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Reflections on Burke

The swing to the left of what is now generally called Liberal politics was of course made evident to Edmund Burke by the emergence of the New Whigs at the end of the eighteenth century, and his *Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* is an attempt to stem the movement and to reaffirm the principles of 1688. A life-long Whig, he found himself in 1791 "at issue with the party, before the present, and if ever he can reach it, before the coming generation." Much of the *Appeal*, like much of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* which precipitated the split with the party, is shrewdly prophetic of future developments in politics of the Left, and however dismayed Burke might be by a contemplation of present-day radicalism, he would hardly be surprised. He would however be surprised to find himself now installed in some quarters as the father of modern Conservatism. Once he realised how Whiggish modern Conservatism is, he might not be entirely dismayed, but would be perhaps aware with some bitterness of the irony of history which first turns his party against him and then thrusts him among the Tories.

The irony would not matter so much if the present age were one in which politics did not matter so much. As it is, once Burke is labelled a Tory, he acquires the *odium theologicum* of the dominant Left, and his works are committed to the tacit *Index* of books unsuitable for reading by the orthodox—by what one might call right-thinking Leftists. At the end of his *Reflections*, Burke described himself as "one, almost the whole of whose public exertion has been a struggle for the liberty of others; ... one in whose breast no anger durable or vehement has ever been kindled, but by what he considered as tyranny." His record goes far towards justifying this claim. Consider his efforts on behalf of the Irish. On one occasion he went to the length of quarrelling with his own Bristol constituents over Irish trade. The Bristol merchants wished to retain every oppressive restraint on Irish manufactures and commerce, hoping to benefit by Ireland's ruin. Burke argued that the

sensations. All motives are reducible to the seeking of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Government is simply a mechanism to procure a harmony of interests (seen as simple economic interests) between individuals or groups of individuals.

This whole tendency of thought, the simplistic reductionism denoted by the "nothing but", is precisely what Burke objected to. He recognizes that man is a complex creature, swayed by complex motives, partly by reason, more by emotions and appetites, largely by a whole congeries of habits, customs, beliefs, and prejudices. This creature engages in a complex variety of activities, physical, mental, spiritual, economic, political, religious, cultural, social, recreational; he pursues a correspondingly great variety of ends, recognizing a great variety of values. To Burke it is obvious that any system of thought which treats such a complex organism as man and such complex problems as arise from his nature with the abstract simplicity of mathematics or mechanics is bound to be delusive. Hence his comment on the French projectors:

They have much, but bad, metaphysics; much, but bad, geometry; much, but false, proportionate arithmetic; but if it were all as exact as metaphysics, geometry, and arithmetic ought to be, and if their schemes were perfectly consistent in all their parts, it would make only a more fair and sightly vision. It is remarkable, that, in a great arrangement of mankind, not one reference whatsoever is to be found to anything moral or anything politic; nothing that relates to the concerns, the actions, the passions, the interests of men. *Hominem non sapiunt.*

Earlier in his career, in his great speech on conciliation with the Americans, Burke had spoken in similar terms of "this species of delusive geometrical accuracy in moral arguments" as "the most fallacious of all sophistry," citing as an authority Aristotle, "the great master of reasoning."

Elsewhere he argues: "The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught *a priori*.... The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and therefore no simple disposition or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature, or to the quality of his affairs." Nor is the nature of society simple. The problem of organization would be difficult enough if society *were* simply an aggregate of atoms, a loose assemblage of complex individuals. But it is much more; it is a complex organism in itself. It is, as Maritain has put it, "a whole made up of wholes.... It has its own good and its own work which are distinct from the good and the work of the individuals which constitute it. But this good and this work are and must be essentially *human*, and consequently become

perversed if they do not contribute to the development and improvement of human persons....”

Maritain's words present the essence of Burke's attitude, which rejects social atomism on the one hand and statism on the other; which recognizes that society and the individual have separate but not conflicting aims, that these aims are complex and by no means all material, and which holds to the conviction that full human individual values are only realisable in society. For Burke, civil society, being necessary to the fulfilment of man's nature, is part of that nature. He rejects Hobbist doctrines of a "natural man" antecedent to society, and in fact all theories of "social contract", which inevitably separate man and society into two negotiating parties, sacrificing "natural rights" for the sake of security. For one thing, the "contract" is an abstraction and a myth, as are the "natural" absolute rights. Man is born into a society, and by being born into it acquires duties and responsibilities which are not voluntary matters of choice, but arise of necessity out of the relations between man and man, between man and society, between man and God.

Another aspect of Burke's view of society, the "organic" view, is that a society, like an organism, exists in time, in a present moment linked to both past and future: society is "a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection." It is what we would now perhaps call a culture. Since the aims of a society cannot be achieved in many generations, it becomes "a partnership not only between those who are living" (who of course themselves represent several generations), "but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." Like Tennyson's Camelot, a society is always building, never fully built.

Change is as natural and as essential to a society as to a growing organism. "A nation," says Burke, "is not an idea only of local extent and individual momentary aggregation, but... an idea of continuity which extends in time as well as in numbers and in space.... It is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions, and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time. It is a vestment which accommodates itself to the body."

The individuals, the wholes who make up the larger whole of a society, are, like the molecules of an organism, in a constant flux of coming and going, of birth and death. The detailed composition is never the same from one moment to the next. A human society will contain a mixture of generations from the newly born to their grandfathers or great-grandfathers; the infants are more intimately linked to the future, the aged to the past. All are linked to each other by a

complex web of relations of multifarious kinds, physical, familial, social, commercial, spiritual, cultural—many of them conscious and many unconscious, habitual. These relations extend in space and in time throughout the society; they are the context into which every member of the society has been born and into which new members are constantly being born. As a consequence, no society can make a complete break with the past; no reformers can wipe the slate clean and on the *tabula rasa* write what they will. Burke does not say simply that you *ought* not to break with the past; he is saying that you *cannot* without destroying the foundations you need for your new society. (It is interesting that this is the conclusion to which the anarchist William Godwin was to come through his close study of Cromwell's interregnum. Cromwell failed because he had destroyed all the structure and relations on which the legitimacy and acceptability of his new régime depended.) Society, if its traditional patterns of behaviour are destroyed by a drastic revolution—and familiar links of obedience and respect for law are broken—must face a period of chaos or of simple rule by force until some connection with its past is re-established.

Along with this principle of continuity, however, goes another principle of growth and change. "A state without the means of change is without the means of its conservation," says Burke, "... We must all obey the great law of change. It is the most powerful law of nature, and the means perhaps of its conservation." He himself had been a constant advocate of change: "almost every business in which he was much concerned... was a business of reformation; and when he had not been employed in correcting, he had been employed in resisting abuses." We ought to "improve with zeal, but with fear," we should have "a disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve." "Our political system," he writes, "is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein... the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young.... By preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve, we are never wholly new; in what we retain, we are never wholly obsolete."

Burke is very conscious that "rage and frenzy will pull down more in half an hour than prudence, deliberation, and foresight can build up in a hundred years." He knows, too, that destruction is easier and simpler than carefully studied improvement: "The errors and defects of old establishments are visible and palpable. It calls for little ability to point them out; and, where absolute power is given, it requires but a word wholly to abolish the vice and the establishment together.... To make everything the reverse of what they have seen is quite as easy as to destroy. No difficulties occur in what has never been tried." He himself,

with his long experience of politics, his immense gift of analysis of situations, motives, problems, and possibilities, with his insistence at every point on the need to ask what ends are to be sought, to distinguish ends from means and means from ends, and with his close understanding of large areas of human history, offers on almost every page — certainly in his major works—gems of thoughtful advice to any who wish to contemplate the political scene with a clear eye.

He also, as an earlier generation fully knew, offers gems of English prose and of Irish wit. Every now and then an idea will touch his fancy, and he will construct a pattern of lively elaboration which conveys a sense of sheer delight in the exercise of wit, at the same time as it impales its subject. His description of the Chatham attempt at a “partyless” ministry in 1768 is a good example, playing on the idea of the *cabinet*:

He made an administration so chequered and speckled; he put together a piece of joinery so crossly indented and whimsically dove-tailed; a cabinet so variously inlaid; such a piece of diversified mosaic; such a tessellated pavement without cement, here a bit of black stone, and there a bit of white; patriots and courtiers; king’s friends and republicans; whigs and tories; treacherous friends and open enemies; that it was indeed a very curious show, but utterly unsafe to touch, and unsure to stand on.

The same sort of wit, but this time touched with a blend of contempt and ferocity, runs through the famous *Letter to a Noble Lord*, which John Morley justly called “the most splendid repartee in the English language.” Burke had retired from Parliament and from public life in 1794. His only son had been elected in his constituency, but died before taking his seat in the House. Burke was offered a peerage, but because of his son’s death, declined it. His great services, for which he had been thanked by a formal motion of the Commons, were then rewarded by a substantial pension. He was then attacked in the House of Lords by the Duke of Bedford, head of the Russell family, and the Earl of Lauderdale. Burke felt that he owed it to those who procured him the pension, and to the King who granted it, to reply to his libellers. It is difficult to quote from his *Letter*: it is such a masterpiece that the whole deserves quoting, and the whole is superbly knit together. Samples will, however, give something of the flavour and texture:

I challenge the Duke of Bedford, as a juror to pass upon the value of my services.... Poor rich man! He can hardly know anything of public industry in its exertions, or can estimate its compensations when its work is done. I have no doubt of his grace’s readiness in all the calculations of vulgar arithmetic; but I shrewdly suspect that he is little studied in the theory of moral proportions; and has never learned the rule of three in the arithmetic of policy and state.... I was not, like his grace of

Bedford, swaddled, and rocked, and dandled into a legislator,... I possessed not one of the qualities, nor cultivated one of the arts that recommend men to the favour and protection of the great. I was not made for a minion or a tool.... At every step of my progress in life (for in every step was I traversed and opposed), and at every turnpike I met, I was obliged to show my passport, and again and again to prove my sole title to the honour of being useful to my country.... Otherwise, no rank, no toleration even, for me....

The Duke of Bedford conceives that he is obliged to call the attention of the House of Peers to his majesty's grant to me, which he considers as excessive and out of all bounds.... The grants to the house of Russell were so enormous, as not only to outrage economy, but even to stagger credulity. The Duke of Bedford is the leviathan among all the creatures of the crown. He tumbles about his unwieldy bulk; he plays and frolics in the ocean of the royal bounty. Huge as he is, and whilst 'he lies floating many a rood,' he is still a creature. His ribs, his fins, his whalebone, his blubber, the very spiracles through which he spouts a torrent of brine against his origin, and covers me all over with the spray, — everything of him and about him is from the throne. Is it for *him* to question the dispensation of the royal favour?

Burke's paraphrase of *Paradise Lost* is a very neat piece of wit, since the original likens Satan to Leviathan, and to the Titan "that warred on Jove", as Satan warred on God. Russell's attack is not only directed against Burke, but against the King — although he owes all that he is to royal bounty. His sin is Satan's.

It would not be gross adulation, but uncivil irony,
continues Burke,

to say that he has any public merit of his own to keep alive the idea of the services by which his vast landed pensions were obtained. My merits, whatever they are, are original and personal; his are derivative.... The first peer of the name, the first purchaser of the grants, was a Mr. Russell, a person of an ancient gentleman's family; raised by being a minion of Henry VIII.... The favourite was in all likelihood much such another as his master. The first of these immoderate grants was not taken from the ancient demesne of the crown, but from the recent confiscation of the ancient nobility of the land. The lion having sucked the blood of his prey, threw the offal carcase to the jackal in waiting.... The second [grant], infinitely improving on the enormity of the first, was from the plunder of the church. In truth his grace is somewhat excusable for his dislike to a grant like mine, not only in its quantity, but in its kind so different from his own. Mine was from a mild and benevolent sovereign; his from Henry VIII. Mine had not its fund in the murder of any innocent person of illustrious rank, or in the pillage of any body of unoffending men.

The young Duke of Bedford has become a leader of the new Whigs, the radicals who supported the French Revolution despite the Reign of Terror. Burke warns him of the nature of revolution:

If a great storm blow on our coast, it will cast the whales on the strand as well as the periwinkles."

He offers him 'a friendly admonition:' the

cannibal philosophers of France... are a misallied and disparaged branch of the house of Nimrod. They are the Duke of Bedford's natural hunters; and he is their natural game.... The men of property in France... were found in such a situation as the Mexicans were, when they were attacked by the dogs, the cavalry, the iron, and the gunpowder, of a handful of bearded men, whom they did not know to exist in nature.... The persons who have suffered from the cannibal philosophy of France are so like the Duke of Bedford, that nothing but his grace's probably not speaking quite so good French could enable us to find out any difference. A great many of them had as pompous titles as he, and were of full as illustrious a race; some few of them had fortunes as ample; several of them... were as wise, and as virtuous, and as valiant, and as well educated, and as complete in all the lineaments of men of honour, as he is.... But security was their ruin. They are dashed to pieces in the storm, and our shores are covered with the wrecks. If they had been aware that such a thing might happen, such a thing never could have happened.... These philosophers consider men in their experiments no more than they do mice in an air-pump, or in a recipient of mephitic gas. Whatever his grace may think of himself, they look upon him, and everything that belongs to him, with no more regard than they do upon the whiskers of that little long-tailed animal, that has been long the game of the grave, demure, insidious, spring-tailed, velvet-pawed, green-eyed philosophers, whether going upon two legs, or upon four.

Apart from the wit that displays an agile and exuberant fancy, Burke also displays copiously the kind of wit that gives condensed, neat, aphoristic form to pieces of wisdom. These abound in his writings:

"The Public must never be regarded as incurable."

"There is a courageous wisdom; there is also a false, reptile prudence, the result not of caution, but of fear."

"The rules of prudence can rarely be exact; never universal."

"Humanly speaking, that people, which bounds its efforts only with its being, must give the law to that nation which will not push its opposition beyond its convenience."

He speaks of "those cold, formal, general professions of peace which no power has ever refused to make; because they mean little, and cost nothing."

He warns of an enemy's "old, steady maxim of separating the people from their government," a maxim "they never have abandoned, and never will... abandon, in peace, in war, in treaty, in any situation, or for one instant."

Again, "Patience, indeed, strongly indicates the love of peace; but mere love does not always lead to enjoyment."

"I am most afraid of the weakest reasonings; because they discover the strongest passions."

"I must fairly say, I dread our *own* power, and our *own* ambition; I dread our being too much dreaded."

One could go on gathering almost endlessly, but this sampling will perhaps serve to suggest the riches of Burke. I cannot however resist the temptation to finish with something of special interest to Canadians. In his *Letter to Sir H. Langrihe, M. P.* on the subject of admitting Irish Catholics to the franchise (1792), Burke counters the common argument (familiar in the Loyal Orange Lodge) that the Irish Catholics would not make loyal citizens. The cause was one on which Burke's mind had, as he says, been fully matured thirty-two years before. Canadians will recognize that the date of this letter is shortly after the Constitution Act had given Canada a new system of government. "I voted last session," writes Burke, "... for an establishment of the Church of England *conjointly* with the establishment which was made some years before by act of parliament, of the Roman Catholic, in the French conquered country of Canada. At the time of making this English ecclesiastical establishment, we did not think it necessary for its safety to destroy the former Gallican Church settlement. In our first act, we settled a government altogether monarchical or nearly so. In that system, the Canadian Catholics were far from being deprived of the advantages or distinctions, of any kind, which they enjoyed under their former monarchy. It is true, that some people... predicted at that time, that by this step we should lose our dominions in America. [One eminent divine] foretold that the Pope would send his indulgences hither; that the Canadians would fall in with France; would declare independence, and draw or force our colonies into the same design. The independence happened according to his prediction; but in directly the reverse order. All our English Protestant countries revolted. They joined themselves to France; and it so happened that popish Canada was the only place which preserved its fidelity; the only place in which France got no footing; the only peopled colony which now remains to Great Britain.... I will not allow that any French Canadian Catholics are better men or better citizens than the Irish of the same communion." Parliament did not concur in Burke's opinion, showing once again the accuracy of his final comment in the *Letter*:

"It is a thing humiliating enough, that we are doubtful of the effect of the medicines we compound. We are sure of our poisons."