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CHAPTER SEVEN

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

John Morrow

The positive ends [of government] are, 1st to make the means of subsistence more easy to each individual: 2d. that ... he should derive from the union and division of labour a share of the comforts and conveniences, which humanize and ennoble his nature; and at the same time the power of perfecting himself in his own branch of industry ... 3dly. The hope of bettering his own condition and that of his children... (and lastly) the development of those faculties which are essential to his human nature by the knowledge of his moral and religious duties, and the increase of his intellectual powers ... [T]hat Constitution is the best, under which the average sum of useful knowledge is the greatest, and the causes that awaken and encourage talent and genius, the most powerful and various.¹

[A] Constitution is an idea arising out of the idea of a state; and because our whole history from Alfred onwards demonstrates the continued influence of such an idea, or ultimate aim, on the minds of our fore-fathers, ... we speak ... of the idea itself, as actually existing, i.e., as a principle, ... in the minds and consciences of the persons, whose duty it prescribes, and whose rights it determines. (19)²

[I]n every country of civilised men, acknowledging the rights of property ... the two antagonistic powers of opposite interest in the state, under which all other state interests are comprised, are those of PERMANENCE and of PROGRESSION. (24)

... In order to correct views respecting the constitution, in a more enlarged sense of the term, viz. the constitution of the Nation, we must, in addition to a grounded knowledge of the State, have the right idea of the National Church. These are the two poles of the same magnet; the magnet itself, which is constituted by them, is the CONSTITUTION of the nation. (31)

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (1830) was the last significant work of a philosophically informed poet and man of letters whose political oeuvre included a range of pamphlets, substantial essays and slighter journalistic pieces. Coleridge's earliest political publications were products of a period in the mid-1790s when his ideas intersected at a number of points with those of radical political and religious reformers that posed a sharply felt challenge to the fundamentally conservative Anglican 'church-state' of eighteenth-century Britain. The references to historical continuity and ancestry, property and the 'National Church' in the extracts mentioned at the beginning of this chapter suggest that Coleridge's political ideas had undergone a markedly conservative shift over the course of his adult life. His late conservatism, however, retained distinctive critical and progressive elements.

In political as well as in literary criticism, Coleridge revelled in terminological distinctions which implicitly qualified more conventional usages. Thus, in *Church and State*, he sometimes uses the terms 'state' and 'commonwealth' to refer to political communities in the broadest sense, but he also drew a distinction between the 'constitution of the state' and the 'constitution of the nation'. The former referred to the legislative and executive arms of government, while the latter set these within a more extensive institutional framework which included the 'national church'. The discussion focused on the historical practice of British government but that was regarded as a particular instance of more general principles of politics and morals.

Coleridge's mature political theory was underwritten by two fundamental sets of assumptions about politics and the state. The first concerned the moral and political significance of property, while the second charged the government with distinctive material and moral responsibilities. Coleridge regarded private property as a means through which humans could give practical expression to their God-given endowment of free will, the faculty

through which they 'intuitively know the sublimity, and the infinite hopes, fears, and capabilities of [their] own nature.'³ Moreover, he claimed that where private property existed, it should determine the distribution of political power within a political community or state: 'that *Government is good in which property is secure and circulates*; that *Government the best, which, in the exactest ration, makes each man's power proportionate to his property*'.⁴ Coleridge insisted there should be no 'direct political power without cognizable possession', no direct access to the organized powers of the state without those 'fastening and radical fibres of a collective and registerable property, by which the Citizen inheres in and belongs to the Commonwealth' (87–8). In writings dating from 1799 to 1800, he had underlined the importance of this requirement by identifying the dangers inherent in a new French constitution ushered in under the auspices of Napoleon Bonaparte, whose dominant position in French politics was due to his control of the army. Coleridge was highly critical of the constitution of 1799 because the absence of property qualifications for members of the legislative body meant that they would be entirely dependent on the executive for their livelihood and particularly susceptible to his or her wishes.⁵ Their political interest as proprietors was derived from a government based on military strength rather than from their standing as independent members of the community. The understanding of the relationship between property and political power that underwrote Coleridge's mature political theory derived from the seventeenth-century republican thinker, James Harrington, who had promoted republican government on the grounds that it reflected shifts in the distribution of landed property as England moved away from feudalism. While Coleridge adopted this general line of reasoning, however, he applied it also to new forms of wealth derived from 'commerce' that had become significant since Harrington's time.

In eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Britain, the 'landed interest' was a widely understood shorthand for an elite made up of members of the aristocracy, and 'country gentlemen', or 'gentry'. The political power of the landed interest was focussed in the House of Lords and in seats in the lower house and reflected in its leading role in the executive arm of government. Its political influence in the 'constitution of the state' was underwritten by territorial domination that made it a powerful economic and social force in the country areas and provincial towns where its estates were located. In many ways, Coleridge's understanding of the landed interest mirrored conventional 'Tory' accounts that stressed the values of a traditional society, identified it with the historical transmission of values and property, habits of ingrained deference, a predisposition to seek psychological comfort in traditional practices and ideas and a commitment to the social duties customarily attached to land ownership. References to the landed classes as the 'permanent' interest epitomized its attachment to tradition and aversion to change. They also, however, signalled the close and distinctive relationship

which he thought existed between land ownership and fundamental moral values.

Coleridge's views on the moral implications of land ownership emerged in 1799–1816 as he distanced himself from the anti-establishment radicalism of the mid-1790s. In *The Friend*, which appeared originally in 1809–10 and was reissued in 1816, and in *Lay Sermons* of 1816–17, he argued that because agricultural activity was necessary to sustain life and hence the communities to which humans naturally belonged, the ownership of the land involved distinctive obligations and privileges. In hierarchical societies such as Britain, where property holdings were very unequal, the privileges of land ownership meant that it was to be regarded as being held as a trust conditioned by the ends of the state.⁶ The landed classes were thus obliged to take account of the material needs of their dependents, contribute to their capacity to improve their condition and that of their children and assist them to secure the guidance and education necessary to foster the development of their potentialities for rationality and morality.

In Britain, and to a lesser extent in other European countries, the interests of permanence coexisted with progressive impulses springing from commercial, mercantile and industrial property. Drawing on eighteenth-century theories of 'commercial society', Coleridge identified 'commerce' with free-market activity and attributed to it the growth of society's productive capacity and the prosperity and influence of those who engaged successfully in it. These features of commercial society were of great positive significance for the advancement of the first three ends of the state. Increased productivity and the circulation of property beyond the confines of landed society, extending potentially at least into the peasantry and urban working classes, provided enhanced opportunities for moral development by broadening the scope for free agency, as well as improving the quality of material life of all members of the community. In addition, however, Coleridge endorsed the widely held view that commercial societies fostered the progressive advance of 'civilisation', through the refinement of 'manners' and the spread of the civilities of 'polite' society, the extension of the 'rights and privileges of citizens' to wider sections of the community, and the development of the arts, practical knowledge and public information (25). But while Coleridge acknowledged that commerce might make valuable contributions to advancing the first three positive ends of the state, he noted that its ethos was quite different from that arising from landed property and would not contribute to the advancement of the fourth educational and moral objective: 'To introduce any other principle ... but that of obtaining the highest price with adequate security for Articles fairly described, would be tantamount to the position, that Trade ought not to exist.'⁷

Coleridge's understanding of the characteristics and implications of landed and commercial property provided the basis for his distinctive reworking of the conventional idea that the British constitution was efficacious because it maintained a balance between the upper and lower house and between

these houses and the Crown. This arrangement was usually expressed in the idea that sovereign power rested with 'the king in parliament'. By contrast, Coleridge's account focused on the implications of a constitutional structure that balanced the interests of permanence and progression rather than on the relationship between the formal elements of the constitution. He thus pointed out that while the growth of commercial wealth was reflected in the changing membership of the house of commons, it had been productively integrated in the 'constitution of the state' by the ongoing influence of countervailing tendencies emanating from the landed classes in the lower and upper houses of parliament. Coleridge described these interests as being in a condition of balance or 'equipoise' and characterized this relationship by an electromagnetic analogy that eschewed the mechanical images usually applied to the relationship among various formal elements of the constitution. He described these interests as 'opposites', rather than 'contraries', and saw them as the source of an invigorating unified force analogous to that arising from the negative and positive poles of a magnet (24n). The Crown's role in assenting to legislation expressed 'the majesty, or symbolic unity of the whole nation, both of the state and the persons' (41–2). Significantly, Coleridge did not believe that the Crown's role was to check or balance the proprietorial interests reflected in the legislature.

Although Coleridge's account of the 'constitution of the state' reflected a particular understanding of the history and practice of the British constitution, it was underpinned by a general theory of legitimate government. This theory incorporated ideas about the direct relationship between property rights and political power and the ends of the state. His analysis showed how the political forces generated by radically different forms of property might be brought into a relationship that maintained the benefits associated with traditional attitudes, practices and values while harnessing the progressive material and social possibilities unleashed by the spirit of commerce. As signalled in the last part of the head quote, however, Coleridge insisted that the balance of interests that made up the 'constitution of the state' had to be seen as but part of a more extensive 'constitution of the nation'. It was only within this enlarged constitutional structure that political communities were able to realize the goals of government and form a genuine commonwealth.

Coleridge claimed that a 'national church' was an essential element in the 'constitution of the nation'. This institution was charged with ensuring that all sections of the population were provided with the means of developing moral and intellectual faculties that would illuminate and fortify their practical commitment to the moral values that underpinned the state. Although the national church in England was closely associated with the Church of England, established by law as one pillar of the Tory Anglican 'church state', Coleridge's conception of the 'national church' was more extensive than this. It embraced an educated and educational elite, which included members of the learned professions who were graduates of the universities, as well as the clergy of the Church of England. Coleridge's

national church was the institutional form of what he called the 'clerisy', 'an accredited, learned and philosophic *class*' dedicated to nurturing 'a learned and philosophic public' which understood the ends of the state and was committed to performing the duties necessary to advance them. He insisted that while commerce may advance 'civilization', only the ongoing influence of the clerisy would ensure that this is grounded in '*cultivation*', in the 'harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterise our *humanity*' (42–3).

The national church was an 'estate' of the realm whose independence was ensured by its possession of property. Unlike landed or commercial property, however, the endowments of the national church were dedicated to *national* rather than *personal* purposes. Coleridge underlined this distinction by describing its property as the 'Nationalty', in contrast to the 'Propriety' held by those who controlled the legislative and executive. The 'Nationalty' provided the means through which the national church performed its functions, and since it was under its corporate control, the clerisy had the means of remaining independent of the influence of government, and of permanent and progressive interests embedded in parliament. Coleridge applied the same image of electromagnetic balance to the relationship between the forces making up the constitution of the state and the national church as he had done to that existing between the different forms of propriety. They are 'the two poles of the same magnet; the magnet itself, which is constituted by them, is the CONSTITUTION of the nation.' The 'nationalty' and 'propriety' form 'the two constituent factors, the opposite, but correspondent and reciprocally supporting, counter-weights, of the *commonwealth*, the existence of the one being the condition, and perfecting, of the rightfulness of the other' (31, 35).

Coleridge saw the national church as a necessary feature of a well-ordered political community and had criticized the French constitution of 1799 for creating a state-funded clergy that would be entirely dependent on government: 'The Church of France is a *standing* church, as its army is a *standing* army.'⁸ He argued, however, that the clerisy had a particularly critical role to play in contemporary Britain because the landed classes' capacity to serve as a counterpoise to the commercial interest had been undermined by its positive response to the morally spurious appeals of the spirit of commerce and its intellectual expression in the putative science of political economy.⁹ This dangerous development was indicative of a failure in elite education and the need for it to be re-oriented by the true principles of philosophy grounded in religion so it would provide a 'counter-charm to the sorcery of wealth'.¹⁰

Church and State was published as an unabashedly retrospective contribution to the debate over 'catholic emancipation'. This debate, which erupted from time to time in early-nineteenth-century British politics, reached a crescendo in the late 1820s, and was concluded by the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. The term 'catholic emancipation' referred to

the repeal of legislation that prevented Roman Catholics from sitting in the British parliament, holding commissions in the armed services and occupying a range of significant civil and juridical offices. Coleridge's ideas about property and political power and the distinction between 'propriety' and 'nationalty' played key roles in his response to catholic emancipation. On the one hand, he believed that it was unjust to deprive Roman Catholic property holders of their electoral rights or to exclude them from military and state offices. This position was an essentially progressive one that rejected conservative claims about the fatal impact of catholic emancipation on the traditional 'constitution in church and state'. On the other hand, Coleridge was adamant that measures to remove penalties imposed on individual catholics should be accompanied by legislative 'securities' which prevented the catholic clergy having access to the nationalty. Since members of the priesthood had taken a vow of celibacy which deprived them of a biological links with the community, and owed allegiance to a foreign sovereign (the Pope), they were effectively removed from membership of the nation and should have no claim on the resources set aside for national purposes. Significantly, however, this prohibition was constitutional rather than theological. That is, the Anglican Church of England's claims to the 'nationalty' rested on its status as a national church, not on the purity of the doctrine it espoused.¹¹

Coleridge's commitment to the place of proprietorial interests in legislation and government, his endorsement of the traditional British constitution embracing the Crown, lords and commons, and the privileged position ascribed to the Church of England, all pointed to a conception of politics that had clear affinities with contemporary Toryism and the more diffuse tradition of British conservatism. The way these themes were handled, however, was characteristically complex and subtle. Coleridge's account of the ends of the commonwealth evoked an image of social and political life that is far more humane, liberal and progressive than statements of conservatism that are premised on fundamental inequality and fatally flawed human rationality. Moreover, he saw the interests of permanence and progression as coexisting in ways that potentially advanced both the material and moral ends of the state and did not confine viable change to slow accretions on traditional structures. Coleridge insisted, however, that this potential would only be unlocked if social and political elites received an education that enabled them to see their proprietorial interests in the context of state's role in promoting the material welfare and moral development of all members of the community. Under prevailing conditions, this line of argument entailed an overt critique of both the upper classes and those responsible for their ongoing education. Coleridge referred to socially irresponsible members of the upper classes as 'Jacobinism's quality cousins', likening elites' attitudes to those of radical agitators, but driven in their case by the 'abstract reason' of political economy and the 'bestial passions' of personal self-indulgence.¹² His criticism of the upper classes

extended to include the clerisy. While enjoying access to the 'nationalty' it had neglected its educational duty and failed to act as an independent check on backsliding members of the aristocracy and gentry. In other words, the clerisy had become an accomplice of a self-serving elite rather than its intellectual and moral conscience and mentor.¹³

Coleridge's theory of church and state was taken up by reform-minded Liberal Anglicans rather than by traditional Tories, who could not accept his insistence on the national rather than the denominational characteristics of the English Church, or by emerging conservative politicians and writers who could not endorse his strongly critical views of political economy. John Stuart Mill was a sharp critic of Coleridge's economic ideas but his prediction that if Coleridge's 'principles' were to be adopted by the Tories, 'we should not wait long for further reform, even in our organic institutions', suggests that the conservative moment presented in *Church and State* was a critical, liberal, optimistic and progressive one.¹⁴