

CHAPTER FIVE

Edmund Burke (1729–97)

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In this enlightened age I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices; and the longer they have lasted, and the more generally they have prevailed, the more we cherish them. We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them. If they find what they seek, and they seldom fail, they think it more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice is of ready application in the emergency; it previously engages the mind in a steady course of wisdom and virtue, and does not leave the

*man hesitating in a moment of decision, sceptical, puzzled, and unresolved. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature.*¹

Edmund Burke's claims for inclusion in the present volume are obvious; indeed, he is widely recognized as the founder of modern conservatism. Born and educated in Ireland, Burke abandoned the idea of following his father into the legal profession after migrating to London in 1750. Initially, he supported himself through writing, publishing *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* in 1757 and becoming the founder-editor of the *Annual Register* in the following year. Always fascinated by politics, in 1765, he was appointed private secretary to the prime minister, Lord Rockingham, whose influence secured him a seat in the House of Commons. He remained an MP for almost 30 years, and served briefly as a junior government minister in the 1780s.

The problem of selection is unusually acute in Burke's case. The critic William Hazlitt – a vehement opponent of Burke's ideas – wrote after his death that 'to do him justice, it would be necessary to quote all his works; the only specimen of Burke is, all that he wrote'.² The excerpt chosen for this chapter comes from the predictable source – Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), from which numerous passages could be selected. This one typifies the characteristic which makes the *Reflections* such a notable landmark in the history of conservative thought. Burke attacked the French Revolution – then in its early stages – both in theory and practice. Yet his account was not purely negative; the positive reasons Burke advanced for adhering to the status quo in France were founded on principles which could be applied in other countries (not least Britain itself). In short, through his defence of the pre-Revolutionary regime in France, Burke furnished something like a transnational manifesto for anyone who shared his general antipathy towards radical change.

As the excerpt suggests, Burke founded his case on a specific view of human nature. Tacitly, he drew a distinction between 'Men of speculation' and members of a community who, whether or not they enjoy direct political influence, do not endeavour to penetrate beneath the surface of events. Embracing without apology a word which even in Burke's day had strongly negative connotations – as Jane Austen confirmed in 1813 by twinning it with 'pride' – Burke argued that 'prejudice' was crucial to any functioning society. His notion of prejudice could, perhaps, have been given the more positive name of 'common sense'; it was a compound of intuition, folk memory and personal experience. This, he argued, is a far more reliable guide to action than abstract reason. In social interactions,

it leads to a spontaneous preference for 'virtuous' conduct. In politics, it inspires profound respect for long-established institutions and practices. On close examination, political arrangements which seem unsupported by anything beyond unthinking 'prejudice' will almost invariably turn out to be susceptible to justification on rational grounds. Limited reforms will usually be sufficient to redress perceived abuses; in contrast, radical measures inspired by visions of political perfection are likely to make a tolerable situation much worse.

On the face of it, Burke's account could seem to have egalitarian implications. If prejudice is such a reliable guide, surely it must be safe to trust the general judgement of the people? However, Burke was a vehement opponent of democratic ideas, and spoke out against even modest proposals to reform the existing franchise in that direction. In the course of a 1782 speech on this subject, he had argued that 'The individual is foolish; the multitude, for the moment is foolish, when they act without deliberation; but the species is wise.'³ This seems difficult to reconcile with the message of the *Reflections*, which implies that prejudice is good precisely because it prompts virtuous conduct without any need for 'deliberation'. Burke, though, would not have recognized any inconsistency. In his view, 'the bank and capital of nations, and of ages' suggested that political decisions should be entrusted to a suitably qualified elite. Thankfully, in Britain, there was a popular 'prejudice' in favour of this arrangement, which allowed ordinary people to go about their business without demanding greater influence in matters beyond their comprehension. At times of crisis, it may be proper for opinion-leaders – 'men of speculation' – to examine existing principles and practices. If the elite uses its influence responsibly, it will provide reassurance to 'the multitude', since, on inspection, it will discover the 'latent wisdom' which underpins the status quo. The real danger to society lies not in the prejudice in favour of deference, but rather in the possibility that 'men of speculation' will betray their privileged position by encouraging 'the multitude' to take independent action, or (still worse) to start speculating for themselves.

The ensuing debate showed that Burke had been right to identify the concept of 'prejudice' as a key line of division among commentators on the Revolution. In his reply to Burke, *The Rights of Man* (1791), Thomas Paine admitted that 'We have but a defective idea of what prejudice is.' But whatever it might be, it should be eradicated and replaced by 'opinion', which demanded rational reflection. 'No man', Paine wrote, 'is prejudiced in favour of a thing, knowing it to be wrong. He is attached to it in the belief that it is right; and when he sees it is not so, the prejudice will be gone.'⁴ Paine thought that everyone should be sufficiently educated to be in a position to develop 'opinions', rather than relying on 'prejudice'. During the American Revolution, Burke and Paine had been allies of a kind, since Burke sympathized with the American rebels. But times had changed dramatically

since then, and what Paine had considered to be ‘common sense’ when he wrote the influential pamphlet of that name (1775–76) seemed a recipe for murderous chaos to Edmund Burke of 1789. ‘Common sense’ and ‘prejudice’ might be value-laden words to denote what is essentially the same thing, but to the followers of Burke and Paine, they suggested entirely different responses to the political dilemmas of France after 1789. The Burkean view implies an overriding concern for social and political stability; Paine’s ideas suggest a refusal to tolerate anything other than a dispensation which would win approval from a ‘rational’ observer. In short, responses to the debate between Burke and Paine over the value of ‘prejudice’ can be regarded as a key diagnostic test of ‘conservatism’ and liberalism to this day.

Burke’s *Reflections* was a major publishing success even before the worst excesses of the French Revolution; when the French political classes started using the guillotine to settle their political scores, he could be hailed as an inspired prophet. This did not mean, however, that Burke was right in his diagnosis of the *causes* of the Revolution. As someone who attributed a central role in politics to ideas, it was not surprising that he was unduly harsh on French *philosophes*, notably Voltaire and Rousseau (‘Atheists are not our preachers: madmen are not our lawgivers’ [137]). It might be argued that Burke’s exaggeration of the influence of ideas over the revolutionaries was an inspired mistake, since it provoked him into a systematic exposition of his own views. But it was not his only mistake; and in his state of overexcitement – which lasted from 1790 until his death seven years later – Burke laid himself open to lines of attack which have continued to be deployed against those who claim to be his legatees.

The most superficial, but nevertheless common, charge against Burke was one of inconsistency in his respective treatment of the American and French Revolutions. Burke, however, could reply that the American insurgents were defending their established practices against misguided British policy innovations. Nevertheless, it is possible that Burke’s sharply contrasting responses to these major developments were affected by considerations relating to his own personal and political circumstances. In 1790, Burke was ageing and increasingly disenchanted with the leaders of his political party (the Whigs), notably Charles James Fox, who was an outspoken supporter of the French Revolution in its early stages. If the American and French Revolutions had occurred simultaneously in the 1770s, he might not have been so inclined to exercise empathy towards the one and vituperation towards the other.

More seriously, in his *Reflections*, Burke overstated his defence of the *Ancien Regime* in France, sometimes in ways which were painfully self-referential and romanticized. The most notorious example was his anecdote of meeting – or rather, glimpsing – the French Queen Marie-Antoinette. ‘Surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision,’ he gushed in the *Reflections* (126). But even if this was an accurate recollection of the Queen’s physical impact, it did not mean that the French people should tolerate monarchical misgovernment. Burke was

running the familiar conservative risk, of sounding as if he was eulogizing the status quo and denying the efficacy even of limited reform. In fact, while critics (like Tom Paine) gleefully exploited this excruciating passage, Burke acknowledged that the *Ancien Regime* in France was far from perfect. Rather, he implied that it was amenable to improvement, through a series of reforms which could have brought it into proximity with the British system. To back this up, Burke offered a punchline: 'A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation' (72). During his own political career, he had tried to exemplify this maxim, particularly by urging the case for limited reforms which would reduce government expenditure. In fact, if implemented in full, Burke's proposals would have triggered a *radical* rebalancing of the British constitution as established by the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–89, by reducing the scope of monarchical influence over the political system as a whole. Equally, rather than being the unaided handiwork of malevolent ideologues, as Burke alleged, the French Revolution itself is better understood as a highly complex process which was instigated at least in part by well-meaning attempts at limited reform, which unwittingly released pent-up demands for more far-reaching changes.

In short, in a book which clearly delineated distinctively conservative principles, Burke had also contrived to underline the difficulties of applying them in *practice*. The ideology expounded in the *Reflections* implied a cautious approach to political questions, based on a sober evaluation of circumstances. Rather than self-consciously serving some ultimate political goal according to a predetermined blueprint, the Burkean conservative is engaged in a continuous process of piecemeal adaptation to unpredictable developments. The exercise of political *judgement* is thus essential to the conservative; and after the Revolution it became clear that Burke was now lacking in this quality. Embittered by his final separation from the Whigs, he lashed out at one of their number (the Duke of Bedford) in a *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1796) which could easily be read as a more general attack on the aristocratic element which, in a calmer context, Burke had regarded as essential to a stable sociopolitical order. It was as if Burke had spent so much time brooding about Rousseau, Voltaire et al. that he, too, had caught a dose of the 'French contagion'. The sensation aroused by the *Reflections* meant that Burke could not be ignored, even by his former political foe, Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger. Privately Pitt had dismissed the *Reflections* as 'rhapsodies ... in which there is much to admire and nothing to agree with'; he felt constrained to listen to Burke's advice on the conduct of the war against Revolutionary France, but resisted his demands for an explicitly pro-royalist policy.⁵

The society envisaged in the *Reflections* is unashamedly hierarchical, depending heavily on deference and an acute recognition of duties on the part of the privileged classes. While Burke's attack on Bedford implicitly conceded the obvious objection that aristocrats could sometimes be forgetful of their duties, other writings rejected the idea of obligations towards the

poor. His *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795) – an attempt to influence Pitt's social policy, but not published until after Burke's death – decried any systematic attempt to alleviate distress, even when crops had failed due to inclement weather, making it difficult to apply the traditional distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' objects of relief. Burke had formed the view that economic activity was governed by immutable laws, and expounded a free-market gospel with a zeal which made Adam Smith look like a socialist. It is just about possible to square this inflexible outlook with the philosophy of the *Reflections*, but only with considerable ingenuity. If the Laws of the Market really were heavenly decrees rather than the result of fallible human artifice, then it would indeed be imprudent to defy them. However, if their operation was threatening to cause mass starvation – or widespread social discontent, which presumably for Burke would be even more alarming – then their (partial) suspension might seem appropriate. This was precisely the approach adopted by William Pitt – himself a disciple of Adam Smith, who advocated relief of the poor on the grounds that abstract principles, however impressive on paper, should be overridden in 'unexpected situations'.⁶

In the *Reflections*, Burke lamented that 'the age of chivalry is gone. – That of sophisters, oeconomists and calculators, has succeeded' (126). His inability to budge from abstract theory on the question of poor relief places him firmly on the side of the 'oeconomists and calculators'. Burke's position also jars against his exalted view of the state, which 'ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern', but rather 'a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection' (147). He might have predicted the blood-soaked course of the French Revolution with remarkable accuracy, but did not detect the developments in industrial processes which were already beginning to trigger a different kind of 'revolution' in Britain itself. In time, this would raise serious questions about the relevance of Burke's assumptions about the nature of society, as well as exposing the fault line between his distinctively conservative take on human reason and his economic theorizing. While a failure to anticipate the full sociopolitical impact of industrialization is forgivable, having served as MP for the port city of Bristol between 1774 and 1780, Burke had an excellent vantage-point from which to identify the incompatibility between attitudes based on the desire for unlimited accumulation and the outlook of the rural aristocracy, exemplified by so many of his parliamentary colleagues. As such, Burke's simultaneous championship of a conservative world in the *Reflections*, and of the economic ideas which were likely to destroy it, was a symptom of something more than an intellectual blind spot.

Although Burke had always seen himself as a Whig, his eloquent opposition to radical change earned him recognition as a spiritual inspiration for the Conservative Party, when the Tories adopted that name in 1834.

However, in reputation as in life William Pitt was regarded as a far more important role model.⁷ Even the change of nomenclature suggested that Burke's conservative ideas, and their embodiment in British institutions, were threatened with redundancy; at least in part, the Tories of 1834 chose a more explicit ideological label in order to rededicate themselves to the increasingly onerous and thankless task of 'conserving' some familiar political landmarks in the face of overwhelming challenges. The most obvious danger was the end of aristocratic dominance of political activity, thanks mainly to the 1832 Reform Act. Burke himself had been a champion of representative institutions, but regarded anything approaching universal (manhood) suffrage as the harbinger of mob rule. While the Conservatives continued to advertise themselves as an indispensable source of stability, in practice they could only try to live up to this role by presiding over (and occasionally even promoting) institutional changes which made Britain an essentially *liberal* state, opening the party to accusations of 'opportunism' (particularly under Benjamin Disraeli).

Arguably, by the twentieth century, the only vestige of 'Burkean' influence on the Conservative Party was its sporadic expressions of veneration for its own traditions and for 'founding fathers' like Burke, although even these displays began to take on the appearance of empty rituals. Burke could be made to seem relevant to new challenges to the status quo in Britain and abroad after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution; after all, few people had issued more potent warnings about the effects of radical change of any kind. Yet his message was at best ambiguous in this new context, and even positively unhelpful to anti-socialists who noticed his lyrical evocation of the state. Burke's *Reflections*, after all, had been a diatribe against *liberal* ideologues; yet in 1917, the most determined opposition to 'Bolshevism' came from Western governments whose habitual mode of thought in the new age of democracy bore more than a passing resemblance to those of the 'execrable philosophers' whom Burke held responsible for the atrocities in France after 1789.

Under the Conservative Party leader David Cameron (2005–16), Burke suddenly became the focus of more practical interest as a partial inspiration for the idea of the 'Big Society' – essentially an attempt to remind citizens that some state functions could be carried out more effectively (and at less expense to taxpayers) by voluntary organizations.⁸ Burke could certainly be cited as an advocate of 'civil society', and as so often had bequeathed to the campaign a useful sound bite in his reference in the *Reflections* to 'the little platoon(s) we belong to in society' (97). Again, however, the appeal to Burke threatened to raise awkward (indeed unanswerable) questions at the level of practical decision-making. In particular, Burke saw membership of the 'little platoon' as 'the first link in a series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind'. The fact that Cameron felt it necessary to 'nudge' Britons towards community action suggests a recognition that atomized liberal individualism – encouraged most notably by his own

Conservative predecessor, Margaret Thatcher (see Chapter 16) – had broken the first link in Burke’s beneficent ‘series’.

In summary, Edmund Burke deserves to be recognized as a major (perhaps even the greatest) exponent of conservative philosophy. That is, his argument against radical change can be distilled into a coherent approach to political questions, based ultimately on a view of human nature which explains why such changes are likely to result in catastrophe, while underpinning a much more positive case for gradualism. However, while William Hazlitt was justified in his assertion that Burke could not be appreciated in full without reading ‘all that he wrote’, a comprehensive survey of that kind reveals enduring dilemmas for people who, since Burke’s day, have regarded themselves as ‘conservatives’. Even during his lifetime, it was possible to identify some elements of his thinking which could not easily be reconciled with the ‘distilled’ version; in particular, as we have seen, his economic ideas were ill chosen for a politician with an overriding preoccupation with social and institutional stability. In this respect, one can at least claim that Burke’s ‘conservative’ successors (whether ‘thinkers’ or ‘practitioners’) have fared no better, and with less excuse, in their attempts to square these circles.