EDMUND BURKE: CONSERVATIVE OR LIBERTARIAN?

Scott Hargreaves asks: was Edmund Burke a lover of liberty, a reactionary or just another politician?
Edmund Burke is known as the father of modern conservatism, but some historians portray him as a fighter for liberty. Others paint the Anglo-Irish philosopher and statesman as a dreadful hypocrite.

As a conservative, Burke stood for the established order, including key roles in both religious establishments and the aristocracy in the government. He was suspicious of measures to further extend the electoral franchise, and was an early vehement opponent of the French Revolution. He favoured the established Church of England and was, albeit quietly, sympathetic to the Catholicism of his forebears.

But in his parliamentary career, Burke was also an acknowledged champion of liberty. He supported trade liberalisation, due process and constitutional protections, while being critical of the overbearing state and its influence. In this guise, he was sympathetic to the grievances of the American colonists and acknowledged their right to revolt, while applauding the work of anti-slavery campaigner William Wilberforce.

The charge of hypocrisy arises from Burke’s different stances towards rebellion against the state at various times. Until the 1780s, he backs liberty and the interests of the people in Britain and America, but when faced with the social collapse and terror that arose with the French Revolution, he defended the established order.

Well-meaning defenders reconcile this seeming inconsistency as merely ‘growing up’ when shocked by revolutionary terror, whereas his detractors see only hypocrisy for not agreeing that the events in France were a new dawn of liberty. The attacks portray Burke as adapting his rhetoric to the changing needs of the titled and wealthy Whig party grandees who had sponsored him into Parliament. Karl Marx amongst others made some cheap shots along these lines.

**BURKE’S EARLIER WRITINGS HIGHLIGHT HIS WORKS ON ENGLISH AND AMERICAN HISTORY THAT HE WAS PLANNING TO WRITE UNTIL HIS LITERARY CAREER WAS ENDED BY HIS ENTRY INTO PARLIAMENT.**

The charge of inconsistency let alone that of hypocrisy is deeply offensive to Professor Richard Bourke, co-director of the Centre for the Study of the History of Political Thought at Queen Mary University of London, who has taken it upon himself to exhaustively review all of Burke’s writings, speeches and political positions in their proper historical and intellectual context in *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund*.

Through a close examination of four of Burke’s great causes, the professor demonstrates that intellectual and moral consistency was maintained throughout his career. These causes were: Catholic emancipation and democratic reform in Ireland, protection for the American colonists from arbitrary government, implacable hostility to the French Revolution, and establishment of legitimate government in British India.

Given the first reference to the death of Burke’s son Richard appears in the middle of an account of Burke’s impeachment of Warren Hastings, the book is true to its title on Burke’s political life. It is not a life of Burke, but it is nevertheless a first rate intellectual biography and account of his political career.

Although the author says his focus is on Burke’s parliamentary career, for the sake of completeness he surveys earlier writings. This section is interesting in its own right, as it demonstrates the sophistication of Burke’s philosophical work and its resonance with contemporary writings of David Hume and Adam Smith. While Burke could not abide Hume’s rejection of Christianity, he and Smith maintained a warm correspondence. All three writers believed that human nature was not a blank slate and had an innate capacity for sympathy, reverence and other moral sentiments critical to understanding how people can live together.

Focusing on Burke’s earlier writings also does a valuable service highlighting works on English and American history that he was planning to write until his literary career was ended by his entry into Parliament. While unpublished in his lifetime, they clearly informed his later pamphlets and parliamentary speeches, further underlining the consistent intellectual framework maintained by Burke over many years.

In *Empire and Revolution*, the architecture of Burke’s thought—which is nothing if not gothic in its complexity and majesty—emerges from the accumulation of evidence rather a BuzzFeed style ‘six things you need to know about Edmund Burke’s political philosophy’. It is a major work of scholarship, rather than broad thematic sweeps found in other landmark works on Burke.
What sticks for me from reading this book is that the fulcrum of Burke’s philosophy is the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the constitutional arrangements subsequently put in place. The hounding of the Catholic and increasingly absolutist James II from office and his replacement by the Protestant regents, William III and Mary II, along with the constitutional legislation that followed, was the singular achievement of the Whig party that Burke later represented in Parliament.

One can only understand our Constitution by understanding the nature of the Glorious Revolution and the system of Government that followed in Great Britain.

After the installation of the Protestant and German Hanoverian dynasty in 1714, in the person of George I, the Whigs dominated parliament and government, and the King was an early prototype of a constitutional monarch. The Commons was not elected on a universal franchise but was charged with the duty of representing the interest of the people, and the King, the Commons and the Lords together governed the country in trust for the national interest.

It was therefore no contradiction for Burke to be a Whig who supported the Hanoverian succession, but who nevertheless was opposed to the Monarchical style of government which re-emerged under George III. That King—the one who lost America—took the Throne in 1760 and immediately revived the Crown’s prerogative (discretionary) powers. There was also an increasing influence of the royal court over parliament, achieved by buying off its representatives with sinecures. He saw the Hanoverian King as betraying the very system that dynasty was meant to secure.

This context also explains Burke’s support for the American colonies—some of whose Constitutions pre-dated the Glorious Revolution and even the English Civil War—as they fought against the increasing application of arbitrary rule and direct taxation by the ministers of George III. He acknowledged they possessed the right to rebel, as all peoples do when their rights are trampled and their voices not heard.

This concern at the King’s power was what made Burke so passionate about the Whigs being truly a unified party, as he saw that members of parliament acting alone could be picked off by the favours of the King and his ministers. For Burke, the Whigs needed to proceed on principle and be ready for government, articulating the great formulations in which Burke was the first political philosopher to give a coherent moral justification for the formation of parties.

This gives a new perspective to Burke’s famous formulation that government is a contract between the generations, our own, those gone and those to come. Empire and Revolution makes it clear that Burke was not being sentimental, but rather consciously endeavouring to build the legitimacy of the English Constitution on the natural human inclinations to honour our ancestors and revere institutions which survive through multiple generations. Similarly, Burke’s poetic evocation of ‘little platoons’ in which the bonds to the nations spread out in increasing circles from the original attachment to family, shows how Burke understands the legal principles of the constitutional balance but also how he conceives the mechanisms of emotion and sympathy by which this balance is legitimised by the people.

Maintaining private property is also fundamental to the constitutional order. Otherwise the state is confiscatory and arbitrary. For Burke, private property is grounded in prescription, accruing from long possession and secure in common law. Burke’s support for aristocracy as a principle of continuing relevance was grounded in a belief that only figures with power in the state (through their wealth and political positions) could protect private property for the benefit of all, and that the heritage of the families involved added further legitimacy to the Constitution as well as (he hoped) providing further incentives for aristocrats to exert themselves on behalf of the national interest.

The state governs in trust for the people, but Burke follows Hobbes in believing there can be no such thing as a sovereign people existing outside the constitution. Thus direct government by the people would not only be a disaster, it would be incoherent and nothing less than a tyranny. Practical evidence of this truth was ‘The Terror’ phase of the French Revolution in 1793-4, which actually came after Burke had issued his warnings.

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For Burke, government must proceed through a constitution which establishes sovereignty and the means for the just exercise of power, provided that constitution allows for the interests of the people to be advanced and their views heard. Parliament and parliamentarians must be vehicles for the national interest, and not just an
amalgam of the interests of each district. Hence Burke’s insistence on being seen as a representative rather than a delegate of the 6000 electors of Bristol, an attitude which caused in part the latter to later withdraw their support for Burke. This was an early indication of the difficulties of maintaining Burkean detachment in a democratic age.

Later writers have seen parallels between Burke’s writings on constitutional order and those of Austrian philosopher and economist Friedrich Hayek. While securing liberty is the shared objective, mere majoritarianism or populism in the name of the people cannot secure property rights and other foundations of freedom. Hayek himself, in his essay ‘Why I am not a Conservative’, approvingly quoted Lord Acton’s formulation that Burke, Thomas Babington Macaulay and eighteenth century Prime Minister William Gladstone were the three greatest Liberals of the time, and said that if the tradition they embodied defined liberalism, then he would sit comfortably within it.

For Burke, who lived through the birth of the British Empire in the eighteenth century, the notion of government acting (constitutionally) in trust for the people applied no less to conquered territories such as Ireland, India and America. Bourke does well in explicating the intellectual foundations of Burke’s thought in this regard, squarely in the tradition of what now would be called international law. Indeed, that Burke launched the impeachment of Warren Hastings, the former Governor-General of India, in same year the First Fleet sailed into Botany Bay prompts reflection on the importance of understanding the legal basis and responsibilities associated with conquest and settlement. For Burke, this was the foundation of the responsibilities to indigenous populations that needed to flow from the act of settlement or conquest.

Bourke has done a great service to Edmund Burke and to political philosophy in this book, surely putting to rest any residual taint of hypocrisy as we reconcile the positions taken by Burke on different issues over many years. It also paints a picture of a man who by sheer intellectual brilliance, integrity, and personal exertion exhibited great consistency during a tumultuous period of British history. Indeed, Burke must be considered one of the fathers of our own constitutional arrangements.