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The Conservative Revolution of Edmund Burke

by Bruce Mazlish

EDMUND BURKE enjoys the rather unusual distinction of having been both a revolutionary and a conservative at one and the same time. Before and after Burke, men have begun life as radical firebrands and ended it as reactionaries; but Burke combined the two attitudes, although in differing proportions, now one or the other predominating, almost throughout the course of his life. For example, Burke approved unreservedly of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, accepted the American Revolution of 1776, and called for a drastic change in the administration of British India; yet, he became the first thinker to propound a comprehensive statement of modern conservatism. He favored the Polish Reform of 1791, the freeing of Irish trade, the relief from religious disabilities of the Catholics, and the promotion of religious tolerance; yet, he lauded prescription and traditionalism. It is this ever-present dualism of thought in Burke which has so consistently disturbed scholars and historians of political theory and made it so difficult for them to place him in one camp or another.

The full consequence of Burke's tergiversations, however, as I shall try to show, was to turn traditionalism into a self-conscious and fully-conceived political philosophy of conservatism.¹ The result was a major shift in political thought. After Burke's work, a large part of political theory became concerned with the question of preserving existing society, and turned away from the previous inquiry into the conditions justifying tyrannicide and revolution. I should like to consider this transformation in detail, but before doing this I wish to ask briefly: What led Burke to this new sensibility toward political life?

II

It is doubtful if Burke could ever have achieved his self-conscious position and written the *Reflections* if he had not shared the highly introspective temper of a small group of English writers

¹ For the notion of conservatism as self-conscious traditionalism, cf. Karl Mannheim's article, "Das konservative Denken," *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, LVII (1927).

in the eighteenth century. It is difficult to believe that Burke could have developed the conservative world-view without meditating on the "sublime and beautiful," without enjoying a feeling of *Angst*, or without, like his fellow writers, Gray and Young, musing upon tombs and graveyards. It was only because Burke was possessed of the feeling that his world was on the "way out" (literally, that his world-view was fading) that, to prevent the disintegration of this world, he alchemized traditionalism into conservatism.

The connection between conservatism and romanticism in Burke's work must not be considered accidental. Even before the French Revolution, Burke had rejected the "classical" tendencies of the Enlightenment in his book, *On the Sublime and Beautiful*. In this work, as early as 1756, he turned his mind against what Lionel Trilling has so aptly called the "liberal imagination."² Burke's rejection of classicism in the aesthetic field was in harmony with his general shift toward political conservatism. The same romanticism which favored rambling gardens and "sublime," that is, "awful" and semi-chaotic, literature also favored disordered, unproportioned, vigorous historical growth and a government which was undefined, mysterious and veiled in its nature. Burke, like Pascal before him, denied that mathematical reason, "the geometric spirit," could tell us anything about human beings or human relations. Only history and tradition could inform us about man.

III

To understand Burke's development, we must remember that an outstanding feature of eighteenth-century England was the absence of a rigid, closed aristocracy. The intermarriage of the landholding nobility with wealthy merchants, the elevation of the latter to nobility, and the entrance of the nobility into commerce all provided for a fluid upper class. (In contrast, we may note that the Prussian nobility was not allowed to enter commerce without derogation until the Prussian Reform Ordinance of 1807.) What Napoleon meant by "careers open to talent" was already, in large part, present in late eighteenth-century England.

Burke availed himself of the opportunities open to him. Born and educated (Trinity College) in Ireland, he came to England, as had so many other Irishmen (and Scotsmen), in order to ad-

² Lionel Trilling, *E. M. Forster, A Study* (London, 1951), p. 14.

vance himself. Originally intending to make his way as a lawyer, Burke abandoned his legal studies, repelled by their aridity and narrowness, and tried to obtain such posts as H. M. Consul at Madrid and Agent of the Colony of New York (1761). But it was his pen which was to make his career; already by 1756 he had published his *Vindication of Natural Society* and *The Sublime and Beautiful*. In addition, in 1758, he agreed to edit Dodsley's *Annual Register*. As he himself remarked in a letter of 1763 to his early patron, William Hamilton, "Whatever advantages I have acquired . . . have been owing to some small degree of literary reputation."³

The position of writers in the eighteenth century, however, was precarious, and Burke attached himself, after serving as secretary to William Hamilton, to the leader of the Whig Party, the Marquis of Rockingham.

Although a Protestant, Burke was an Irishman and, therefore, an outsider in England; he was very close to being what sociologists are fond of calling a "marginal man." This decision to attach himself to the nobility emphasized his marginality. As an outsider, however, Burke could see and state objectively and "reflectively" the position of his employers. Thus, not only romanticism but marginality was required for the development of conservative thought. Lord Camden glimpsed this when he wrote to Burke in 1791:

I . . . like many other, have always thought myself an old whig, and held the same principles with yourself; but I suppose none, or very few of us, ever thought upon the subject with as much correctness; and hardly any would be able to express their thoughts with as much clearness, justness and force of arguments.⁴

Burke, it appears, personally aspired to the life of the landed gentry, and in 1768 he purchased 600 acres at Beaconsfield for £20,000, although he could not actually afford it.⁵ As early as 1750, in a letter to Matthew Smith, he lamented his landless state and announced: "the progress of agriculture, my favourite study,

³ *Correspondence of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke; Between the Year 1744, and the Period of his Decease, in 1797*. Edited by Charles William, Earl Fitzwilliam, and Lt. Gen. Sir Richard Brooke, K. C. B., in 4 vols. (London, 1844), Vol. I, 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol. III, 229.

⁵ The decline in Burke's Indian stock holdings forced him to mortgage Gregories, as he named his estate, to the hilt.

and my favourite pursuit, if Providence had blessed me with a few paternal acres."⁶

But it would be a great over-simplification to "explain" Burke simply as a tool of the landowning aristocracy. Although many of his basic predispositions favored agriculture and the "ways of land," he did not place himself in the Tory camp, which represented the country; instead he eventually represented the city, Bristol, and fought for the commercial interests. Burke's adherence to the Rockingham Whigs and the Aristocratic cause was not so much for personal gain as for belief, although he admits, in a letter to Joseph Bullock in March, 1783, that "I have certainly a natural desire, and a natural right, and duty too, to take care of my own interests, whenever I can do it consistently with my superior duty to the public."⁷ Occasionally, there were conflicts between duty to his own interests and to the public's, especially in that corrupt political age, and others have accused Burke of favoring his own. When, in 1783 as Paymaster-General, Burke, while reforming abuses, tried to get his son the second most valuable sinecure on the Exchequer, Walpole commented, "Can one but smile at the reformer of abuses reserving the second greatest abuse for himself."⁸

However, the verdict of scholars has generally been that Burke, although sometimes misled into seeking gain for his family, did not seek it for himself.⁹ There was another, far greater, spring to his action — the desire for fame and the blessing of posterity. Well could Burke have remarked about himself what he said of Townshend: "But he had no failings which were not owing to a noble cause — to an ardent, generous, perhaps an immoderate passion for fame: a passion which is the instinct of all great souls."¹⁰ This

⁶ Arthur P. I. Samuels, *The Early Life, Correspondence & Writings of the Rt. Hon. Edmund Burke, LL.D.*, with an Introduction and Supplementary Chapters on Burke's Contributions to the Reformer and his part in the Lucas Controversy (1784) by the Rt. Hon. Arthur Warren Samuels. (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 219-20.

⁷ Burke, *Correspondence*, Vol. III, 13.

⁸ Quoted in Sir Philip Magnus, *Edmund Burke. A Life* (London, 1939), p. 116.

⁹ Cf. Thomas W. Copeland, *Our Eminent Friend Edmund Burke. Six Essays* (New Haven, 1949), especially Chapter II.

¹⁰ *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke* (hereafter referred to as *Works*) in 12 Vols., (Printed by the Colonial Press, Boston, no date given) Vol. II, 65.

theme resounds through all of Burke's writings, and we hear it again in 1785, when he is impeaching Warren Hastings: "My business is not to consider what will convict Mr. Hastings, (a thing we all know to be impractical), but what will acquit and justify myself to those few persons, and to those distant times, which may take a concern in these affairs and in the actors in them."¹¹

In short, Burke believed that he was working in the interests of posterity and that he was not a "hack" defending class interests. It would be as wrong for a sociologist to attribute Burke's writings solely to the class structure as it was for Burke to ignore his own partiality. The evidence shows that Burke had elaborated the basic ideas of his position before he entered the service of Rockingham; thus, the aristocratic connection would seem to have only modified and channeled the direction of his original drift. In a sense, time and party conspired to take advantage of Burke and make him great. Another time, an absence of party, and his ideas might have been out of season. Oliver Goldsmith missed the point in writing that Burke "to party gave up what was meant for mankind."

IV

In the early part of his career, Burke helped to lead and manage the Rockingham Whigs in opposition to the King's Friends. Calling the American Revolution a "civil war," Burke characterized the King's policy toward the colonists as "an attempt made to dispose of the property of a whole people without their consent."¹² In 1777, Burke was so pessimistic about the position of his party (the Rockingham Whigs) and the chance of the American colonists escaping defeat that he recommended the secession of the Rockingham Whigs from Parliament. This was, in reality, an admission that the King's control of the corrupt Parliament was so complete that only an appeal to the people was left. (Later this was to be the same position taken by the Parliamentary Reformers. In fact, one might well ask whether Burke's "Address to the British Colonists in North America, in relation to the Measures of Government in the American Contest, and a Proposed Secession of the Opposition from Parliament," of January, 1777, was not in the same traitorous category as the later correspondence of the English

¹¹ Burke, *Correspondence*, Vol. III, 41-42.

¹² Burke, *Works*, Vol. VI, 164.

Constitutional Society with the French Revolutionaries?) In his "Address," Burke spoke over the head of his government and claimed to speak for the "nation."

The stress, at this point of Burke's thought, was on natural rights combined with expediency, in opposition to the letter of the law.¹³ Thus, in his declaration on the right of taxing America, he said: "It is not what a lawyer tells me I may do, but what humanity, reason and justice tell me I ought to do."¹⁴ Writing to the Marquis of Rockingham in 1777, Burke contended that at the time of the Glorious Revolution the people "re-entered into their original rights; and it was not because a positive law authorized what was then done, but because the freedom and safety of the subject, the origin and cause of all laws, required a proceeding paramount and superior to them."¹⁵ The natural rights, for the protection of which society was introduced, were life, liberty and property. These were sacred and, as Burke said, "If any public measure is proved mischievously to affect them, the objection ought to be fatal to that measure."¹⁶

Burke was careful to make a distinction between natural rights and what he called civil, or chartered, rights. Such things as political power and commercial monopoly were merely chartered rights and civil conventions to which society might annex any conditions. Being artificial, they were only granted the holders on condition that they be exercised for the benefit of society.

All political power which is set over man and . . . all privilege being wholly artificial, and for so much in derogation from the natural equality of mankind at large, ought to be some way or other exercised ultimately for their benefit. . . . Such rights or privileges or whatever you choose to call them, are all in the strictest sense 'a trust' and it is of the very essence of every trust to be rendered *accountable*; and even totally to *cease* when it substantially varies from the purposes for which alone it could have a lawful existence.¹⁷

¹³ Burke's future respect for the "letter of the law" must be placed next to his disdain for lawyers and his own abandonment of the profession.

¹⁴ Cf. F. T. H. Fletcher, *Montesquieu and English Politics (1750-1800)* (London, 1939), p. 212.

¹⁵ Burke, *Works*, Vol. VI, 178-79.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 473.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 439.

It is important to note that even during this period of opposition to the King and of appeal to the people, Burke was not a democrat. He was adamantly opposed to parliamentary reform, to more frequent elections, to real as opposed to "virtual" representation, and to extension of the suffrage. He wished to sustain the balance of the forces involved in the British constitution; and it was in this spirit that he introduced and spoke on his *Plan for the Better Security of the Independence of Parliament and the Economical Reformation of the Civil and Other Establishments* (1780). Indeed, he advocated the reform of the King's Civil Expense List primarily to restrain the King's influence and reduce the possibility of corruption of parliament rather than to effect money economies for the public.

In his *Plan*, Burke made frequent appeals to precedents because they were the most expedient ground on which to defend the measure and to attack the King's List. Gradually, however, a shift took place in his thinking until, by the time of the *Reflections*, precedent became a positive virtue in itself. In 1790, Burke could majestically describe "that grand title which supersedes every other title, and which all my studies of general jurisprudence have taught me to consider as one principal cause of the formation of states; — I mean the ascertaining and securing of *prescription*." To the objection that these might be donations made in ages of ignorance and superstition, Burke replied: "Be it so; — it proves that they were made long ago; and this is prescription, and this gives right and title . . . that which might be wrong in the beginning, is consecrated by time and becomes lawful."¹⁸

Statements such as these have led F. T. H. Fletcher, when relating prescription to the historical method, to declare that Burke used the latter

. . . in a case-hardened form which distorted, if it did not wholly betray, the intention of its creator, Montesquieu. Where for the latter the "historical method" had assumed the permanence of the spirit, but not of the letter, of the law, for Burke it came to mean prescription, a theory which declared that legislators had *always* acted in the full light of reason and had thus given to written law a solidarity and a permanence that brooked no change.¹⁹

¹⁸ Burke, *Correspondence*, Vol. III, 145.

¹⁹ Fletcher, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

What caused this momentous shift toward prescription and toward a position which happily astounded Burke's former detractors, like George III, and dismayed many of his earlier friends, like Charles James Fox and Philip Francis? Was it inconsistency and sophistry in Burke's principles? Fox thought so and accused him on the floor of Parliament of self-contradiction. Paine, who said in the *Rights of Man*, "I used sometimes to correspond with Mr. Burke, believing him then to be a man of sounder principles than his book shows him to be," saw a ready and discreditable explanation: "There is a certain transaction known in the City, which renders him suspected of being a pensioner in a fictitious name. This may account for some strange doctrines he advanced in his book. . . ."

This last and thinly veiled accusation can be dismissed immediately upon an inspection of Burke's life; he was not one to sell out to the King after having been in opposition, to the enormous disadvantage of his career, from his first entrance into politics. Instead, we must seek the explanation in a combination of Burke's principles and the historical circumstances of the time.

If we investigate his principles carefully, we see that, as early as 1756, Burke had opposed the abstract ideas of the philosophers in his *Vindication of Natural Society*; in 1773, during his visit to France and the Paris salons, he also made clear his opposition. He always recognized the existence of natural rights, but he was more concerned with civil and historical rights and with the question of expediency. His thought constantly centered about the notion of the British constitution as a balance of parts, as a ship of state whose equipoise had to be maintained. The image of a boat being tipped, with the resultant necessity of shifting weight to prevent the boat going down, appealed to Burke.²⁰

We have an echo of this theory and a hint of Burke's "new" development as early as 1783, in his speech on Fox's East India

²⁰ Compare the earlier use of this idea by Halifax in his *Character of a Trimmer*, where he says: This innocent word *Trimmer* signifieth no more than this, that if men are together in a boat, and one part of the company would weigh it down on one side, another would make it lean as much to the contrary; it happeneth there is a third opinion of those who conceive it would do as well if the boat went even, without endangering the passengers." This is quoted in A. W. Reed, "George Saville, Marquis of Halifax" in *The Social and Political Ideas of Some English Thinkers of the Augustan Age A. D. 1650-1750*, ed. by F. J. C. Hearnshaw (London, 1928), pp. 62-63.

Bill. Speaking then as a friend and supporter of Fox against the King, Burke declared that

If I am not able to correct a system of oppression and tyranny, that goes to the utter ruin of thirty millions of my fellow-subjects, but by some increase in the influence of the crown, I am ready here to declare that I who have been active and strenuous to reduce it, shall be at least as active and strenuous to restore it again. I am no lover of names; I contend for the substance of good and protecting government, let it come from whatever quarter it will.²¹

The principle latent in this speech came into force shortly after the outbreak of the French Revolution. By 1790, Burke felt that the boat was tipping and that his weight had to be shifted to restore the equipoise.

He was aware of going too far in so doing:

For my part, for one, though I make no doubt of preferring the ancient course, or almost any other, to this vile chimera, and sick man's dream of government, yet I could not actively, or with a good heart and clear conscience, go to the re-establishment of a monarchical despotism in the place of this system of anarchy.²²

But this was only a momentary doubt. Passionately, Burke dedicated himself to the mission of warning England and the world against the sirens of false philosophy, and cast himself into the Cassandra role of exposing the true nature of the French Revolution. His oracular message was first delivered in the *Reflections*. It is in this book that, without system or codification, only half-consciously, with the shreds of polemic still clinging to it, the world-view of conservatism first emerges.

V

Burke never denied that the course of history created rights in defense of which revolution was permitted; in his eyes, such a "conservative revolution" was even necessary. Thus, he explicitly defended the Glorious Revolution of 1688 on the grounds that it was a reassertion of historical rights which had been usurped by the King. History, for Burke, was not Voltaire's "story of errors" but

²¹ Burke, *Works*, Vol. II, 522.

²² Burke, *Correspondence*, Vol. III, 349.

rather the “wisdom of our ancestors.” In defense of this “wisdom” and the historical rights which are its progeny, men might advance against tyranny the argument of “fidelity to the ancient laws” and resort to revolution.

Even given these conditions, however, it was with a certain amount of trepidation that Burke approached the subject. As he said:

The speculative line of demarcation, where obedience ought to end and resistance must begin, is faint, obscure and not easily definable. Government must be abused and deranged indeed, before it can be thought of, and the prospect of the future must be as bad as the experience of the past . . . but, with or without right, a revolution will be the very last resource of the thinking and the good.²³

In 1688, the situation had been of this “last resource” nature; but the revolution went only so far as to return the old order. Burke, describing the Glorious Revolution, declared: “With us we got rid of the man, and preserved the constituent parts of the state . . . the nation kept the same ranks, the same orders, the same privileges . . . the same rules for property . . . the same lords. . . .”²⁴

So with America. After talking with Benjamin Franklin, Burke reported that he did not “discover any other wish in favor of America than for a security to its *ancient constitution*” and gave it as his considered opinion that the Americans were “standing at that time, and in that controversy, in the same relation to England as England did to King James the Second in 1688.”²⁵

As to the Polish Reform, Burke declared it to be in all points the reverse of the French and approvingly noted that “Everything was kept in its place and order; but that in that place and order everything was bettered.”²⁶

The seeming paradox, which has bothered so many writers, of Burke’s approval of some revolutions, can be explained when seen in the light of his entire conservative ideology. Thus only can we understand Burke’s statement, *in October of the year 1789*, that “A positively vicious and abusive government ought to be changed, —and if necessary, by violence,—if it cannot be (as sometimes it is

²³ Burke, *Works*, Vol. III, 271.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. IV, 101.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

the case) reformed."²⁷ Naturally, the latter solution, reform, was the desirable one, and Burke once affirmed that he reformed not out of love but out of hatred for innovation.²⁸

The real difficulty in handling Burke's view on this matter is a semantic one; he used a very loose terminology and frequently the same word with entirely different meanings. For example, Burke made his real conservative distinction when he declared that there was a

. . . marked distinction between change and reformation. The former alters the substance of the objects themselves, and gets rid of all their essential good as well as of all the incidental evil annexed to them. Change is novelty. . . . Reform is not a change in the substance or in the primary modification of the object, but a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained of.²⁹

Obviously, in this sense of the term, Revolution was merely the furthest extreme of Reform: such were the events of 1688 and 1776.

However, Burke misused his own carefully defined words when he said: "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation . . . the two principles of conservatism and correction operated strongly at the two critical periods of the Restoration and the Revolution. . . ."³⁰ According to his own definition, quoted earlier, the word he wanted was reform and not change. Only with a similar substitution can we explain his statement that "We must all obey the great law of change. It is the most powerful law of Nature, and the means perhaps of its conservation." The guide to Burke's mind in this matter should be the distinction between a change in substance and an improvement in exteriors.

So, too, we can understand correctly such a statement of Burke's as that "*General* rebellions and revolts of an whole people never were *encouraged*, now or at any time. They are always *provoked*"³¹ only if we investigate the key word in this quotation:

²⁷ Burke, *Correspondence*, Vol. III, 116-17.

²⁸ Burke, *Works*, Vol. V, 188. This motif of reform was strong throughout Burke's life, and it is interesting to note that the name of his undergraduate effort at a periodical was the *Reformer*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, Vol. VI, 259.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 217.

“general.” To explain how Burke could utter such a sentiment and not be contradicting his views at the time of the French Revolution requires another semantic explanation. Burke meant by a “general revolt” one involving both the upper and lower orders; the 1789 revolt had been, on Burke’s reading, only of the lower orders. If it had been a truly general rebellion “of an whole people,” led by an upper, propertied class, in the reassertion of historical rights, the French Revolution (like the Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution) would have been welcomed and defended by Burke.

Burke’s justification of resistance to the established government, on the grounds of historical rights, when the rebellion was led by the “magistrates,” was not new; for example, an earlier theorist, François Hotman, in his *Francogallia* of 1573, had taken the same position. In fact, this had been the basic argument of the entire school of Protestant monarchomachs in the sixteenth century. Looked at from this point of view, Burke accomplished nothing of importance.

What is original and important in Burke emerges almost by accident. In the course of explaining why he was opposed to the *particular* revolution of 1789, Burke not only attacked Locke’s natural-rights justification of revolution, but he forgot his own defense of revolution on historical grounds and worked out conservative principles which appear to question *all* revolution.

Burke justified the English Revolution of 1688 and the American Revolution of 1776; the French Revolution of 1789 frightened him into shifting the emphasis from a justification of revolution to a justification of “conservation.” Burke, who really believed in historical rights and, hence, some revolutions, had not intended his work to be so sweeping, but the public and other publicists overlooked his restraining remarks and condemned all revolutions.

Thus, a major attempt at the reorientation of the general direction of political theory took place. A similar shift had occurred in the late sixteenth century, when, instead of tyrannicide, the justification of revolution became the central topic of political discussion (and thereby raised, in its modern form, the entire question of the proper relations of subject and sovereign).³² As a result of

³² This shift, in essence, marked the appearance in history of the “people” as a major political force.

this shift, during the seventeenth century a long polemic emerged over leveling tendencies, constitutions and natural rights, finding its most significant expression in John Locke's *Two Treatises*. The eighteenth century discussion of the subject culminated in Rousseau. After 1789, however, conservative thinkers, led by Burke, attempted to center political theory on the problem, not of justifying revolution or discussing the limited conditions under which it might take place, but on answering the question: What are the conditions necessary to conserve and preserve society?

Burke's conservatism, in the sense of being an attempt at a major reorientation (and it is only this relation of conservatism and romanticism which is intended in this sentence), was the political counterpart of romanticism. Romanticism had changed the orientation of aesthetic theory from a search for objective, classical rules, applied to the work of art, to a concentration on the subjective, relative impressions, experienced by the observer. Conservatism tried to change the orientation of political theory from a concern with changing and improving society to a concern with stabilizing and preserving society, and opposed to the liberal emphasis on philosophy a conservative emphasis on history. Burke linked the appeals of conservatism and romanticism and thereby exercised a tremendous power over the imagination of his contemporaries. In this sense, as well as in the narrower meaning which I have discussed in reference to the idea of revolution, Burke effected the "conservative revolution."