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Edmund Burke and the Politics of Reform

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Introduction

Edmund Burke (1729-97) seems to be a contradictory beast! On the one hand he is considered by some to be 'the father of conservatism'; on the other hand, he was an ardent reformer. But the two impulses – conservatism and reform – are not contradictory if there are things to conserve in society as well as things to change. For instance, if a society has a functioning democracy, concerned citizens should be as active in preservation as in reform. And reform should be a cautious process that improves rather than undermines democracy. Even while identifying faults, we should acknowledge positive attributes. Edmund Burke exemplified this attempt to balance the reforming and the conservative instincts.

Burke was born in Dublin to a Catholic mother and a Church of Ireland solicitor father. He followed the Anglicanism (Episcopalianism) of his father, while his sister followed the Catholicism of their mother. Religion, along with the gentry, were, in Burke's view, fundamental to civilisation, but he was non-sectarian and supported the Catholic Relief bills of 1778 and 1791.

Burke was a member of the British House of Commons from 1766 to 1794 and made his mark as an orator and political theorist. Nowadays, he is most remembered for his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), a conservative tract written in reaction to the radicalism of the revolution begun the year before. Yet as a reformer he successfully spearheaded change, limiting royal control of the government in Britain and supported foreign causes such as the American revolution, greater independence for Ireland, and better practise in the East India Company rule of India.

This essay will lay out Burke's arguments for conservative caution, then extrapolate from these to suggest some general principles for reformers today.

The Nature of Burke's Conservatism

Burke's conservatism orbited around his admiration for the British polity. Relative to other polities of the time, Britain had the advantage of an entrenched and active parliament, greater freedom of the press, and openness to reform. On these scores there was a lot to preserve in Britain, so in some measure conservatism made sense.

Following Burke's themes in several of his speeches and writings, it is possible to compose two structured arguments on the basis of his insights. These arguments can be extracted for example

from the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790); his *Speech on a Committee to Inquire into the State of the Representation of the Commons in Parliament* (1782); and his *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791). The first argument suggests that given the complexity and the slow evolution of any stable society, it is extremely difficult to successfully radically intervene in a society, for example with a revolution. The second argument warns that the stakes are very high when it comes to initiating significant social change. Both arguments weigh uncertainty and the risks of change against what Burke sees as revolutionary presumption. A summary of the first of these arguments is as follows:

Effecting successful social change is difficult because:

- **Society is complex and difficult to understand**

And

- **Society evolves slowly and the results of change emerge only over time**

Therefore

- **Intervention requires 'profound thinkers', not 'pettifoggers'**

In other words, good social change requires wise people rather than an imprudent rabble, such as those that started the French Revolution. Burke sardonically compares the complexity of society to that of a clock:

> 'An ignorant man, who is not fool enough to meddle with his clock, is, however, sufficiently confident to take to pieces and put together, at his pleasure, a moral machine of another guise, importance, and complexity, composed of far other wheels and springs and balances and counteracting and cooperating powers'
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> (*An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs, in Consequence of Some Late Discussions in Parliament, Relative to the Reflections on the French Revolution*)

For this reason, Burke advises hesitation before meddling with such an intricate assemblage as a society.

But a society is not only very complex, it is formed over a long period of time: 'it is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions, and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time.' If the development of a polity is slow, attempts to improve its working should likewise take place over a longer time-frame. Slow piecemeal fabrication or reform is the only appropriate means of development for a state, for the results of any changes may not be initially apparent: what seems at first to be good may turn out to be bad, and *vica-versa*.

As a result of the difficulty of good social change, we need more than a 'simple disposition or direction of power'. In fact, we need 'profound thinkers', not the 'inferior' sort of lawyers found in the French revolutionary assembly:

> 'The British Constitution has not been struck out on heat by a set of presumptuous men, like the Assembly of pettifoggers run mad in Paris….It is the result of the thoughts of many minds in many ages. It is no simple, no superficial thing, nor to be estimated by superficial understandings…..The British Constitution may have its advantages pointed out to wise and reflecting minds, but is of too high an order of excellence to be adapted to those which are common. It takes in too many views, it makes too many combinations, to be so much as comprehended by shallow and superficial understandings. Profound thinkers will know it in its reason and spirit.'

(*Reflections on the Revolution in France,* 1790)

The very possibility of there being any profound thinkers, who are competent to intervene in society is presented by Burke mostly in the negative sense of criticising those who don't measure up, like the French revolutionaries. But he does make the positive case that profound thinkers learn from experience rather than from 'abstract principles'. Meanwhile, the profound thinker is the one who endorses the British constitution. Fearing the spread of the revolutionary impulse from across the channel, Burke seems to want to garner support for the status quo in Britain amongst the aristocracy and gentry, as well as amongst the electorate.

While Burke's first argument is to do with the difficulty in effecting positive change; the second argument refers to what is at stake:

- **All societies have faults, but we should keep a sense of proportion about these faults**

  And
- **Traditional European polities have many positive attributes**

  Therefore
- **The 'burden of proof' is on those who want to incur the inevitable costs of systemic change for what are uncertain gains.**

Burke takes issue with the revolutionaries for attacking the faults of the established regime as if these faults were fundamental or the only or even the major thing about it. We shouldn't, he says, completely reject a regime just because it has minor defects:

> 'The second claim of the Revolution Society is "a right of cashiering their governors for misconduct…" No government could stand a moment, if it could be blown down by anything so loose and indefinite as an opinion of "*misconduct*".' (*Reflections*)

So, we should keep a sense of proportion about the faults of a society. This sense is enhanced if we acknowledge all the attributes a society such as old France exhibited, including flourishing manufactures and arts, philosophers of note, complex cities and infrastructure, and heroic or charitable individuals. Burke concludes:

> 'I do not recognize in this view of things the despotism of Turkey. Nor do I discern the character of a government that has been on the whole so oppressive, or so corrupt, or so negligent, as to be utterly unfit *for all reformation*. I must think such a government well deserved to have its excellences heightened, its faults corrected, and its capacities improved into a British Constitution…'

Following on from advocating a sense of balance about the liabilities and advantages of a polity, Burke contends that the onus is on radicals to prove that their designs wouldn't do more harm than good, given that radical change entails high costs (to hundreds of thousands of people in the case of France): 'The burden of proof lies heavily on those who tear to pieces the whole frame and contexture of their country…' In other words, there is too much at stake to easily risk dramatic change without good reasons to do so

Burke wants to warn Britons against emulating the precipitous actions of the French by emphasising the uncertainty and riskiness of revolutionary action. The uncertainty and risk concerning change is in fact the key underlying messages of both Burke's arguments. Society is too complex, and the stakes are too high to allow rash meddling; so change should be piecemeal, slow and cautious rather than sweeping.

Nonetheless, Burke recognises the need for progress. One of his specific claims with respect to reform is that even reform supports the conservative cause: 'A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.' However, Burke's zeal for his own reformist causes suggests more than conservative expediency, as he exhibits as much commitment to reform as to conservatism in his political career.

I think Burke's sophistication was that he was appraised of the complexity of life - a complexity which implies that one can side with much of the *status-quo*, yet also support significant moves for its reform. The two impulses are not contradictory if, like Burke, you are a gradualist.

Extrapolations

Burke's arguments are more relevant to today's world than to his own. The social democracies in which we now live offer greater good for their people than did the eighteenth-century British polity. We have more to preserve than was the case in Burke's time. The particular relevance of Burke's writings today can be judged by considering further guidelines for reform based on his insights. Amongst those who have advanced conservative thinking in this area is Michael Oakshott (1901-90), who, in his 1962 book: *Rationalism in Politics and other Essays*, offers some cogent developments of Burke's arguments.

The following are some points that apply to the task of promoting social or political change in the modern world. The first three points are my attempts to apply Burke. Point's four and five are quotes from Oakshott:

1. There is no perfect society. Humanity is congenitally flawed, and this fact should moderate our objectives. We should be aware that many needs are met in existing social democracies (so there is much to be admired), and that misconduct by the authorities is not itself cause for rejecting the system as a whole. Nonetheless there's always room for improvement.
2. Society is complex and the results of intervention are therefore uncertain. So intervention should be piecemeal in order to reduce the size of unforeseen consequences, and to allow corrections in policy.
3. The results of intervention reveal themselves only over time, so even piecemeal reform should be well spaced to allow time for intended and unintended consequences to reveal themselves. This will allow us to deal with adverse consequences before incurring further unnecessary disruption through further misguided reform.
4. '…innovation entails certain loss and possible gain, therefore, the onus of proof, to show that the proposed change may be expected to be on the whole beneficial, rests with the would-be innovator' (*Rationalism in Politics*)
5. '[The conservative] believes the occasion to be important; and, other things being equal, he [sic] considers the most favourable occasion for innovation to be when the projected change is most likely to be limited to what is intended and least likely to be corrupted by undesired and unmanageable consequences.' (*ibid*)

Recognising the absence of the perfect society should colour our appraisal of our social democracies and their problems in a way that reduces the ambition of our demands for change. And alongside recognising the imperfectability of humanity, we should also be aware of the way in which modern social democracies in fact meet the needs of many, perhaps most, of their citizens. Interests have been met by *ad hoc* adjustments and people have found a place for themselves in the hierarchy of their social setup. One should therefore not set oneself against the whole edifice of a democratic

society, for to do so is to set oneself against the interests of most of the people – which is a fault in terms both of rights and of strategy.

The revolutionary impulse for sweeping change falls foul of the facts that there is no perfection to be had, and that social engineering is a difficult, uncertain game which will probably entail huge costs. So, our reform goals should be moderate and our means incremental. A strong ardour for piecemeal reform may be appropriate, at least if Burke's example is anything to go by; but reformers need to give a good account of what changes would mean for ordinary people, and why the risks and costs of transition will be worth it.