Burke Unboxed

Political Theory
2018, Vol. 46(2) 280–298

journals.sagepub.com/home/ptx
SAGE

The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence, by David Bromwich. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.
Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke, by Richard Bourke. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015.

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DOI: 10.1177/0090591716672403

I

David Hume wrote that "everything in this world is judg'd of by comparison."[1] This is especially so with books, where the genuine achievements of one author can nonetheless be cast into comparative shadow by the accomplishments of another. Such is frequently the case here. For whilst David Bromwich's *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* is undoubtedly a good book, Richard Bourke's *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* is a towering intellectual achievement, and a landmark of scholarship. Taken together they establish beyond doubt Burke's status as a major political thinker, dispelling any residual image of him as merely an unusually reflective politician who lacked the depths of more overtly philosophical figures. It is, however, to Bourke's treatment that we must look for the most penetrating insights.

I shall consider some of what separates Bromwich and Bourke in a moment, but it is first worth emphasizing what unites them. Most importantly, both are committed to dispelling the popular and longstanding reputation of Burke as a conservative thinker, indeed the very founder of modern conservative thought. What emerges clearly from both studies is that this label is not merely false, but otiose. On the one hand, labeling Burke a "conservative" is deeply anachronistic, picking out a style of thought that would have been unrecognizable to him or his peers. (As Emily Jones has recently shown, Burke owes his popular reputation as a conservative not to anything he himself wrote or said, but to late-Victorian and Edwardian British debates, and especially his appropriation by early twentieth-century Conservative

Unionists.[2]) Of course, retention of the "conservative" label might nonetheless be thought permissible if constituting a useful shorthand for denoting rough sets of dispositions or views.[3] But Bromwich and Bourke show that this cannot be the case with Burke. When we appreciate his full depth and complexity, calling him a conservative serves only to impoverish and mislead.

In both cases, refusal to characterize Burke as a conservative is underpinned by emphasizing his adoption of Hume's insistence that all government is founded upon "opinion." That is, that because rulers are always the few, whilst the ruled are always the many, successful politics operates not by coercive enforcement but the free acquiescence of subjects: "as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion."[4] As opinion is the foundation of all government, it is to opinion that we must ultimately look when trying to understand why certain regime forms are accepted—or rejected—in varying times and places, and how rulers are able to exercise authority over those they command. Yet, as Bromwich emphasizes:

> None of this is to be confused with the popular will: "I have nothing to do here with the abstract value of the voice of the people." The force of opinion that Burke cares for is the same moral force by which individuals govern their peers and often their superiors: persuasion must be founded on knowledge of the temper of the audience. A well-conducted government is anything but "a continued scuffle between the magistrate and the multitude," and the first requirement of a statesman is to be so conversant with the moods and needs of the people that such disputation is averted.[5]

For Burke, the practical import of approaching political questions via the idiom of opinion was that it revealed the inherent limits of legalistic or moralistic a priori theorizing, especially when such presumed limits were really put to the test. As Bourke summarizes, "sovereignty by its nature was theoretically unaccountable, yet in practice its exercise was always limited by circumstance."[6] In other words: whilst the sovereign power must always be the final and highest site of decision-making authority, if the sovereign loses the support of opinion, de jure authority will mean nothing de facto.

The real-life consequences of this would play out spectacularly in the cases of the American and French revolts, analyzed by Burke with more depth and seriousness than any of his contemporaries. The issue raised in turn was when, if ever, subject populations were entitled to rebel against oppressive rulers. When did political obligation give out, with recourse being made to extra-legal measures outside the ordinary functioning of the forums of

politics that enabled first and foremost collective survival, and in turn material advancement and prosperity? The attempt to grapple with this vexed issue, and Burke's couching of it in the idiom of opinion, is shown by Bromwich and Bourke to account for his divergent treatments of the American and French revolutions.[7] Although Richard Price would write to Burke in 1791 that it was "unaccountable" that he should be "an avowed friend" of the American revolution but an "enemy" of the French—a judgment that has long dogged Burke's legacy—there is in fact no paradox or mystery.[8] Any alleged incompatibility, or dramatic change in Burke's views between the 1770s and late 1780s, turns out to be a pseudo-problem easily dispelled by examining Burke's positions in adequate detail. But removing the pseudo-problem generates a much more serious question about our own attitudes to the significance of 1789. This is important, and I will come back to it, for Bourke's treatment in particular forces us to reassess our own commitments to political progress and improvement once Burke is no longer safely boxed-off as a conservative. This is because unboxing Burke means ceasing to implicitly—but no less effectively—dismiss his thought from contemporary consideration due to its allegedly reactionary nature. Yet if Burke is not simply a reactionary, then he cannot automatically be placed on the wrong side of the upward march of history, and safely dismissed accordingly. This in turn has ramifications for where we think that we ourselves stand—and whether we are right about that.

II

Before considering those issues, however, it is worth addressing some of what separates Bromwich's and Bourke's treatments. Bourke is recognizably in the tradition of the last four decades of the history of political thought loosely associated with the so-called "Cambridge School." He seeks to engage Burke's philosophical ideas as such, whilst also paying (an unusually high level of) attention to the surrounding historical context, not just in terms of Burke's intellectual milieu but also the political arena in which he operated for most of his life.[9] Bourke's treatment is notable insofar as it offers detailed and sophisticated reconstructions not just of Burke's ideas, but his world. He has made the effort not only to read everything that Burke wrote (including decades' worth of parliamentary speeches) but everything that Burke *read*, whilst immersing himself in the complex histories of Britain, Ireland, America, France, and India in the eighteenth century. This at times makes for dense and demanding reading—but the subject matter is dense and demanding, so that can hardly be faulted.

Bromwich offers a different approach. Sterling Professor of English at Yale, his engagement is orthogonal to more mainstream history of political thought, and might be described as operating by a sort of communion with Burke's texts (which Bromwich takes to include the many speeches as well as the more famous public writings). One of Bromwich's most valuable contributions is his careful sifting of the vast archive of Burke's correspondence to unearth new materials that yield fresh interpretative insights. Yet large passages go by in which Bromwich renders some aspect of Burke's thought, but wherein it is unclear who is speaking: is this Burke verbatim, or Bromwich interpretation? Doubtless, discussion would need to be had about what constitutes "interpretation," as well, perhaps, as to where the author ends and the reader begins. Nonetheless Bromwich's tendency to quote without citation can make it hard to assess whose views are being considered, and for those interested in what *Burke* thought this is bound to prove problematic.

Similarly, Bromwich's focus is at times perplexing, insofar as he concentrates attention on what is of most interest to him, rather than (say) to Burke, or to those interested in eighteenth-century ideas or history today. So for example we get very long examinations of Burke's involvement in the crises surrounding Parliament's ongoing attempts to exclude the rabble-rousing demagogue John Wilkes in the late 1760s, as well as repeat comparisons between Burke's thought on the American colonies and that of the much less interesting and intellectually accomplished Tom Paine. By contrast, we hear almost nothing of the Seven Years War, despite its enormous importance in setting the scene for the American revolt and the subsequent position of British military and imperial power in the second half of the eighteenth century. (I spotted only a couple of passing mentions in the text; certainly it receives no entry in a noticeably anorexic index). Even more glaringly, Bromwich's treatment has almost nothing to say about Burke's views on religion outside aesthetics, with the effect that he emerges as an almost secular political thinker. Yet as Bourke shows, this is to present a severely distorted picture. Burke's early years exhibited a deep hostility to deist free-thinking, which he later saw as tipping over from superstition into enthusiasm (to use Hume's terms), threatening to erode the bonds of civil union via the fetishization of the power of reason, and the presumption that complex systems of temporal association could be overthrown or disregarded on the basis of personal conviction.[10] Bourke's treatment implies that what happened in France in the late 1780s was a transmutation of this religious impulse into a political one—with devastating results. In later life, Burke worried that Hume's (as he saw it) corrosive religious scepticism blinded him to the fragility of a world based on opinion. If organized religious faith was removed as a support for collective political endeavor, there might not be enough to keep self-interested economic

competition at bay even domestically—let alone internationally—once one abandoned Hume's assumption that pursuit of status goods would be naturally self-correcting within the national economy.[11]

Bromwich's communion with the texts is, at times, effective (it is certainly always enjoyable). His treatment of the American Revolution is particularly powerful, and serves as a helpful supplementary to Bourke's more dense and difficult treatment. But Bromwich's secular, progressive (in the distinctively modern American sense) Burke—for whom "the principles of politics are nothing but the principles of morality enlarged"[12]—tends to tell us rather more about Bromwich than about Burke, or the problems that Burke took himself to be facing down not just intellectually, but practically.[13] Indeed, the title of Bromwich's book is telling: the *Intellectual* Life of Edmund Burke. Certainly, Burke was a thinker, but he was also a lifelong politician: a key member of the Rockingham Whigs, and for much of his life a Member of Parliament. Burke did not simply think about large and complex political problems, he acted directly upon them. To some extent Bromwich's treatment reflects this. His presentation of Burke as demanding a "moral" politics is best read not as a prurient or naïve form of moralism, but something like Weber's insistence that the political actor recognize their deep responsibility for the things that they do. Like Weber, Bromwich's Burke is alert to the problem not only of what political actors must do, but of what they must *be*.

Nonetheless, such a heavy emphasis on Burke's intellectual life—and the relatively empty presentation of him as somebody for whom "Politics . . . is more than politics. It is the natural and public form in which moral commitment is expressed"—distorts the core problem.[14] Namely that politics is ultimately about judgment, that black box between theory and practice which by its essential nature is intractably resistant to theorization or elucidation outside of the experience of doing. Practical judgment is certainly a bizarre thing, insofar as it is necessarily self-effacing: once one opts to act, one must simultaneously stop judging (at least for that portion of time it takes to follow through). In politics, that will mean committing to a course of action whilst often knowing that once one is committed there is no going back. Emphasizing only the intellectual portion of this endeavor is to miss out that politics is irreducibly also about what happens when decisions have been committed to. Not just about what is to be done, but about how to get it done, and then living with it once it has been brought about.

III

Where Bourke's study comes into its own, over and above Bromwich's, is the sensitivity to this wider range of problems surrounding the complexity of

political judgment. His much more deeply historical treatment is a major means of facilitating this. In order to understand political judgment, it is helpful to examine how decisions are actually made, and going beyond Burke's intellectual life into his deeply embedded political life proves fruitful. A helpful case study in this respect is Burke's engagement—practically and intellectually—with the issue of representation.

Representation occupied a central place in Burke's political thought. He was returned to the House of Commons as the member for Wendover in 1766, before moving to represent Bristol in 1774. Yet just six years later he would lose the local support necessary for retaining his seat. A central cause was Burke's open refusal to straightforwardly translate the preferences of voters into Westminster activity.[15] Burke's opposition to the slave trade (which local sea-faring merchants relied heavily upon), his condemnation of the Government's repressive policy towards the American colonies, and his support for lifting Irish trade restrictions, and the emancipation of Irish Catholics, all estranged him from the Bristol electorate.

As both Bromwich and Bourke make clear, Burke in particular saw the widespread jingoism and thirst for military domination, that manifested in Bristol just as it did in much of the wider country, as deeply troubling. Yet he did not see himself as being thereby meekly incapacitated, charged with simply ventriloquizing the war-hungry, bigoted, Crown-partisan attitudes of his electors. On the contrary he saw his role as a representative to be that of distancing himself from the views of voters when necessary, acting as a locus of judgment for how best to proceed. This was especially so in the context of crisis and war, when popular sensibility ran amok and good government required careful distancing from the turbulent spirit of domination.

Burke's position was complex. He had no doubt that the function of government—and indeed, it's ultimate legitimacy—rested in the upholding of the old maxim *salus populi suprema lex esto*. Representatives were charged with promoting the welfare of the represented, and failed insofar as they did not deliver. Yet representatives ought not to blindly put into practice the views or desires of those whom they represented *precisely because* those views or desires could be quite seriously misguided—could, if acted upon, endanger the very *salus populi* it was the representative's job to uphold. Acting simply as the conduit of the masses—that is, relinquishing the task of judgment—would be a piece of gross negligence and moral cowardice. Burke took it upon himself to be (in his own words) a "pillar of the state," not a "weathercock on top of the edifice." Or as Bourke renders it: "A representative was a servant of the public interest, not the agent of incompatible popular whims."[16]

This outlook was further complicated by Burke's distinction between "virtual" and "actual" representation.[17] The former referred to (for example) the

situation of peoples within the British Imperial structure who had no direct say in the appointment of members of the Houses of Parliament, and yet whose interests ought rightly to be held of paramount consideration in political affairs. These included the Irish Catholics, the American Colonists, and the millions of vulnerable and exploited natives on the Indian Subcontinent: peoples who were under imperial rule, but were not (necessarily) rendered unfree or illegitimately subjugated merely because of that. For Burke there was nothing fraudulent about the idea of virtual representation, any more than there would be in thinking that a modern elected politician is bound to "represent" even those voters who supported the rival, losing, candidate(s). "Actual" representation was only one institutional mechanism for trying to stabilize the link between the judgment of rulers and the *salus populi*—and not necessarily an especially good one, as the rising spirit of domination in the metropole in response to American claims starkly illustrated. What mattered was that representatives sincerely attempted to do what was best, on balance, and to the utmost of their knowledge and abilities. This meant a difficult balancing act between permanent "reverence for the people's will" and a clear-eyed awareness of "the possible folly of their judgment."[18] Ultimately, national sentiment did have to prevail over the political judgment of politicians: they were precisely representatives, not autocrats. The people could make mistakes, and in the end they might have to be allowed to do so. But this outlook was a long way from MPs acting simply as conduits for the preferences of voters, an arrangement that would destroy any possibility of deliberation, whilst dismantling the political division of labour that delivered humans from the state of nature.

In adopting this stance, Burke put himself firmly outside of the more famous Enlightenment tradition that had its roots in Hobbes: the attempt to unify the disparate multitude of a divided populus via the singular will of an authorized representative. Transmogrified through Rousseau's imagining of a "general will"—yet with Rousseau's categorical ban on any form of representation promptly forgotten—it is this other tradition that still dominates our political imagination, with regards to both the function of the representative and ultimately his or her legitimacy in a democratic form of politics. Certainly, the version that operates in contemporary political discourse is an anemic and bastardized descendent of the Enlightenment philosophical vision. The idea of a general will, or more likely, "the will of the people," is seldom called upon to do serious intellectual or political work today (unsurprisingly, since no such thing ever exists). Instead, representatives are assumed to receive their (democratic) legitimacy by reflecting the preferences of those who elected them: taking up to the Senate or the Houses or the Assembly whatever it is their electors have told them to carry. But having abandoned any

thoroughgoing idea of the general will, or of the representative as bearer of unifying power to bring final authority to collective decision making, what is the exact worth of this modern manifestation? One of the deep, provocative, questions raised by Bourke's study is to ask what exactly Burke got wrong—if indeed anything at all. Certain species of modern democratic sensibilities will be put out of joint by the suggestion that elected politicians have a deep responsibility *not* to ventriloquize the prejudices, whims, demands, and desires of the electorate. But then the issue must turn on whether the electorate can be trusted to have prejudices, whims, demands, and desires that may be safely, let alone morally defensibly, translated into political action. Leftist sentiment (which generally prevails in the academy, if not so frequently in the wider world) has tended to assume that it simply can. One of the functions of labeling Burke a "conservative" (read: reactionary on the wrong side of history) is to automatically delegitimize his contribution to any debate on such a matter, thus shielding opponents from challenge. By contrast, one of Bourke's central achievements is his demonstration that we have good reason to take Burke extremely seriously when it comes to the question of how the opinion of mankind is to be managed in the short and medium terms. In this regard, 1789 continues to be the crucible of Burke's thought. But before we arrive in France, we must pass first through India and America.

IV

Burke's skepticism about the fitness of ordinary people to make wise political decisions must not be read as entailing a blind faith in the ability, or even the good intentions, of those who wield power from positions of established advantage. On the contrary, and as Bourke's painstaking treatment of Burke's engagement with Indian affairs makes clear, Burke was deeply preoccupied with—indeed, horrified by—the scope for abuse and corruption that had been unleashed on the subcontinent by unchecked power, where no effective means of representation, virtual or actual, was in place.

Burke's interest in India began in the 1770s, but came to dominate his thought in the 1780s, reaching a climax in his ultimately unsuccessful attempt to impeach Warren Hastings, who had been Governor-General of Bengal from 1772 to 1785. From Burke's point of view the East India Company—which de facto ruled India with the military backing of the British Crown—was a moral monstrosity. It wielded what was effectively sovereign power, but was underpinned not by the imperative of promoting the welfare of the people, only its private mercantile interest. Burke agreed with Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations*: the Company was not really a trading entity, but a vehicle for rapine and extraction, operating not through genuine business

practices, but using force to exploit. As a result, "revenue, rather than trade, came to dominate its agenda."[19] Burke was no misty-eyed admirer of the regimes that had ruled India prior to British incursion, judging them various forms of tyranny. Nonetheless, "India had never been subject to a truly despotic power until the accession of the British to imperial dominion between 1757 and 1765."[20] Burke saw in the East India Company a system of rule "that had grown systematically abusive in nature," operating without even the pretense of upholding the interests of subjugated populations.[21] The practical, late eighteenth-century problem was that ceding rule of British-controlled Indian territories was (Burke believed) a political and practical impossibility, and could anyway result only in a dereliction of moral duty. What was required was extensive reform directed by the British Parliament. Individuals like Burke would have to "virtually" represent the Indians, attempting to deliver them from the exploitation and domination dealt by the hand of British power.

Yet the political significance of Burke's views on India go beyond showing his clear ability to denounce, and attempt to combat, the misrule and corruption of established power-holders, erasing any easy caricature of him as an apologist for unthinking (and even worse, racially "legitimated") aristocratic deference. Although Bourke does not say it explicitly, his portrait of Burke on India reveals his subject to be—like Smith and Hume before him—a theorist of what Istvan Hont termed "jealousy of trade."[22] This is the view that not only are economics and politics inevitably deeply intertwined, but that the logic of politics dominates and warps that of economics, such that the demands of positional advantage and sectional prejudice intrude aggressively upon the operation of purely material, market-based interactions. This was starkly illustrated in the case of India. Not only was free trade with the subcontinent, as well as other potential foreign merchant interests in the region, ruthlessly excluded by the imposition of force so as to monopolize short-term revenue, but this policy received support from the British government insofar as the temptation of quick profits blinded administrators to the long-term folly of shielding British merchants from effective competition, whilst turning the dominated colonies into enforced captive markets for shoddy goods. Worse, the corruption of the East India Company metastasized. British policy at home was bent towards the Company's interests, as politicians were enthralled by the allure of profit-makers who presented themselves as paragons of industry and rugged accomplishment, when usually they were little more than chancers and economic parasites (one might remark that little has fundamentally changed). Burke saw that Adam Smith's dictum that "people of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public" received an

especially damaging twist with the East India Company.[23] In that case, conspiracy spread beyond the merchants and took hold of the very agents who were supposed to uphold the welfare of the public.

The failure to prosecute Hastings in the long-drawn-out process from 1787 to 1795 only underlined the extent to which sectional political factors (in this case, Hasting's personal support in Parliament) proved to be decisive over purely economic—let alone moral—considerations. But as a result, Burke can in no meaningful way be enlisted for the defence of modern brands of "economic conservatism," which advocate for the withdrawal of the state to make way for the market. Burke's engagement with India reveals that, however appealing such ideas might be in theory, they cannot work in practice. Politics always crowds in, because economic competition is a poor way to first gain, but especially to then monopolize and hold, material advantage. Genuine economic competition erodes market dominance, so those who presently dominate the market seek to protect their position via extra-economic means. Most especially, trying to rig the game so that fair fights that might weaken their position are prevented from even occurring. Such rigging can only be done via politics, the site at which the rules of the game are decided. The only way to stop this sort of behaviour from winning out is to combat it with a different sort of politics, of a more responsible, less partisan, kind. When it comes to the market's role in both social and economic affairs, the clear-headed answer can never be to advocate for *less* politics, only for a *different kind* of politics. In any case, just as serious scholarship on Adam Smith has decisively dislodged the caricature of him as a Friedmanite free marketeer *avant la lettre*, so for much the same reason Burke cannot legitimately be enlisted in support of such outlooks either.[24]

Certainly Burke thought that the right to own—and the meaningful organized defense of—property was a necessary condition of successful government. In this he differed not at all from John Locke (the history of political thought's most notable insurrectionist), or Adam Smith (for whom, like Burke, it was imperative to defend the property of all precisely to secure for the least-well-off their meager gains, which would otherwise be stripped from them by the powerful). Yet Burke saw that the right to, and defense of, property was a double-edged sword. It was in a measure sacred, but not from empty piety: property rights were the necessary means for promoting the *salus populi* in a world of moveable goods and vulnerable bodies. But if the power charged with upholding the sanctity of property failed to do so, it risked becoming forfeit. In the case of India, British rule at times so manifestly failed to uphold the *salus populi* that any claim of a duty of obligation on behalf of inhabitants of the subcontinent was void. "On Burke's scheme, not only was the use of arbitrary power a criminal enterprise, but enduring it

was equally nefarious. Power of this kind had to be resisted, and only "absolute impotence" could justify the failure to rise against it."[25] Such was the situation of the Indians during the worst excesses of imperial exploitation. But what of the Americans, and later the French?

V

As Bourke makes clear, Burke's attitude towards the American colonists was never one of simple approval. He identified their legacy as that of "unmanageable" seventeenth-century religious dissent, with "rustick" ideas of politics "founded on the primitive ideals of liberty celebrated by the canon of radical Whig polemicists."[26] The prevailing political attitudes amongst the Americans were democratic and republican, and their colonial assemblies were especially influenced by the whims of popular sentiment. When dispute with the British Parliament over taxation and trade monopolies first arose, there was a great deal of unreasonable political sentiment—and confused ideology—underpinning American grievances. The language of the rights of man in particular undergirded claims for American political entitlement that Burke regarded as not only deeply confused but disruptive of the complex balance of power that must exist in an empire separated by three thousand miles of sea, wherein a sovereign crown-in-parliament in the imperial seat had to relate to distant provincial assemblies, whose peculiarity and truculence were not even easily understood, let alone managed.

Yet American grievances were not spurious. Certainly, self-interested political operators in the colonies manipulated popular sentiment to their own advantage. Yet as Bromwich summarises, for Burke:

> A society at peace is defended by a stability that is not fragile. People live their lives from habit; it does not occur to them to change things much. So when we see them stirred by deep dissatisfaction, it is a fair inference that something has gone badly wrong in the society. Lawyers, merchants, and pamphleteers may foment violence from ambition, but the people are not liable to be easily turned, and before they revolt they must be brought close to despair.[27]

What brought the colonists from dissatisfaction to despair, and then full-blown rebellion, was the intransigent policy of the British. Rather than engaging the demands of the Americans as claims made by members of the imperial settlement, whose interests needed to be fairly represented and thereby taken properly into consideration, they were met with immediate hostility and threatened with outright military subjugation if they refused to acquiesce unconditionally. Yet Crown policy thereby failed to understand that sovereignty in America

extended only as far as opinion supported it. Alienating opinion would make de jure authority meaningless de facto—which is exactly what Britain's haughty and aggressive response achieved. Having lost the opinion of the Americans, Parliament then undertook measures that were expressly repressive in nature. But this in turn "implied a dissolution of government; it entailed a withdrawal of protection, and consequently a release from the duty of obedience."[28]

What started out as little more than an "idle quarrel" was pushed into a case of legitimate resistance when the Americans were given no option but to defend themselves by force of arms.[29] Things only got worse when the mounting popular spirit of domination in Britain fuelled ever more bellicose and intransigent policy, such that no terms with the rebels were countenanced unless total supplication was offered beforehand—a condition perceived as suicidal by the Americans. Even when the balance of war had decisively turned, with France's entry confirming the impossibility of British victory, domestic attitudes remained belligerently unwilling to brook compromise. Burke by contrast suggested that the only option for salvaging the situation, from the British perspective at least, was a federated empire. The state of opinion in America by this stage entailed the effective independence of that nation, and it could remain politically associated with the metropole only if the latter directly covenanted with the people of the former. The assignment of sovereignty—based on the reality of de facto authority, not empty de jure statute—would have to reflect the fact that opinion had been irreversibly reconfigured. Until the end, Burke hoped for the maintenance of a North Atlantic British political settlement. Instead, the Empire in the west was lost.

Consistently underpinning Burke's qualified and evolving support for the American revolution was his Humean view that all authority depends upon opinion, and that when trying to settle real crises, abstract theories of politics are at best useless, and at worse positively dangerous. As Bourke makes explicit: "Twelve and a half years before the publication of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in the midst of his defence of the American Revolution, and in the context of a bid for reconstituting the Empire on the basis of a new covenant for the distribution of its powers, Burke was trying to expose purely speculative theories of government and the abstract conception of freedom that accompanied them."[30] Repressive implementation of the policy of "equal" taxation on the decidedly unequal circumstances of the Americans saw the colonists mobilize claims for liberty in response, with the new and powerful rhetoric of the rights of man used to undercut the claims of established constitutional rule.

The Americans, however, were fortunate. Having cast out the perceived external cause of their woes, they settled down to institute forms of

government that took a less doctrinally pure, more pragmatically workable attitude, than earlier rhetoric had indicated, and the leveling impulse in the doctrine of the rights of man was contained by subsuming it into a properly constitutional settlement of regular political procedure (helped in no small measure by the early victories of the Federalist cause). After independence, the new American state proved one that could be worked with. From the British side, it was prudent and proper to "politically accommodate rather than condemn existing tendencies in the colonies. In the aftermath of 1789, Burke's point was that American goals could be practically and morally accommodated. The French Revolution, by comparison, was an abomination."[31]

VI

What separated the American and French cases was that whilst in the former force of arms had been legitimately resorted to in self-defense, the "situation in France . . . could scarcely justify resort to violence, still less an attempt upon the pillars of established government."[32] Burke had no doubt that the French *ancien regime* was a "gilded tyranny," in which legitimate and severe grievances existed.[33] Nonetheless the "French Revolution had begun not as a rebellion against an oppressive monarch but as a willful campaign on the part of a faction to usurp the constitution of the state."[34] It was not an uprising of the people in defense of the *salus populi*, but a power-grab by ambitious provincial legates and lawyers, themselves cripplingly inexperienced in grand affairs of state, wholly unfitted to hold the reins of national power. In a sense, therefore, the revolution "had its origins in a bid for domestic conquest."[35]

In time this spirit of conquest would turn outwards, wreaking havoc by eliminating the delicate European balance of power. This balance had been instituted after the last continent-wide conflict, a concerted effort by the states of Europe to contain Louis XIV's bid for universal kingship. This specter the Revolution now ushered back onto the world stage. Burke would eventually claim that the only solution to this international crisis was the total elimination of the French disease, via invasion and conquest. This was a grim, but to Burke a necessary, response to an ideological-military republican expansionism that had was congenitally incapable of respecting national borders, or the safe limits of international power politics. Such was the true legacy of the rights of man: domestic anarchy to be (eventually) quelled only by military subjugation, exporting its bulimic energies in the form of ceaseless international bellicosity.

The revolutionaries initially gained the upper hand in France by unleashing a grasping malevolence disguised as "a show of public virtue." They did so duplicitously: "Speciousness was at the heart of proceedings: actions were

legitimized in the name of justice, yet self-advancement was their underlying object; equality was advertised as their ultimate goal, yet their real aim was to level all distinctions." The intrinsic advantage of republican insurgency was that it flattered (as Burke saw it) people's natural inclinations, "namely, the feeling of desert, underlying claims of merit, driven by the passion for self-regard." The demand for social and economic equality was driven by "the passion for primitive justice" which "entailed extinguishing privilege, or at least those privileges that adversely affected one's own standing."[36] Once such demands were fully unleashed, however, they proved uncontrollable. The Bourbon monarchy might well have been a gilded tyranny, but at base it nonetheless provided for the *salus populi*, and was owed corresponding levels of obedience. This meant maintaining reverence for existing political institutions, themselves the necessary means of upholding civil society, which as a complex form of human association necessarily exhibited an extensive distinction of ranks. Yet in France civil society "had fulfilled its trust only to be treated with contempt."[37] When unleashed this contempt could brook no check upon the spirit of leveling. The institutions of political order were deemed illegitimate insofar as they were presumed to be an affront to the rights of man, and were to be torn down accordingly. Living individuals perceived as standing in the way were to be dealt with likewise. Although democracy appeared to be the natural form of government for a politics of equality, in reality it degenerated into anarchy underpinned by the violence of the mob. "In form, the French had resolved to erect a constitutional democracy; but the edifice was exposed to anarchic dictation from the populace."[38]

Burke's most famous work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, was simultaneously an indictment of events in France and a defense of the British constitutional settlement, issued in reply to radicals at home who looked to revolutionary events as offering a programme to be emulated. Burke saw sympathy with the Revolution for what it was: ideologically driven delusion that mistook the rhetoric of egalitarian emancipation for reality, when what was actually being unleashed was violent despotism from below. Burke had no objection to individuals having rights, but he insisted that such things could only be coherently understood in terms established by legal and constitutional orders. What they certainly should not be understood as was metaphysical trumps used to invalidate proven and durable systems of government in the name of self-destructive leveling.

When the revolutionaries attacked the property of the established French church, Burke rallied to its defense not from some empty reverence for "tradition"—as the "conservative" misreading of his thought has long claimed—but because he saw this as an attack on the necessary foundation of any civil government that could fulfill its primary role as the vehicle for collective

survival. Likewise, his notoriously effusive description of the humiliation of Marie Antoinette at the hands of the Paris mob was not (as is frequently supposed) a piece of sniveling deference to class superiority, but an attempt to illustrate to his readers how the noble rhetoric of the rights of man in practice unleashed a vicious ugliness that would culminate in a contempt not just for the dignity of the monarch, but her very life and limb—and in turn, everybody else's.[39] Burke's innovative claim that the true social contract was not a compact between individual bearers of rights to lay down conditions under which they could "choose" governments for themselves, but an inheritance and a trust between the living and the dead—a "great primaeval contract"—reflected his sensitivity to the fragility of government, and the permanent potential for human associations to eat themselves alive.[40] In other words, Burke saw clearly and from the start that the Terror of 1793 was not an unfortunate deviation from the true principles of the revolution, but their highly probable end-point.

In turn, and as Bourke emphasises, it is a categorical error to read the *Reflections* as a reactionary counter-Enlightenment tract bemoaning the emergence of a new era of justice and equality, penned by a partisan of privilege and undergirded by superstitious reverence for empty tradition. On the contrary, "the *Reflections* is largely an enlightened assault on the pretensions of self-appointed representatives of enlightenment whose doctrines promised to over-throw what they hoped to realise."[41] Burke's British targets—the complacent Radical dissenting polemicists Richard Price and Joseph Priestley, and later key members of the Whig party such as his soon-to-be-estranged friend Charles James Fox—not only sought to legitimate the new French antithesis of free government, they proposed to export the disease back across the channel. "True enlightenment" for Burke "involved combatting false prophets of enlightenment. The *Reflections* . . . was Burke's response to what he saw as the specious illumination of fanatics."[42]

VII

It is the great achievement of Bourke's *Empire and Revolution* to make these matters plain in ways that they have not been before. No serious interpretation of Burke's political thought can now operate under the old complacencies. In that regard, Bourke's is a magnificent achievement of intellectual biography, philosophical reconstruction, and historical revision. But it carries political-theoretic ramifications also.

An implicit consequence of Bourke's recovery is that if we wish to look to the late eighteenth century for guidance on how to think politically, we will do far better to look to Burke than to his contemporary, Immanuel Kant.

Unlike Burke, Kant was a sympathetic admirer of the revolutionary upheaval in France, in private correspondence welcoming its arrival and celebrating its purported achievements. Yet when it came to thinking about revolutions philosophically Kant fell back to a (mildly ameliorated) Hobbesianism that decreed the illegitimacy of all rights of resistance, closing down the theoretic analysis of the limits of sovereign power beyond the right to remonstrate in word (but never in deed).[43] Whilst his belief in a divinely ordained teleology allowed him to welcome what he saw as a staging post in the upward march of history, Kant's juridical a priori theorizing in politics foreclosed its serious consideration through a theoretical lens. The implication of Bourke's reading is that Kant's inheritance of the Hobbesian idiom of sovereignty is otiose and empty vis-à-vis Burke's. The Humean idiom of opinion emerges as the more dynamic, subtle, and insightful philosophical approach, one easily and fittingly bolstered by the lessons of real history, yielding superior insights for understanding the dynamics of politics, most especially at times of crisis.

More recently, Kant's legacy in the modern Anglophone academy has undergone a strange twist. The master's categorical ban upon the straightforward application of moral principles to political questions has been almost entirely forgotten, and most contemporary Anglophone political theory (the majority of which is implicitly or explicitly Kantian) proceeds as though politics is at most about information and co-ordination problems, with the real philosophical action being on how to determine the prior moral values or constraints which it is the role of politics to implement, or else be systematically regulated by. Against this, Burke stands as a reminder that politics can never be simply that. That if we want to do *political* theory, we had better realize, first, that important (because politically divisive) moral principles can never be meaningfully agreed upon prior to the real practices of politics, precisely because it is through politics that meaningful moral disagreement gets resolved. No amount of sincere assurance that one has the *right* moral values will cut ice with those who see it differently. But second, and more disturbingly, it is sometimes precisely abstract moral principles themselves, when conceived outside of a careful analysis of how they will manifest and metastasize in practice, that are capable of generating some of the greatest harms that humans are capable of—as the French Revolution ought to remind us still.

Which brings us back to the question: on which side of history do we stand? The French Revolution exists in popular imagination as the moment in which a modern politics of equality and liberty (we hear less these days of fraternity) emerged to overthrow the *ancien régime* tyranny of privilege and oppression. The Revolution is still widely regarded as a watershed of human progress: the foundational moment the rights of man were finally backed up

with political force, empowered to begin the emancipation of the species. It is a nice tale: human society as upwardly progressive, via the instantiation of simple egalitarian principles self-evident to all rational creatures, that in time ushered in the democratic freedoms we now cannot conceive legitimate politics as operating without.

But can we honestly believe in any of it? Whilst Kant had a divinely ordained teleology to underpin his commitment to inevitable human progress, a disenchanted secular world view supports nothing of the kind. As for the actual facts of the French Revolution, those are on Burke's side: it was a tumult of enthusiastic carnage that ended in internal ideological genocide, military dictatorship, and continent-wide devastation. Bourke's recovery of Burke ought properly to make us reconsider where the French Revolution stands in the legacy of human "progress," coming to view it for what it was: a humanitarian calamity. If we don't, we have to ask: why not? The answer, it may turn out, is that we are apt to be beholden to the very varieties of political enthusiasm and wishful thinking that Burke diagnosed as being so spectacularly combustible that they could explode the very foundations of civil society. We may like to think that we are a long way from 1789. Yet has the opinion of mankind really changed so drastically, or have we simply enjoyed a long run of good fortune? The evident parochialism of that question is revealing. Bourke, like Burke, demands that we stop being so relentlessly complacent in our assumptions—or else the price we pay may be great.

Notes

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 210.
2. Emily Jones, "Conservatism, Edmund Burke, and the Invention of a Political Tradition, c. 1885-1914," *Historical Journal* 58 (2015).
3. For the promises but especially pitfalls of doing this, see Christopher J. Berry, "Science and Superstition: Hume and Conservatism," *European Journal of Political Theory* 10 (2011).
4. David Hume, "Of the First Principles of Government," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985), 32. For discussion of Hume's political theory of opinion, see Sagar, Paul. "The State Without Sovereignty: Authority and Obligation in Hume's Political Philosophy," *History of Political Thought* 37 (2016): 271-305.
5. David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2014), 150–51.
6. Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 489.
7. In Bromwich's case, this is more by implication than argued explicitly, as this first volume of two runs only until the early 1780s. The second installment will

take the story up until Burke's death in 1797, thereby encompassing his major engagement with Indian affairs and the French Revolution directly.

8. Quoted in Burke, *Empire and Revolution*, 515.
9. On Bourke's own self-identification as operating between reductive political histories that remove the intellectual bent of Burke's interventions, and distorting histories of ideas and political theoretic treatments that misleadingly render Burke an academic philosopher, see *Empire and Revolution*, 223-5.
10. Hume, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," in *Essays*. On Burke's early attitudes towards enthusiasm, see especially Ross Carroll, "Revisiting Burke's Critique of Enthusiasm," *History of Political Thought* 35 (2014).
11. Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 736.
12. Bromwich, *Intellectual Life*, 258.
13. On this score, see especially Jonathan Green, "Occupy Edmund Burke," in *The American Conservative*, http://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/occupy-edmund-burke/.
14. Bromwich, *Intellectual Life*, 260.
15. Fortunately for Burke, he was returned to Parliament the same year as the member for Malton, on the Rockingham Whig interest, i.e., in a pocket borough, rather than in a more prestigious, contested seat.
16. Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 388.
17. Ibid., 389–90.
18. Ibid., 388.
19. Ibid., 653.
20. Ibid., 11.
21. Ibid., 562.
22. Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Harvard, 2005).
23. Adam Smith, *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 145.
24. For example Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*; Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) and *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain 1750-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
25. Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 669.
26. Ibid., 461.
27. Bromwich, *Intellectual Life*, 305.
28. Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 502–3.
29. Ibid., 513.
30. Ibid., 505.
31. Ibid., 514.
32. Ibid., 678.

33. Ibid., 621.
34. Ibid., 574.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 620.
37. Ibid., 678.
38. Ibid., 610.
39. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. C. D. Clarke (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 231–39; cf. Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 610, 706.
40. Burke, *Reflections*, 261.
41. Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*, 688.
42. Ibid., 700.
43. Immanuel Kant, "On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice," and "The Metaphysics of Morals," in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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