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Would Edmund Burke Celebrate The Bicentennial of the French Revolution?

EDWARD COLE

We are now less than a year from the celebrations marking the two hundredth anniversary of the great upheaval that brought us, among other things, the slogan "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," the metric system, and Napoleon. In France itself, where the Revolution is still a divisive political issue, and where at present things are relatively harmonious, there are indications that the main events may be staged chiefly for the tourist trade. And indeed travellers will be there, for the French Revolution was one of the recognizable turning points of the history of western civilization. Some of them may even recall that the most influential critic of the Revolution was not French, but Anglo-Irish, and that 1990 will mark the bicentennial of Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France.

The French Revolution has not lacked hostile critics, from that day to this (indeed the very latest historical scholarship is generally hostile), including such weighty names as that of Hippolyte Taine, who contributed six volumes listing mainly crimes and outrages against humanity. But the greatest and most insightful of them all is Burke, a best-selling author in his own time, and still an important influence. For example, in February 1988, Adam Michnik, in-house historian of Poland's Solidarity Union, publicly stated that if he could present Gorbachev with one book, it would be a translation of Burke's Reflections, which, of course, is presently banned in communist countries. The historian Georges Lefebvre wrote of Burke: "Better than any of his contemporaries, he perceived the most essential and enduring aspects of the revolution in France." Practically every year has brought forth a new analysis of the Reflections, and with the coming anniversary in view, Burke-scholars must be ordering additional bookshelves. Thus it is difficult to avoid speculating on what the Revolution's greatest critic would think of the impending celebrations in France.

What Burke might think today would, of course, depend mainly on what he thought of it in 1790. Though to the uninitiated that might seem a fairly simple task, modern scholarship, as usual, has managed to present us with a bewildering array of revisionist opinions, and it is necessary to throw many books into the hopper before one can distill the consensus on Burke's critique. On various points there is considerable divergence. A number of scholars charge Burke with aristocratic class-bias, arguing that "he was speaking only for the propertied class of his country," and was only concerned to defend "chivalry and all that"; but this school of interpretation is contradicted by another insisting that just the opposite is true, because Burke, himself an Irishman.
of modest birth, "attacked the aristocracy, opposing to an aristocracy of birth a natural aristocracy (as did Jefferson and John Adams)."

Philosophers have sustained a spirited dispute on such matters as Burke's relationship to Aristotle, Cicero, St. Thomas, Locke, Montesquieu, and Hume (just to mention a few of the obvious influences on his thought). Political scientists have argued Burke's place on the political spectrum, noting that he worked against the enemies of the American Revolution, but two decades later was himself an enemy of revolution in France. Some studies represent him as an extremist, flatly stating in one case that "nobody tried to be more conservative than Burke." To others, however, he was "an apostle of moderation." Burke is charged with ignorance of the industrial revolution, so that, like Metternich in 1815, he constructed the defenses of an aristocratic castle which even then was being sapped by new productive forces. But he is also lauded as one of the first informed critics of modern industry. In 1756, for example, Burke described the plight of Britain's 300,000 miners and industrial laborers "daily bathed," he deplored, "in the poisonous damp and destructive effluvia of lead, silver, copper and arsenic." And any reader of the Annual Register, an historical almanac founded by Burke in 1758 and edited by him until about 1765, when his parliamentary career commenced, will note that he had a keen eye for the elements of social and economic history, including statistics of trade and production.

The obvious truth is that Burke was amazingly complex, and that his mind was furnished not only with the theories of Locke and others, but also with a somewhat contradictory, and perhaps typically English, regard for the past, the whole leavened by wisdom learned in the hard school of statesmanship. To historians examining Burke's credentials as a critic of the Revolution, the most important question, however, is whether he knew anything reliable about the France of which he wrote in 1790.

The most eloquent charge of historical ignorance was brought against Burke by Alfred Cobban, whose audacious book, Edmund Burke and the Revolt against the Eighteenth Century, set out to link the author of the Reflections to the quixotic and anti-rational Romanticism of the Lake Poets. Cobban notes that as early as 1770, on the pages of the Annual Register, in phraseology suggestive of Gibbon (they were mutual admirers), Burke predicted that because of its "injudicious" and "oppressive" system of taxation the French monarchy "may at length fall of its own enormous weight." Nevertheless, Cobban notes, when the collapse actually came, in a fit of almost willful ignorance, Burke fell back on "the absurd expedient of assuming the Revolution to be the result of a conspiracy." The great statesman's knowledge of the Revolution, Cobban avers, was poetic, not based on the rational insights of history.
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More recent scholarship has taken Cobban seriously, but most writers have, in the final analysis, found his arguments unconvincing on this point. In his *Burke and the Nature of Politics*, Carl B. Cone, for example, found that Burke took great care to know about France, largely because he disliked it so much, and long before the Revolution, feared it. On the other hand, much in the spirit of the cosmopolitan eighteenth century, Burke also greatly admired the French, and entertained many of them at Gregories, his magnificent Beaconsfield estate. Among these were individuals later to become famous in the annals of the Revolution: Abbe Reynal, Jean Baptiste "Anacharsis" Cloots, Count de Mirabeau, Madame de Genlis, Jean DuPont (Intendent of Metz), and his younger brother Charles Jean all knew the Irish hospitality of Gregories. In the *Reflections* Burke also refers to having seen the French Court, and it is known for certain that his son Richard was received there by Louis XVI.

B. W. Hill, editor of *Edmund Burke on Government, Politics, and Society*, found that "as usual Burke had investigated the French details closely and was therefore better able than most of his contemporaries to see the constituent elements [and that] some of Burke's most basic conceptions arose from the fact that he approached politics equipped with a measure of historical vision unusual in his day." He was continually reminding the House of Commons that every age has its peculiarities, that human institutions are born, mature and decline, and that each stage of historical existence provides unique strengths and vulnerabilities.

Perhaps the best way to apprehend Burke's degree of historical knowledge is to read the French history sections written by Burke and published in the *Annual Register* for 1789 and for 1790. The modern reader will come away impressed by the number of his insights that have been confirmed by professional historians only comparatively recently.

Aside from the questions concerning why Burke criticized the Revolution and on what basis, there is a strong consensus among scholars as to the depth and the importance of his compelling warning to the West, which most agree rested on three historical positions: the political, the intellectual, and the spiritual.

In old regime Europe, the common assumption among the educated of France and England was the essential similarity of the two countries. Voltaire and Montesquieu, for example, believed that they understood the British Constitution and could apply its principles to France. For his part, Burke was an optimist of the same sort. His whole political critique of the French Revolution was based on the firm conviction that, left to the gradual workings of time, France would evolve along British lines. His reading of Aristotle and Montesquieu convinced him that France possessed the basic elements...
of an ideal “mixed” Constitution: monarchical, oligarchic, and democratic. To him, the Revolution represented the destruction of the one and of the few by the many; the crucial date was not 14 July (Bastille Day), but 4 August (when aristocratic privilege fell), or 6 October (when the royal family was taken). In essence, Burke reproached the French for not having a Glorious Revolution like that of England a century earlier. It is hardly surprising to discover that the catalyst which set Burke to writing was a pro-French discourse read by a free-thinking parson at a meeting of the Revolution [i.e., of 1688] Society of London. Burke considered this Revolution no revolution at all, but rather a restoration of a balance temporarily disturbed by the overweening pretensions of the monarchical element. To compare it to the democratic usurpations of the National Assembly was positively pernicious! And thus the Reflections were written.

Burke may have been too optimistic about the strength of the “ancient constitution” of France, but most of his modern readers find that his remarkable grasp “of the essence of the Revolution” rested on his assumption that the French Revolution was mainly a revolution of ideas, and that this was what constituted the greatest threat to civilized order. It was Burke who called Rousseau “the insane Socrates of the National Assembly,” but his criticism went much beyond Rousseau to indict many of the core assumptions of the Enlightenment. The pernicious ideas Burke saw at work were those that exalted the individual, that insisted on the test of Reason as the only test, and that brought all the painfully-wrought institutions of civilization before the bar of modern science, accused of being the offspring of ignorance and superstition because they had grown out of history, rather than from the pipedreams of armchair utopians. He saw that behind the actions of the National Assembly (and later, behind those of the Jacobins and their ilk) there lay the assumption that mankind is progressing, can be perfected, and should look only to the future. Burke shuddered for the fate of a nation that would regard liberty as emancipation from inherited wisdom, from creeds and oaths and from established institutions. Atomized and directionless, the last hope of such a nation would be naked force, and the military regime necessary to it. As revolutionary events unfolded, leading to the Terror and ultimately to Napoleon, Burke’s Reflections came to be regarded almost as a book of prophecy.

Burke’s demonstration of the relationship of ideas to politics is impressive, but many modern scholars emphasize the importance of a more profound spiritual understanding: a belief in a fundamental “eternal moral order which is immanent in the historical process.” In Burke’s view, the purpose of human institutions was to enable men to live the good life by participating in this objective moral order. Thus, in his book,
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sensitive to history, Burke insisted that the wisdom necessary for the government of men was far greater than anything that could be produced by sheer abstract thought in a single century. In the form useful to men, such wisdom was conveyed as "prejudice and prescription," a kind of folklore, aptly described in Russell Kirk's *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered*, as "the supra-rational wisdom of the species." Its source lay in history, some of it written, some not. And history is "the gradual revelation of a Supreme design," though not charged with mystical determinism in the manner later found in Hegel.

The basic assumption of a God-given permanent order enabled Burke to understand the central fallacy of the French Revolution and why it was so productive of violence and destruction. For at bottom, the Revolution's reforms rested on the sentimentalist morality of the innate conscience. Believing in this "inner light of the heart," the revolutionaries felt that it was not only safe, but just to destroy traditional institutions. Burke's political and historical wisdom caused him to disbelieve this notion of moral self-sufficiency, which "makes man like to God." The voice of conscience is subjective, and will promote the kind of pride of conscience pregnant with terrible and unrestrained fanaticism. "A new, subtle and deadly species of pride" is what the National Assembly canonized in its laws, and behind this Burke saw "the insane Socrates, the professor and founder of the philosophy of vanity."

From the consensus view of Burke it seems warranted to assume that, could we have him here and now in the flesh, he would surely deplore the idea of celebrating the bicentennial of the French Revolution. Any ceremonies of honor and grateful remembrance would be absurd, in his view. But anniversaries are not always recalled out of a sense of gratitude, and it is indeed interesting how many of the best-remembered dates are those of unmitigated disasters: 7 December and 29 October come readily to mind. Historic events often qualify as such because they drive home certain powerful insights or costly lessons. There is some reason to think that the spirit of Edmund Burke might approve of a commemoration of the Revolution, so long as it included truly authentic reenactments of the events set in train in 1789.

Such supposition is based on one of Burke's earliest writings, entitled *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1756), a treatise which belonged to his intellectual youth, before he found his political vocation. The *Inquiry*, which in some ways heralded the dawn of literary and artistic romanticism, investigated the sentiments to which sublime and beautiful objects appeal. Somewhat
surprisingly, the sublime seems to have been the more interesting to Burke. Beautiful things appeal to the sentiments of love, affection, tenderness and sympathy, all of which are necessary to civilized life as Burke conceived it. But sublime objects are those which appeal to "the passion of self-preservation."

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime: that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.

There is much about the sublime which is suitable to the French Revolution, especially when we list the sentiments and qualities which Burke insists are appropriate to the category: astonishment, fear, obscurity, power, strength, dread, privation, vastness, infinitude, magnitude, difficulty, magnificence, loudness, uncertainty, bitterness, stench, animal cries, pain, and violence. Are these not the very elements of the French Revolution? Surely Burke felt it to have been one of the most sublime events in history. But what would be the point of contemplating it in 1989?

Burke believed that human appreciation of the sublime was a gift of Providence, for without it men might fall into "a state of rest and inaction" dangerous to moral and physical well-being. Tragedy, for example, alerts us to the hazards of evil and injustice. In fact, terrible and awesome, the sublime exerts an irresistible and beneficial attraction, which Burke could only describe as delight. "I am convinced," he wrote, "we have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes and pains of others." And this is especially noticeable in our historical tastes: "The prosperity of no empire, nor the grandeur of no king, can so agreeably affect in the reading, as the ruin of the state of Macedon and the distress of its unhappy prince." And this too is Providential, "as our Creator has designed that we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportional delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted — in the distress of others."

One can almost hear Burke addressing the Revolutionary Bicentennial Commission in the following words:

...there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity; so that whether the misfortune is before our eyes, or whether they are turned back to it in history, it always touches with delight. This is not an unmixed delight, but blended with no small uneasiness. The delight we have in such things, hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer; and all this is antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works us to its own purposes without our concurrence.