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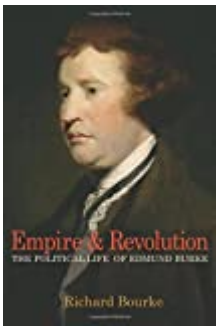

Richard Bourke. *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. 1,032 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-14511-2.

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Edmund Burke has often appeared an enigma to many historians. His lengthy political career and prolific body of work spanned three decades in which he supported the rights of British colonists, spoke out against Anglican bigotry in Ireland, and vehemently denounced the French Revolution. His writings have been interpreted through both a liberal and conservative tradition, at once making him a principled defender of constitutionalism and a reactionary traditionalist and forefather of modern conservativism. In *Empire and Revolution*, Richard Bourke attempts to make sense of these contradictory legacies. In this extensive study of Burkeâs political thought, Bourke sets out to examine the statesman within two contexts: the âmicroscopicâ context of daily politics and the âintellectualâ context of eighteenth-century political philosophy. Over the course of some one thousand pages, Bourke provides a highly detailed analysis of Burkeâs life and intellectual development, chronicling his engagement with the American Revolution, Britainâs growing presence on the Asian subcontinent, Irish religious conflict, and republican revolution in France. It is not simply these large events and subjects that Bourke is concerned with in his book. His study focuses on the dynamics of political debate and rationality that came to guide Burkeâs stances on these various issues. As Bourke observantly notes, for most of his political career, Burke was in opposition. His political thinking needs to be seen in relation to the policies he rejected just as much as what he supported. As he puts it, Burke was an âengaged polemicist,â and it is chiefly by understanding him as such that we might begin to reconsider his place in modern political history (p. 18).

One of the primary issues that *Empire and Revolution* seeks to address is Burkeâs problematic relationship to the Enlightenment and his supposed turn to conservatism in the late eighteenth century. Burke did not owe allegiance to any one particular school of thought over his career and drew on a variety of intellectual traditions. Bourke does a good job of pinning down the specific roots of Burkeâs thinking and the varied influences that wove their way into his arguments. Montesquieu, George Berkeley, and John Locke were all references for Burke, just as were theologians like John Tillotson and Edward Stillingfleet. This mix of natural law theory, empiricism, skepticism, and Anglicanism gave Burkeâs perspectives a distinct character, but it was nonetheless an outlook in line with enlightened liberal thinking in Bourkeâs estimation. Burke himself insisted that he lived in âenlightened times,â a claim embodied in his respect for rational debate and desire to combat âprejudice,â a

theme he closely associated with diminishing the religious divides that pitted Catholics against Anglicans in his native Ireland. He deplored the Protestant Ascendancy and incessantly called for religious tolerance when it came to Irish Catholics, seeing Anglican discrimination as a threat to British society. Bourke depicts these enlightened attitudes from a formative age, citing Burkeâs time at Trinity College, his participation with young Irish literary circles, and his tenure as editor of *The Reformer*, as an important period of cultivation and reflection in the future statesmanâs life.

Yet Burkeâs Enlightenmentâif we may be permitted to use such a phraseâpossessed a unique quality. Burkeâs admiration for natural law encouraged doubts about the effectiveness of natural reason. He favored reason accrued through empirical refinement and accumulated practical intelligence, what he deemed âartificialâ or ârefinedâ reason. It was only through refined reason that wisdom matured and became more perfect through its consistent application and amendment. Burke extended this assessment to his views concerned with English law and the role of custom in modern society. English law had developed through experience and proven convenience, in his opinion. âUniversal customâ arose through a process of experimental adaptation brought to bear on particular circumstances. By its very nature, English law was reasonable and not given to abstract or theoretical speculation. It was in this respect that Burke understood British constitutional liberty and the Anglican religion, seeing them as products of custom and adaptation over time. He rejected the idea of static and traditional Saxon constitutionalism popular among many contemporaries and insisted that religion constituted âthe first opening of civilityâ in any society (p. 181). These broad positions would inform Burkeâs thinking over his lifetime, and throughout his career lead him to shield both constitutionalism and Anglicanism from the attacks of inveterate rationalists.

These considerations provide a framework for the two main themes addressed in the book, namely, empire and revolution. As Bourke argues, Burke was never the archetypical conservative that many would later make him out to be. His ideas on politics remained firmly rooted in liberal notions of constitutionalism and governance. He maintained a distinction between society and government and did not believe that popular sovereignty posed a threat to either in theory. Burke even acknowledged the âright to revolutionâ under the proper circumstances, exhibiting his appreciation for Locke. He also upheld a firm belief that government was to advance the public good while protecting private rights. Britainâs mixed government was the best suited to manage these relations, as it protected the rights of each constituent part of society. For Burke, the âspirit of libertyâ was a world historical phenomenon guiding modern society. It signified the progressive move toward impartial justice, the equitable application of law, and constitutional rule over the despotism and tyranny of the past. This âspirit of libertyâ was contrasted with what Burke labeled the âspirit of conquest,â a term closely associated with the formal practice of empire. The so-called Spanish model of imperialism relied on force, coercion, and domination and was incompatible with modern society as Burke understood it. Burke began his political career as Britainâs empire was expanding, and it was, therefore, inevitable that it would come to play an important role in his polemics. According to Burke, imperialism posed a threat to the âspirit of libertyâ in general and had the potential to alter established constitutional elements within Britain if left unchecked. In this respect, Burke intended to frame a brand of empire that was consistent with liberty, believing it could exercise a civilizing force through good administration and an appreciation for customary arrangements. Indeed, it was on these grounds alone that empire could be justified, a claim that would shape his positions on the American colonies, India, and Ireland over his career.

Burke took his seat in the Commons just as the American crisis broke and would side with the Rockingham party committed to reform and parliamentary prerogative. Evident is the fact that Burke saw the complaints of American colonists as part of a larger threat posed to British constitutionalism by the power of the Crown *tout court.* In attempting to adumbrate a new constitution for the empire, Burke endeavored to limit royal prerogative and support the supreme authority of Parliament. Yet Burke was willing to recognize that this supreme authority was, in fact, theoretical, making a distinction between sovereignty in the abstract and in practice. Empire was not a unitary state structure in Burkeâs estimation, but rather a diversified collection of jurisdictions. His âconciliationâ with the American colonists held out the prospect of allowing for sovereign colonial assemblies in order to effectively realize a constitutional empire. Burke argued that the punitive measures taken against the colonists during the early 1770s violated the rights of Atlantic British subjects and destroyed the principle of equality within the British community. Following the Prohibitory Act, Burke admitted that the colonists had a right to revolution, although he upheld his support for

a mixed government compatible with empire. Burkeâs vision was for a composite parliamentary system that would allow colonists to exercise their sovereignty, and according to Bourke this position was aimed at restoring the proper functions of the British constitution and saving the imperial government from the âspirit of conquest.â

These same concerns were evident in Burkeâs treatment of the East Indian Company between the 1770s and 1790s. The companyâs ability to engage in wars and influence local Indian politics were evidence of the spirit of conquest that Burke believed detrimental to the British polity. Remedying this malfeasance required greater parliamentary oversight of the company in order to prevent British commercial imperialism from degenerating into despotism. Sitting on the parliamentary select committee, Burke resisted efforts to impose English law on natives and protected native property rights against the commercial greed of the company, insisting that these measures were essential to preserving the âancient Establishmentsâ of the Indian people (p. 552). Good administration would eventually lead to native consent, fostering the style of constitutional and enlightened imperialism that Burke favored. Charles James Foxâs India Bill, in line with Burkeâs vision of empire, aimed to restore accountability and law to imperial governance. This view did not profess that the government should be accountable to the Indian âpeopleâ (which Burke believed ill-prepared for self-government) but to a sovereign parliament that would check the despotic influences of company men and, by proxy, the Crown. The later impeachment proceedings against Warren Hastings would mark an effort to secure parliamentary power over Indian affairs and rally the Whigs to a platform of liberal constitutional government against despotism. It was not inconsequential that Hastingsâs trial occurred in the midst of the French Revolution, as Burke began to draw broad parallels between the depraved âIndianismâ infecting British liberty on the subcontinent and the tyrannical âJacobinismâ emanating from across the channel. As Bourke sees it, the two became synonymous, providing Burke with a platform that championed civic freedom and the rule of law over tyranny.

That Burkeâs principled defense of morality and constitutional government vis-Ã -vis India occurred in tandem with the writing of *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790) demonstrates that Burke was hardly an opponent of Enlightenment sensibilities and even willing to speak out against their shortcomings in Asia. According to Bourke, *Reflections*âthe work that would peg Burke as the mouthpiece of European conservatismâneeds to be reconsidered in relation to the other polemical positions that engaged Burke at this time. Indeed, Bourkeâs panoramic view of Burkeâs career during this period sees the statesman embattled in the fight for religious tolerance in Ireland and protesting against injustice in India, offering a convincing context for such a reappraisal. *Reflections* constituted a strong defense of British constitutionalism and existing relations between church and state. On the one hand, it attacked the oppressive principles of the Rights of Man and on the other took aim at Richard Price and vocal nonconformists. Its polemical power sought to discourage fellow Whigs from embracing populism, contrasting enlightened British values with the chaos and despotism of the French Revolution. Contrary to prevailing beliefs, *Reflections* did not simply command reverence for âtradition.â It dwelled on themes of obedience and government protection that Burke believed central to what he called the âgreat primeval contractâ outlining the moral relations between ruler and ruled. Bourke adeptly notes the continuity linking Burkeâs various arguments. Burkeâs conception of natural law had always rested on the belief in promoting progress through restrained manners, religious morality, and reasonable adaptation. The French Revolution rejected all of these. It engendered a brand of radical egalitarianism that usurped the constitution of the state and abolished any concept of social pluralism or mixed government. It was, therefore, contrary to civic freedom, amounting to a form of tyranny that subjected all aspects of society to the rule of âthe peopleâ or âthe commons.â The National Assemblyâs attacks on property and social status negated any sense of civic society. For Burke, the French Revolution characterized the spirit of conquest incarnate.

While Bourkeâs contention that Burke was not reverting to conservatism is justified by his extensive and detailed analysis of *Reflections*, his argument that Burkeâs imputed conservatism has come through a âsimplified picture of the pastâ with regard to the French Revolution tends to overlook a great deal of recent scholarship on the French Revolution (p. 741). The predominant view of the Revolution no longer sees it as the âliberal-democraticâ movement Bourke claims to be challenging. A long tradition of historians from J. L. Talmon to FranÃ§ois Furet have accented the illiberal and âpathologicalâ nature of Franceâs revolutionary democracy, often repeating many of the arguments elaborated by Burke. Given this fact, it is difficult to see how Bourkeâs insistence that reconstructing Burkeâs thought

in such a manner adds anything especially new to this debate. More to the point, it is questionable whether this âsimplifiedâ view has been implicit in sustaining allegations of Burkeâs conservatism over the years.

This limited engagement with historiography is evident in other aspects of *Empire and Revolution* as well. In recent years, Burke has been the subject of a variety of studies linked with empire, some of which have rehabilitated the statesman in certain respects. Uday Mehta, for example, has depicted Burke as a supporter of pluralism against an imperious Enlightenment universalism.[1] Jennifer Pitts has equally noted Burkeâs conflicted relationship with empire, although she draws quite different conclusions than those of Bourke.[2] In a more general sense, postcolonial studies have remarked on the tensions between Enlightenment principles and imperialism in the late eighteenth century, insisting that Burke was hardly alone in attempting to square enlightened values with the realities of conquest and oppression that empire invited.[3] The recent âimperial turnâ seems to be underrepresented in Bourkeâs study despite the fact that both empire and revolution have been consistent themes within a growing body of literature concerned with questions relevant to Enlightenment thought, modern democracy, and the relationship between nation and empire.

Also worthy of note is the way Bourke organizes his study. His book sets out to examine Burkeâs vision of history and politics as they were worked out in response to prevailing issues of the day. It presents a panoramic view of Burkeâs career that often captures the frenzied political debates and shifting positions with which Burke grappled, moving from London to Ireland, the American colonies, India, and France. The events unfold in âreal-time,â reconstructing how Burke addressed major events that often occurred simultaneously. This approach is laudable, although it can at times make it difficult to place the particularities of each situation in their proper context. This organization is, of course, the preference of the author and does offer a very compelling image of a statesman engaged in the leading controversies of his day. Ultimately, Bourke has produced a meticulous study that blends biography with intellectual and political history. It illuminates a consistency at the heart of Burkeâs thinking. Ascendancy, Indianism, and Jacobinism all symbolized modes of misgovernment rooted in the spirt of conquest. They were destructive forces that threatened the survival of the spirit of liberty Burke believed essential to modern society. This argument, which is effectively sustained across the lengthy tome, offers scholars an interesting reappraisal of one of modern historyâs most ambiguous political thinkers.

Notes

[1]. Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 12, 41-42.

[2]. Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Liberal Imperialism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 59-100.

[3]. Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment against Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Anthony Pagden, âThe Effacement of Difference: Colonialism and the Origins of Nationalism in Diderot and Herder,â in *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 129-152.

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