



Daniel I. O'Neill. *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. 291 S. ISBN 978-0-271-03486-7.

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D. I. O'Neill: The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate

Conceptions of canonical texts often become dislodged from the contexts in which the works were developed, and can be interpreted singularly, separated from other texts by the same author. This has occurred in some circles with the work of Mary Wollstonecraft and Edmund Burke, often represented as the respective founders of modern feminism and conservatism. In presenting a writer as the beginning of something, as the mother or father, we risk ignoring the intellectual legacies they inherited. It is this that Daniel O'Neill sets out to combat in his study of the debate between Burke and Wollstonecraft over the meaning and consequences of the French Revolution, the foundational event of political modernity (p. 257). O'Neill achieves his goal with a thorough examination of the impact of Scottish Enlightenment moral philosophy and historiography upon both Wollstonecraft and Burke, demonstrating the ways in which their debate was framed around differing interpretations of the civilising process.

O'Neill's aim is to extend our understanding of Burke and Wollstonecraft beyond narrowly focussed analyses. Burke's views on the French Revolution, expressed in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), are placed firmly in the context of his earlier moral philosophy as propounded in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). This moral philosophy is described and analysed in detail by O'Neill in Chapter 2, where he explores Burke's use of, and divergence from, Scottish Enlightenment philosophy. This enables O'Neill, in his exploration

of Burke's views on the French Revolution in Chapters 4 and 6 (where he also considers texts published after *Reflections*), to emphasise the continuing importance of his beliefs in the necessity of the hierarchical rule of the aristocracy and the sublime power of the church in maintaining morality in society and achieving civilisation. It is this belief that guides Burke's contention that the deep democracy – the democratisation of public and private life – seemingly made possible by the French Revolution spelt the end of civilisation itself.

O'Neill also shows the impact of Empire, particularly perceptions of Native American culture, on Burke's work. He illustrates the connections between Burke's description of savagery in his 1757 *Account of the European Settlements in America* (a text produced with his brother William) and his ideas of revolutionary savagery in *Reflections*; like (perceived) Native Americans, the revolutionaries were thought to value liberty and equality above all else, thus causing an absence of civilised virtue. Burke's description of what he sees as Native American female savagery in *Account* found their precise analogue in Burke's description of Parisian ferocity in the *Reflections* (p. 84), Burke even uses the same word in both texts to describe the women, *âfuries*.

Burke and Wollstonecraft's differing opinions as to what constituted civilised womanhood were key to their differing interpretations of the consequences of the French Revolution. Whilst Burke's ideas on hierarchy and beauty led him to consider weak, subservient

femininity to be the ideal civilised womanhood, Wollstonecraft railed against this view. In Chapter 3, O'Neill considers Wollstonecraft's response to Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, emphasising her forceful critique of Scottish Enlightenment ideas of femininity as expressed in her "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" (1792). O'Neill considers the development of this critique through a study of Wollstonecraft's earlier texts, including "*The Female Reader*" (1789). This analysis is continued in Chapter 7 with an examination of the ways in which Wollstonecraft rewrote Scottish Enlightenment historiography in "*An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*" (1794).

O'Neill links Wollstonecraft's rejection of Scottish Enlightenment ideas of female sensibility to her ideas concerning the importance of the cultivation of reason to achieve true virtue, and her argument for a deep democracy that challenged patriarchal authority and hierarchy in the domestic as well as the public sphere. In Chapter 5, O'Neill discusses Wollstonecraft's attacks on Burke's ideas on women and her belief in the great potential of the French Revolution to replace hierarchies with new relationships constructed on the basis of democratic equality. (p. 157) This argument, O'Neill demonstrates, was developed as part of Wollstonecraft's rejection, in "*A Vindication of the Rights of Men*" (1790), of Burke's interpretation of the civilising process, demonstrating the importance of their intellectual debate to the development of their respective theories. Wollstonecraft's rejection of Burke's conception of innate femininity, and her corresponding assertion of the socially constructed nature of femininity, is, O'Neill asserts, something that might well be reckoned as one of the most significant moments in modern feminism. (p. 172)

O'Neill's placement of Burke and Wollstonecraft's political theory in the context of the Scottish Enlightenment is the main aim and achievement of this book. This contextualisation is set up for the reader in the thorough discussion of Scottish moral philosophy and historiography in the first chapter. This discussion will likely prove useful to the reader who is new to Scottish Enlightenment philosophy. For the reader who is reasonably conversant in these ideas, it can become a little laboured and it is hard not to wonder whether some of the material discussed here could have been integrated into the discussions of Burke and Wollstonecraft's ideas in Chapters 2 to 7. This is a criticism that can be levelled at the text

as a whole. Whilst it contains some very interesting information and offers an analysis that develops on work by previous scholars, it is sometimes repetitive and the central arguments are often restated.

A study that places Burke and Wollstonecraft in their eighteenth-century intellectual context is to be welcomed, and O'Neill has certainly succeeded in demonstrating the impact of, and engagement with, Scottish Enlightenment philosophy in their opposing viewpoints. Yet, whilst O'Neill, like others before him, clearly demonstrates the ways in which the Revolution Controversy framed Burke and Wollstonecraft's debate, it is disappointing that there is little here of the broader cultural context and intellectual milieu in which this debate occurred. This context is sometimes briefly included, for instance in O'Neill's interesting discussion in Chapter 7 of Wollstonecraft's presence in Paris during the Terror and her ideas of gradual revolution. However the cultural context is generally lacking. For example, O'Neill's examination of the emphasis placed by both Burke and Wollstonecraft on the political nature of the family and the mutually reinforcing relationship between private and public spheres in Chapters 5 and 6 would have more impact if it was more firmly grounded in its cultural historical context. Instead Burke and Wollstonecraft's respective ideas on the family are presented in a manner largely divorced from the considerable body of literature on the eighteenth-century family, and that on separate spheres ideology.

O'Neill does clearly state in his conclusion that he is dealing with Burke and Wollstonecraft's theoretical imagination of the French Revolution, not what the Revolution actually achieved and he demonstrates the ways in which their interpretations of this event were often informed less by the facts of the event itself and more by hope in the case of Wollstonecraft, and fear in the case of Burke. However, this does not mean that their hopes and fears were not influenced by material events and the culture immediately surrounding them.

Overall, O'Neill's book provides a very detailed discussion of the moral philosophy and political theory of Burke and Wollstonecraft and illuminates the intellectual inheritance that framed their contribution to the Revolution Controversy. Readers wishing to develop their understanding of the writings of Burke and Wollstonecraft will find this book useful and enlightening.

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