

Reflections on the Revolution in France

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Conservatism is resistance to change. By this definition, the actual political values held by conservatives can differ widely. A conservative of the former Soviet Union differs markedly, if not necessarily temperamentally, from a conservative Southerner in the States. Conservatism has a bad press. It conjures up obstinate obstruction to progress, timidity in imagination as well as in action, and a sentimental servility in the face of established authority. In many ways of life such censures are more than justified, but are they necessarily justified in the political sphere? With the conventional arrangement of political opinion into the furrow of a 1-dimensional spectrum, there is a tacit gradient of morality, with darkness lurking on the right, and with light on the left, appropriating a natural arrow of political movement. Is it possible to find an intellectual legitimacy for political conservatism that can match the inspired defences of the left? Many claim that while the causes of the left are championed by most intellectuals, few if any intellectuals feel incumbent upon themselves to rally to the right. Burke may be one of the few notable exceptions.

I heard about Burke and his censure of the French Revolution as a teenager, and decided that he might be my man, although I never took the trouble to read him. Had I done so then I might have been both delighted and seduced by his arguments as well as bored to tears by their tedium, ending up even more confused than I was before. Still, by osmosis or whatever, I must have absorbed some of his ideas, maybe the most important idea, as I recall once giving a political lecture in highschool, in which I contrasted evolution to revolution. Natural Evolution is indeed a conservative force *par excellence* yet with the possibility of change and reform so necessary, as Burke teaches us, for ultimate preservation.

Burke's Reflections is written in the form of a very long letter¹, thus continuous and unrelenting, without divisions into chapters and sections. Its form is the one of a diatribe, in which he inveighs against the follies, the atrocities, and the sheer cynicism of the French revolution. His arguments are not structured, but well forth like a strident river unstoppably overflowing its beds. This makes for great rhetorics, and the prose of Burke has stood the test of time well, reminiscent in elegance and clarity of those of his 18th century contemporaries Gibbons and Hume. Thus while he may be eminently quotable, it is on the other hand very hard to fether out of all that debris that is deposited at the end of the discourse, what is really interesting and substantial, as opposed to what is merely frivolous, malicious, hyperbolic, incidental and ephemeral or more often than not just plain wrong. His lack of familiarity with French ways earned him much contemporary criticism and as a consequence weakened his case. But such objections do not cut at the heart of his enterprise, because in spite of the title, the main object of Burke is not to critically assess the French Revolution, but to warn against tendencies to import it to England.

¹ It would make up a file of about 600'000 bytes

To the Conservative one can never wish out of existence the baser instincts of Man. They are part of Nature and need to be accounted for and checked against, if anything like a fair and benevolent government will ensue. To Burke there is no such thing as a *tabula erasa* on which we can prescribe what Man should be. This is one of the pillar stones of conservative political faith, and Burke returns over and over again to the complexity of man, and the folly of treating his various manifestations uniformly. Given the inherent difficulties of human nature the creation of a government and its concomitant institutions is an extremely difficult undertaking, beyond the power of any single intellect. In particular it cannot be derived in a mathematical way from a few simple principles and high-flown proclamations like the natural Rights of Man. Burke writes

..because the real effects of moral causes are not always immediate; but that which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation; and its excellence may arise even from the ill effects it produces in the beginning. The reverse also happens; and very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions.

Words that have particular relevance to political schemes of the 20th century. The pragmatic attitude is further emphasized by

Old establishments are tried by their effects. If the people are happy, united, wealthy, and powerful, we presume the rest. We conclude that to be good from whence good is derived. In old establishments various correctives have been found from their aberrations from theory. Indeed they are the results of various necessities and expediencies. They are not often constructed after any theory; theories are rather drawn from them.

laying out the evolutionary development of the creations of institutions. Elsewhere Burke concedes that it takes its time, and cannot be accomplished with the frenzied pace of the work of zealous reformers, but so be it. Time it should take. In fact evolution allows continuous induction unlike revolutions

If possible the next assembly will be worse than the present. The present by destroying and altering every thing, will leave to their successors apparently nothing popular to do. They will be roused by emulation and example to enterprises the boldest and most absurd. To suppose such an assembly sitting in perfect quietude is ridiculous.

In other words the logical consequence of revolutionary zeal is frivolous inconstancy, once again in the words of Burke *They think that government may vary like modes of dress and with as little ill effect.*

Still Burke is not a Tory, he is, surprisingly to late observers like ourselves, a Whig; and he was a champion of the American Revolution. Burke is no bogey-man of the dark, he abhors tyranny in all its forms, and exults the notion of responsible freedom. As an intellectual of the 18th century he is also a child of the Enlightenment, approving of the political theories of a Montesquie, as well as being sceptical about the French Encyclopedists

and hateful of Rosseau². To him the French Revolution was profoundly different from the American, and considering the fact that his pamphlet was written in 1790, well before the actual reign of terror, many of his predictions turn out to have been remarkably prescient.

Burke was no admirer of the French state finding it inferior to the English system; yet he considered it workable as well as reformable and perfectible. The country was populous (proportionally more so than England) and wealthy with an increasing population, which he takes as symptom of it not being so oppressed and in such dire straits as the revolutionaries made it up to be. In fact the state of its finances, which inaugurated the chain of events, was never so calamitous as to warrant such draconic measures as followed.

As to the French revolution he finds faults with everything. First of all the composition of the National Assembly, especially the fact that the third estate was allowed as many delegates (600) as the two privileged together and that voting should be by member and not by estate. In this way the third estate would, with a marginal as well as predictable defection from the first two become the dominant force. To Burke this manifestation of democratic influence, which we cannot but applaud, is specious. He quotes with approval Aristotle remark that democracy has many striking points of resemblance with tyranny, and especially the danger of the majority exercising the most cruel oppression upon the minority. To him the vote and general will of the people is a questionable abstraction, maybe even a fiction, and he is more concerned with the actual composition of the assembly, finding there predominantly a rabble of petty lawyers, professionally primed to prey on the instabilities of property rather than cater to its preservation (incidentally also one of the invariant mainstays of conservative politics). In fact he accuses the assembly to be filled with delegates envious of property and bent on their only means of sharing it, namely through plunder. He adds invective to invective

Already there appears a poverty of conception, a coarseness and vulgarity in all the proceedings of the assembly and its instructors. Their liberty is not liberal. Their science is presumptuous ignorance. Their humanity is savage and brutal.

The worst of it is, that this their despair of curing common distempers by regular methods, arises not only from defect of comprehension, but, I fear, from some malignity of disposition

Yet refuses to go into particulars, except as to one fundamental measure particular obnoxious to his political sensibilities. The first act of the National Assembly was confiscation of Church property, which he finds amoral, and the creations of so called *assignats*³ and an economy based on paper-money, which he finds a folly⁴. To a Conservative like

² But points out that even Rosseau if alive would be horrified at the conclusions his influence has brought

³ a kind of formal security, the details of which I remain in ignorance

⁴ He compares the French circulation of paper-money infavourably to that of the English, implicitly implying a mindless imitation on the part of the former. In England paper-money was an option, backed by cash, and at every moment potentially convertible to such upon demand; while in France their value was not by choice but by force. In England paper-money greatly eased circulation and thus encouraged trade, but should be seen as a manifestation of wealth, not as a basis for it.

Burke the competence and responsibility of a delegate is more important than his status as a representative. It could be worth quoting him in full.

But when leaders chose themselves to be bidders at an auction of popularity,...They will become flatterers instead of legislators; the instruments not the guides to people. If any of them should happen to propose a scheme of liberty, soberly limited, and defined with proper qualifications, he will be immediately outbid by his competitors, who will produce something more splendidly popular. Suspicion will be raised of his fidelity to his cause. Moderation will be stigmatized as the virtue of cowards; and compromise as the prudence of traitors; until... the popular leader is obliged to become active in propagating doctrines, and establishing powers, that will afterwards defeat any sober purpose at which he ultimately might have aimed.

Thus any true Conservative is suspicious of general plebiscite and the dangers of a concomitant populism, and thus often exhibits a sentimental regard for the traditionally privileged and the distinction leisure and the responsibility for property may endow them with. This concern is of course by no means limited to the right if not often so explicitly voiced. Thus the prevalent concern of today of rising the level of education generally in the hopes of attaining a wide level of uniform competence. This vision presents problems of its own, at the time of Burke, well beyond his horizon.

The legitimacy of power is a crucial problem in any political philosophy, as well as is its constriction. In the case of a constitutional Monarchy, like that of England's, the legitimacy was supposed to ultimately rest on a popular election, then propagated by a convention of inheritance. Burke points out the simplicity of this view, and also that it does not strictly hold in the case of England, pointing out one exception. But to a conservative, any exception should not be confused by principle, (thus confirming the rule rather than invalidating it) and no principle is rigid enough not to allow a slight bending brought out by pragmatic necessity. To the ultimate question Burke wisely does not address himself, as it logically involves an infinite regress. Burke instead defends the system of the British monarchy, with some real power vested in the King, but with sufficient checks against absolutism. His heart bleeds for the simple-minded Louis XVI⁵ (as of the writing not yet guillotined) divested of all his powers, becoming reduced to a mere executioner of orders. With such a pitiful spectacle of a head of state, who can seriously believe that say an army can be held in abeyance by referring to such hollow authority. Here Burke touches on a crucial element of conservative political thinking, namely a distinction between proximate causes and ultimate, the former being illustrated by the formalia of power, the latter by basic human drives⁶. Thus the removal of proximate causes only entail a changing of names. Do away with the King, and the King will appear under another designation. Burke voiced concern about the French army, fearing that it might change from an instrument of the

⁵ His sentimental eulogy on Marie-Antoinette, is not only embarrassing to read, but also insincere, as Burke in private letters expressed far more critical opinions on her.

⁶ To the latter he counts pride, ambition, avarice, revenge, lust, sedition, hypocrosy, ungoverned zeal and other disorderly appetites. To the former he refers to religion, morals, laws, prerogatives, privileges, liberties, rights of men, and refers to them as pretexts.

state to a becoming a deliberative body acting on its own resolutions, in particular warning for a military democracy, a species of political monster, he asserts has always ended up devouring those who have produced it. The rise of Napoleon a decade later can be seen as a confirmation of his apprehensions.

Burke continues with discussing the French Revolution from every possible angle. He deplores the abolition of the independant parliaments, the degradation of the judicial system, satirizes the geometrical and arithmetical principles on which representation are based, in particular the folly of trying to make departments of uniform geometrical shape (squares of prescribed area). He puts in opposition the solidity of landed wealth to monied, and thus presents his partiality for the feudal system as opposed to the capitalistic, which clearly is a temporal as opposed to invariant aspect of conservatism. And he spends a lot of space on criticising the economical and fiscal policies of the revolutionaries. As a conservative he puts great stock at law and order and the stability without which any trade and subsequent wealth would be an impossibility. In particular he notes that the revenues of the French state declined by a third after the revolution, remarking that this is far more than any kind of regular incompetence and folly as well as rampant corruption would have been able to cause. Also he points out glaring inconsistencies to their high-flown principles. Their dealings with their colonies for one thing, in particular their preservation of slavery, already being abolished in Britain. He notes

[They] lay down metaphysic propositions which infer universal consequences and then [they] attempt to limit logic by depotism.

Tedious as his repeated invectives may appear to the reader, he scores many points, making predictions of greater relevance to the future (especially the 20th century as noted above) than to his immediate successors. His greatest intellectual service as a conservative is to point out inconsistencies as well as hypocrosies in the revolutionary mood. To hint at possible unwanted ramifications, and to reveal ironically similarities between what is abolished and its replacements. While Machiavelli can be seen as a text-book on the cynical practice of 'realpolitik', Burke can be seen as a cautionary tale about the fallacies and hypocrosy of political rhetorics and its ineffectuality. Thus the conservative mood supplies an antidote to unconstrained experimentation. Not a very glorious part, maybe but a necessary and inevitable, and as such indispensable and honorable, as long as it does not itself fall prey to the remptations of populism, in which it degenerates into yet another kind of fascism. In fact Burke concludes by likening himself to a man, who

..when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails, may be endangered by overloading it upon one side, is desirious of carrying the small weight of his reasons to that which may perserve its equipoise.