has too often been stained with avarice, cruelty, and fanaticism; and the intercourse of nations has produced the communication of disease and prejudice. A singular exception is due to the virtue of our own times and country. The five great voyages successively undertaken by the command of his present Majesty were inspired by the pure and generous love of science and of mankind. The same prince, adapting his benefactions to the different stages of society, has founded a school of painting in his capital, and has introduced into the islands of the South Sea the vegetables and animals most useful to human life (iv. 168-9).

In his acceptance of the harshness of 'discovery', Gibbon revealed Enlightened susceptibilities. His account was also Eurocentric. Savages were to receive 'gifts'. Whatever Gibbon's willingness to extend the concept of civilization to non-European settled societies, he regarded barbarians, however virtuous or free (i. 130; v. 3, 23; vi. 140, 175), as less developed (iv. 123, 131-3, 140-1, 158). Leaving aside the issue of 'ecological imperialism', in Captain Cook's introduction of pigs, possibly the white potato, and 'exotic weeds' to New Zealand,¹ it is clear that a 'present-minded' critique of Gibbon's account would emphasize the possibilities of a more multifaceted treatment of human happiness and progress, and would contrast his relative openness to

¹ W. Crosby, *Ecological Expansion: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge, 1986), 228-30, 234.

religions other than Christianity, especially those of the Classical world and Islam, with a failure to appreciate those cultures he termed 'barbarian', other than in terms of primitive virtue (i. 130; v. 3, 23; vi. 175). Yet, Gibbon was more sensitive to the problems of imperialism than most commentators. If Gibbon was an imperialist, he would have been what he defined as a 'rational' one. Thus, he wrote of Genseric of the Vandals 'pressed and confined, on either side, by the sandy desert and the Mediterranean. The discovery and conquest of the Black nations, that might dwell beneath the torrid zone, could not tempt the rational ambition of Genseric; but he cast his eyes towards the sea' (iv. 1).

A cautious approach to imperial expansion, an example of his moral and prudential opposition to unconstrained ambition, can be seen as an important respect in which Gibbon was out of touch with political opinion, certainly aggressive 'Patriotism', in Britain. Similar cautious attitudes were, of course, voiced in government circles and the principal motivation behind Britain's global policy in the 1780s was indeed defensive, specifically anti-French.¹ Yet, in Gibbon's last eight years, Britain established colonies in the Andaman Islands, Australia, Penang, and Sierra Leone; claimed Lord Howe Islands and the Chatham Islands; made important gains in southern India; and, by threat of war, established a right to acquire territory on the Pacific coast of modern Canada. These were scarcely the actions of a sated power, nor of one ready to follow Augustus in setting bounds on its territories or Hadrian in restoring gains. The principal thrust of empire, both Roman and British, was war, war both as a means of gaining power and territory, and as a precipitant of fear. The Pitt government was reluctant to become involved in war with European powers, and did not do so until 1793. It was only then that 'forward defence' took on a new immediacy. Yet, this had been actively prefigured during Britain's more aggressive international stance of 1787-91, and again by governmental and popular willingness during the Third Mysore War (1790-2) to support what became a war of conquest in southern India.²

Dr Johnson had also advanced a theme of hostility to war and disapproval of imperial expansion in *Thoughts on the Late Transactions Respecting Falkland's Islands* (1771).³ Like Johnson, Gibbon had 'an

¹ J. Black, *British Foreign Policy in an Age of Revolutions, 1783-1793* (Cambridge, 1994), 498-504.

² P. J. Marshall, "'Cornwallis Triumphant': War in India and the British Public in the Late Eighteenth Century", in *War, Strategy, and International Politics*, ed. L. Freedman, P. Hayes, and R. O'Neill (Oxford, 1992), 60-74.

³ Black, 'Johnson's *Thoughts on the Falklands: A Tory Tract*', *Literature and History*, 2nd ser., 1. no.

enlightened superiority to patriotic prejudice' and yet was also affected by a sense of national pride.¹ Because he was writing about the distant past, however, Gibbon's authorial irony about enthusiasm, in both politics and religion, and his scepticism about the cause and course of empire, was acceptable. Only when he discussed Christianity, very much part of the living past, did Gibbon's views provoke outrage. Gibbon benefited from the popular interest that a sense of parallelism between Rome and Britain encouraged, but he kept them at a distance. Whereas another master of authorial irony, Henry Fielding, in *Journey from This World to the Next* (1743), which Gibbon praised in *Decline and Fall* as providing 'the history of the human nature' (iii. 384, n. 13), used metempsychosis to make points that would have been direct, pertinent, and barbed to contemporary readers, Gibbon was more elliptical in allowing the past to serve present purposes. His was very much a work of history rather than an historical commentary on contemporary politics, and if history was philosophy teaching by example, for Gibbon the teaching, like the history, was universal rather than specific.

Gibbon was clear in his judgement of individuals: they were moral agents who were defined and discussed with little hesitation. If he was sometimes less certain and less probing in his grasp of larger themes, more willing to write long passages of narrative with only limited analytical insight, that was in keeping with the historical conventions of the age. Furthermore, it was not because there was an absence of analysis in the book. The essential structure of *Decline and Fall* was narrative, but there is in it much of interest for those whose major concerns are not historiographical or literary. Certainly any discussion of eighteenth-century concepts of international relations would be poorly advised if it omitted the historians of the age.

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² (1990), 42–7.

¹ J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981), 112.