Burke on the Brink of the Volcano

Explaining the Theory of an Anti-Theoretical Theorist

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> Burke has more in common with modern social democracy than he does with the libertarian excesses of the Progressive Conservative government in Ontario, which is ruling with an almost religious faith in its own 'common sense revolution.'
>
> Bob Rae, The Three Questions

> Canadian conservatives need to rediscover the virtues of Burkean conservatism.
>
> Stephen Harper, 'Rediscovering the Right Agenda'

Edmund Burke stands for modern conservatism; he is commonly said to be its greatest theorist; he is to conservatism what Marx is to socialism and Locke and Mill are to liberalism. So if you want to understand what genuine conservatism is (we tell our students), you should read Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France, for it is the canonical text of a genuinely conservative conservatism. (Neo-conservatism and aristocratic radicalism, not being genuine conservatism, have other sources, it seems.)

But what should a student following this advice expect to find? Is conservatism not always relative to whatever is to be conserved, so that the principles of today's conservatism will necessarily differ from those of any earlier conservatism? Can any universal principles be rightly abstracted from Burke's mighty, sprawling, meandering, almost formless piece d'occasion? For instance, what does it show about the relation between truth and power? Does it provide any place for wisdom in politics, or is the 'prudence' that Burke commends no more than steady nerves and practical common sense? In short, what is Burke's theory of conservatism? Can it be 'potted' and presented in a form that will be intelligible to undergraduates?

One solution is to speak of conservative 'values' such as tradition, authority, and hierarchy. (Burke put these stodgy values in the best possible light by contrasting them with the extremism of the French radicals and reformers, but of course you young people remain free to opt for the more modern and progressive values, such a reason, freedom, and equality, that may happen to appeal to you.) A complementary solution is to deny that Burke has any theory at all in the conventional sense – the sense in which Marx, Locke, and Mill have theories – but offers instead a sophisticated argument against the very possibility of theory in politics. (All generalizations are false, including this one, so practical people like Burke rightly scorn the theorizing of mere theorists, and you, like him, should put your faith in the prudence of our statesmen.)

A third possibility will be explored in this paper: that Burke has a theory but one that is hard to explain because it no longer sounds very conservative, when it is spelled out in contemporary terms. I shall focus on the Reflections and shall avoid, except for some brief remarks at the end, the standard scholarly disputes about Burke's consistency and the relation of his thought to that of his predecessors. I shall plunge into the middle of Burke's reflections (actually, about a quarter of the way in), where we find him at the side of a man standing on the brink of a volcano, contemplating whether to jump into its fiery maw.

What Volcano?

In one of the most 'theoretical' parts of Burke's Reflections, the part where he calls prudence 'the first of all virtues' and which has been given the title 'The True Meaning of the Rights of Man – Dr. Price Answered,' Burke includes two brief quotations from the last few lines of Horace's Ars Poetica.[1] They have to do with a mad poet who wanders about declaiming his verses, with his head in the clouds, not watching where he is going, and who tumbles into a well or pit. He cries for help, but none of his fellow citizens are willing to let down a rope to pull him out. If anyone were inclined to respond to his cries, Horace would object that the poet may have thrown himself in on purpose and may not really want to be saved. He'll remind the would-be good Samaritan of the story about a mad Sicilian poet, Empedocles, who, eager to be thought immortal, cooly leapt into the flames of Mount Etna. 'Let poets have the right and power to destroy themselves,' Horace concludes. 'Who saves a man against his will does the same as murder him.'[2]

The moral seems to be one that John Stuart Mill, in his libertarian mood, would endorse: people should be free to do whatever they want, provided only that they do no harm to others. It is a moral that can also be drawn from Locke's writings about the natural freedom and equality of man in the state of nature. The law of nature governing the state of nature, which according to Locke is reason, teaches that men ought to refrain from harming one another (and especially from violating each other's property rights), but his way of putting this restriction implies no very onerous duties with respect to benefiting the rest of mankind. Indeed, he implicitly denies that anyone can rightly claim to know what constitutes the good of others. In short, if Empedocles wants to create a sensation by his sudden disappearance, leaving the more credulous to think that he must have been the incarnation of a god, no one should stand in his way.

Burke alludes to this passage in the Ars Poetica in order to contrast his own more charitable view with that of the hard-hearted Roman. Metaphysically or in theory, men may have the right to dispose of themselves however they wish, but in reality, the wise, or at least the clear-headed, must take responsibility for their more foolish fellows. 'Men have no right to what is not reasonable and to what is not for their benefit,' Burke says. So no matter whether it was a mad poet or a divine or a politicians who was contemplating a leap into the flames, Burke would try to keep him from doing so. 'More wise, because more charitable, thoughts would urge me rather to save the man than to preserve his brazen slippers as the monuments of his folly.' (71)

The real volcano Burke had in mind was of course not Etna but rather the 'volcanic

revolution' that had been overturning French life since the beginning of 1789, when Louis XVI, desperate for more taxes, had summoned the States-General to meet for the first time since 1614. In 1790, as Burke was writing, French political institutions were being recast according to the principles of natural equality, individual rights, and an active popular sovereignty. Some would say – were saying – that these are sound principles and that the French had every right to do what they were doing. Government is for the people; it should ideally be by the people; and the people must ultimately be its judge. There can be no right to rule a people contrary to its own will, without its consent. For Burke, however, the unqualified assertion of these principles and the attempt to put them into practice were disastrous errors, as foolish as jumping into a volcano.

Burke's Reflections are in the form of a letter to a young French nobleman, but the readers he had in mind were plainly English, and the real occasion for his writing seems to have been an objectionable sermon preached 4 November 1789 to a little-known club of dissenters, the Revolution Society, by a non-conforming minister, Dr Richard Price. The Society, which apparently existed to celebrate the principles of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, had for some years been gathering annually to hear a sermon in one of their churches on the anniversary of the Revolution. Almost nothing would be known of this obscure club today were it not for Burke's 'inexpressible surprise' when he learned that they had, 'in a sort of public capacity, by a congratulatory address, [given] an authoritative sanction to the proceedings of the National Assembly in France.' (6) Burke's Reflections are at bottom an exposure of the errors of this address and of the reasoning that underlay it, as found in the sermon of Dr Price, which had preceded its adoption.

In 1790 the upheaval in France was still in its relatively moderate, constitutional phase – the attempted escape and subsequent execution of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, the war with Austria, the expulsion of the Girondins, the Feasts of Reason, the Terror, the Directory, and Napoleon were still hidden in the future – but the overall tendency of the turmoil and the form of constitution it would favour were becoming clear. 'It appears to me,' Burke wrote, 'as if I were in a great crisis not of the affairs of France alone, but of all Europe, perhaps of more than Europe. All circumstances taken together, the French revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world. . . . Everything seems out of nature in this strange chaos of levity and ferocity, and of all sorts of crimes jumbled together with all sorts of follies. In viewing this monstrous tragicomic scene, the most opposite passions necessarily succeed and sometimes mix with each other in the mind: alternate contempt and indignation, alternate laughter and tears, alternate scorn and horror.' (9)

Burke experienced a kind of vertigo at the prospect raised by these events and especially at the possibility, represented by Dr Price and his sermon, 'of connecting the affairs of France with those of England by drawing us into an imitation of the conduct of the National Assembly.' (8) It was as if he and his compatriots were standing on the brink of a volcano. He wished not just to warn them of the dangers they faced but if possible to prevent them from losing their balance and plunging into the chaos. But with what means and on what authority?

Abstract Theory

The difficulty was that the principles to which the revolutionists – their leaders in France and their sympathizers in Britain – appealed were, it seemed, the principles underlying the British constitution that Burke, as a prominent and reflective Whig, had vigorously defended in a political career that had begun thirty years earlier. They were the principles most clearly set out in Locke's influential Second Treatise of Government. No quick abridgement of Locke's argument will do it justice (this may be one of Burke's basic points). Nonetheless, one could say that man, according to Locke, is naturally free to do as he thinks fit 'within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.' This natural state of man is therefore one of equality: nothing is more evident, Locke says, 'than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection.'[3] Consequently, political or civil society, with its laws to restrain the wayward impulses of its members and with its rulers and judges to exercise authority over them, must come into existence by means of a compact or agreement among these free and equal persons. The institutions and authorities are the creatures of convention, and their creators must retain the right to resist and, if necessary, to overthrow any government they have established, should it prove to be serving its own interests rather than theirs. These are the principles Dr Price reiterated, in the new circumstances of 1789, in his sermon. In 1688, he said, the people of England had vindicated their right to liberty of conscience in religious matters, their right to resist power when abused, and their right to choose their own governors, to cashier them for misconduct, and to frame a government for themselves. 'On these three principles, and more especially the last, was the Revolution founded. Were it not true that liberty of conscience is a sacred right; that power abused justifies resistance; and that civil authority is a delegation from the people – Were not . . . all this true; the Revolution would have been not an assertion, but an invasion of rights; not a Revolution, but a Rebellion.'[4] The French were now, belatedly but happily, acting on these principles, and the English, he thought, needed to be reminded of them.

How was Burke to dissent from such orthodox 'dissent'? The problem facing Burke was not the scholarly one of determining exactly what Locke intended to say, so that we can understand his claims exactly as he understood them. Burke shows no interest in the close scholarly reading of any of his predecessors. In his Reflections, he nowhere mentions Locke, and only rarely does he refer to him elsewhere. The problem for Burke was rather that of providing an interpretation of Lockean reasoning (and British political practice) that would provide safer and truer guidance in dangerous circumstances than was being offered by Dr Price and his friends.

To this end, Burke did two things. First, he explained the practically important differences between the English revolution of 1688-1689 and the French revolution of a century later. The crucial difference has to do with the principles to which their leaders appealed. The French claimed to be establishing a new regime on the basis of popular sovereignty. As Burke says elsewhere, the 'fundamental and fatal principle' of the new French government is that 'in every country the people is the legitimate sovereign.'[5] The leaders of the parliamentary forces in the earlier revolution were more prudent. Burke denies that any evidence can be found in the records of their revolution of any claim to 'a right to choose our own governors.' (17)

Admittedly, he concedes, there was, under the compulsion of necessity, 'a small and temporary deviation from the strict order of a regular hereditary succession.' (16) But the statesmen of that time were careful to maintain the principle of hereditary rule, even as they deviated from it. 'The crown was carried somewhat out of the line in which it had before moved, but the new line was derived from the same stock. It was still a line of hereditary descent, still an hereditary descent in the same blood, though an hereditary descent qualified by Protestantism.' (19-20) The mistake of Dr Price and his followers in the Revolution Society, Burke says, was to take the deviation from the principle for the principle itself.

Burke's second, more theoretical-sounding (and perhaps therefore more convincing) criticism has to do with what it means to say that civilized society is founded upon an original contract between free and equal persons. It does not mean that men today are essentially, for all practical purposes, free and equal. Natural equality, rightly understood, is quite compatible with conventional inequalities that are not simply 'conventional,' for much happened during that long time that separates primitive man and the tiny societies of the most remote human past from their contemporary civilized namesakes. Contract theorists who imagine free individuals constituting civil society by their agreement to accept its obligations provide a useful simplification for some purposes, but one that can be misleading in so far as it suggests the possibility of abandoning or fundamentally modifying the course of development embarked upon eons ago. Contemporary men, born into civilized societies, discover themselves and their freedom within complex networks of social relations with corresponding rights and duties that were unknown in the primitive state and that are no longer simply matters of choice. Differences in aptitudes that would have been hardly noticeable among primitive men in the simplest conditions are now elicited and developed by education and specialization. Where once there may have been practical equality, there are now vast differences in capacities and responsibilities.

Locke's abridgement of a very long and complicated history abstracts from these inescapable realities. It encourages those like Dr Price to think that they can enjoy all the rights of the primitive state together with all the advantages of civilized society. This was the most basic error of the radicals of his own time, Burke thought. Admittedly it is tempting to think that the purposes for which men entered civil society must provide the standard by which it should now be judged, but the creature has in the meantime transformed the creator. Man is no longer primitive man with primitive needs and impulses but rather civilized man with civilized rights and duties. He can no longer plead the rights of childhood against the duties of adulthood. Dr Price and his friends insist on doing so because they fail to see that civil society, the product of convention, must now be governed by convention. '<u>And how can any man claim under the conventions of civil society rights which do not so much as suppose its existence – rights which are absolutely repugnant to it?</u>' (52, Burke's italics)

Among the rights of 'civil social man' (52) is the right to be restrained by superior wisdom or prudence. When standing on the brink of a volcano, individually or collectively, there is no right to do whatever one may will. Rather it is one's right to have one's wayward impulses thwarted by those in a position (and hence with the obligation) to govern them.

Government – 'a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants' (not to uphold rights or liberties) – must frequently impose restraints on the passions of those under its authority. 'Society requires not only that the passions of individuals should be subjected, but that even in the mass and body, as well as in the individuals, the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection.' (52) The simple theory of popular sovereignty denies this need for authoritative restraint, which can be imposed on the collectivity – men in the mass – only by 'a power out of themselves, and not, in the exercise of its function, subject to that will and those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue. In this sense the restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights.' (52-3, Burke's italics)

Burke's objections to 'abstract theory' and 'political metaphysics' are well known. For example, immediately following the passage just quoted, he says that the relevant liberties and restrictions, since they vary with times and circumstances and admit of infinite modifications, 'cannot be settled upon any abstract rule; and nothing is so foolish as to discuss them upon that principle.' (53) It would be strange, however, if his objection were to the application of intelligence to practical matters, as if mental and verbal agility were alien to the craft of politics. Evidently his demand is for even greater delicacy and skill than the 'clumsy subtilty' usually shown by the 'metaphysicians' who dabble in politics. (51) They tend to abstract from essentials, ignoring the circumstances that render the application of any scheme or principle beneficial or noxious. (7) 'What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them. In that deliberation I shall always advise to call in the aid of the farmer and the physician rather than the professor of metaphysics.' (53)

The Value of Tradition

Burke appealed to 'tradition' and 'experience' rather than to 'theory,' but his reverence for tradition is easily exaggerated, and it would be an uninteresting kind of conservatism – not Burke's conservatism – that could be defined simply by its reverence for any tradition. To be sure, Burke was not an adventurous experimenter in politics, willing to 'roll the dice' for any plausible scheme. 'A spirit of innovation,' he says, 'is generally the result of a selfish temper and confined views' (29) and 'it is with infinite caution that a man ought to venture upon pulling down an edifice which has answered in any tolerable degree for ages the common purposes of society, or on building it up again without having models and patterns of approved utility before his eyes.' (53-4) But he also says, of course, that 'a state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation.' (19) And one doesn't have to be a Burke to see that 'reverence for tradition' may not be selective enough among competing traditions or responsive enough to changing circumstances to offer much practical guidance.

To begin to get a clearer understanding Burke's relation to tradition, two points are worth highlighting. First, he says that 'there is no qualification for government but virtue and wisdom, actual or presumptive.' (44) No country can be well governed that does not make good use of its

most intelligent, experienced, and public-spirited citizens, its 'natural aristocracy.'[6] To do so, it must avoid giving too much influence to those whose only claims are great wealth, noble family, and good breeding, but it must also avoid giving more influence than necessary to those with the opposite claims, in short, the people. 'No rotation; no appointment by lot; no mode of election operating in the spirit of sortition or rotation can be generally good in a government conversant with extensive objects.' (44) The road to eminence and power should be open to those from humble beginnings, but the ascent ought not to be made too easy. 'The temple of honour ought to be seated on an eminence. If it be opened through virtue, let it be remembered, too, that virtue is never tried but by some difficulty and some struggle.' (44)

Burke, a commoner, had no desire 'to confine power, authority, and distinction to blood and names and titles.' (44) Early in this Reflections, he makes it plain that he is not a Tory. He has no more respect for those 'exploded fanatics of slavery' – those 'old fanatics of single arbitrary power' – than he has for 'our new fanatics of popular arbitrary power [who] maintain that a popular election is the sole lawful source of authority.' (23) The old dogmatists maintained that 'the crown is held by divine hereditary and indefeasible right,' 'as if monarchy had more of a divine sanction than any other mode of government.' But the absurdity of their belief in divine right should not discredit a more limited claim to hereditary authority based in 'solid principles of law and policy.' Its absurdity does not justify going to the opposite extreme. 'If all the absurd theories of lawyers and divines were to vitiate the objects in which they are conversant, we should have no law and no religion left in the world.' (23)

Burke saw no merit in either of the simple, unqualified forms of government, that is, monarchy and democracy. 'The nature of man is intricate; the objects of society are of the greatest possible complexity; and, therefore, no simple dispositions or direction of power can be suitable either to man's nature or to the quality of his affairs. When I hear the simplicity of contrivance aimed at and boasted of in any new political constitutions, I am at no loss to decide that the artificers are grossly ignorant of their trade or totally negligent of their duty. The simple governments are fundamentally defective, to say no worse of them.' (54) Later Burke returns to this theme, invoking the authority of Aristotle to support his opinion that 'an absolute democracy, no more than an absolute monarchy, is to be reckoned among the legitimate forms of government.' (109)

Burke defended the Whig ideal of a 'balanced' constitution. Formally, this was a constitution like the 18th century British constitution, which combined hereditary monarchy (a king or queen with some real independent power), oligarchy with a leaven of aristocracy (the House of Lords), and a limited democracy (the House of Commons) in a system of checked and balanced authority. More specifically, Burke pointed to the importance of maintaining a balance at the heart of government between talent (with its energy and fondness for innovation) and wealth (with its fearful resistance to change). 'Nothing is a due and adequate representation of a state that does not represent its ability as well as its property. But as ability is a vigorous and active principle, and as property is sluggish, inert, and timid, it can never be safe from the invasion of ability unless it be, out of all proportion, predominant in the representation.' (44) The wealthy, especially those with land, are the necessary ballast in the ship of state. 'Though

hereditary wealth and the rank that goes with it are too much idolized by creeping sycophants and the blind, abject admirers of power, they are too rashly slighted in shallow speculations of the petulant, assuming, short-sighted coxcombs of philosophy. Some decent, regulated preeminence, some preference (not exclusive appropriation) given to birth is neither unnatural, nor unjust, nor impolitic.' (45)

Second, Burke says that our knowledge of politics and government comes from experience. 'The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught a priori.' (53) In other words, it is not a deductive science from first principles, amenable to any kind of 'geometrical' presentation, nor is it something to be found (it seems) in sacred scripture. It is more like statistically-based medical research dealing with the various effects – beneficial and unwanted – of various possible therapies. 'The real effects of moral causes are not always immediate; but that which in the first instance is prejudicial may be excellent in its remoter operation, and its excellence may arise even from the ill effects it produces in the beginning. The reverse also happens: and very plausible schemes, with very pleasing commencements, have often shameful and lamentable conclusions.' (53)

Burke's political science has a surprisingly 'pragmatic' or 'scientific' character. He considered general principles in light of their practical political effects as shown over many years. He looked beneath the forms to the substance of rule. His observations are more 'empirical' than 'normative' and more 'sociological' than 'philosophical.' For example, the composition of the French States-General, and particularly the Third Estate, draws from him some striking observations about leaders and led. 'In all bodies, those who will lead must also, in a considerable degree, follow. They must conform their propositions to the taste, talent, and disposition of those whom they wish to conduct; therefore, if an assembly is viciously or feebly composed in a very great part of it, nothing but a supreme degree of virtue as very rarely appears in the world, and for that reason cannot enter into calculation, will prevent the men of talent disseminated through it from becoming only the expert instruments of absurd projects!' (36) Burke's analysis would fit easily into contemporary political psychology and sociology.[7]

Similarly, Burke's brief remarks about levelling movements in politics anticipate the 'iron law of oligarchy' and the 'circulation of elites' made famous by 'Machiavellian' social scientists such as Roberto Michels and Vilfredo Pareto: 'Believe me, Sir, those who attempt to level never equalize. In all societies, consisting of various descriptions of citizens, some description must be uppermost. The levelers, therefore, only change and pervert the natural order of things; they load the edifice of society by setting up in the air what the solidity of the structure requires to be on the ground.' (43) (By doing so, they may hope to raise themselves to a higher station.)

Perhaps the most intriguing of Burke's scientific dissents from radical orthodoxy was his bold acceptance of 'prejudice.' We English, he said, 'are generally men of untaught feelings, [and], 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.' (76) The more speculative and critical of his compatriots, he said, practice the art of interpretation like that of Averroes. 'Instead of exploding general prejudices, [they] 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.' (76)

Burke goes on to say that the English know and instinctively feel that 'religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and of all comfort.' (79) So convinced are his compatriots of this, he says, that no amount of superstitious rust, accumulated over the ages, will lead them to prefer impiety to religious devotion. 'We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long.' (80) There is, as it were, an iron law of superstition ensuring that the discrediting of one will just open the way to another.[8] If the traditional religion were to be discredited, something no different fundamentally – though perhaps less benign – would have to fill its place. 'We are apprehensive (being well aware that the mind will not endure a void) that some uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition might take place of it.' (80)

Finally, Burke recognizes that situations sometimes develop where all the old rules, even the most sacred, must be at least temporarily suspended. In these extreme situations, laws and constitutions are put aside – 'tribunals fall to the ground with the peace they are no longer able to uphold' (26) – and the issue is settled by force of arms (Locke's 'appeal to Heaven'). 'When things are in that lamentable condition, the nature of the disease is to indicate the remedy to those whom nature has qualified to administer in extremities this critical, ambiguous, bitter potion to a distempered state. The wise will determine from the gravity of the case; the irritable, from sensibility to oppression; the high-minded, from disdain and indignation at abuses of power in unworthy hands; the brave and the bold, from the love of honourable danger in a generous cause; but, with or without right, a revolution will be the very last resource of the thinking and the good.' (27) A little further on in his Reflections he paints a little grimmer picture of these rare emergencies: 'the statues of Equity and Mercy might be veiled for a moment. The tenderest minds, confounded with the dreadful exigency in which morality submits to the suspension of its own rules in favour of its own principles, might turn aside while fraud and violence were accomplishing the destruction of a pretended nobility which disgraced, while it persecuted, human nature. The persons most abhorrent from blood, and treason, and arbitrary confiscation might remain silent spectators of this civil war between the vices.' (118-19) But thankfully, Britain was not at this juncture when Burke wrote, and France, he maintained, had not been there when its revolution began.

Scholarly Questions

The goal of this paper has been to abstract a teachable theory from Burke's lengthy and

somewhat confusing Reflections on the Revolution in France. I have not addressed any of the difficult scholarly questions raised by those who try to make sense of all of Burke's writings and not just his anti-revolutionary writings of the 1790s. Did he expound a consistent and profound doctrine or should he rather be seen as essentially a politician who, despite an undeniable flair for philosophical-sounding rhetoric, professed whatever principles would serve the cause he was committed to defending? How should he be fitted into the history of political thought? The answer may be clear if the categories are tradition and progress, or conservatism, liberalism, and socialism, but it is not so clear, as the scholarly literature shows, when it is a question whether Burke should be regarded as an exponent of natural law or of British utilitarianism. Was he a disciple of Hooker and Locke or of Hume and Smith? And is he rightly seen as a source of the historical consciousness represented by Hegel and his successors, or is there no real evidence of their historicism in his writings?

These difficult scholarly questions obviously cannot be dealt with on the basis of a single text, even if it is Burke's greatest. Nonetheless, some tentative responses to them may be apparent from what I have said, and there is nothing to be gained from hiding my hunches. I have read Burke on the assumption that he is consistent and profound – why else read him? – and I have seen nothing so far that forces me to abandon this 'working hypothesis.' How Burke should be fitted into the history of political thought obviously depends not just on what he wrote but on how that long and complicated history is to be simplified and summarized. Much depends on how Locke's writings are to be understood. Was Locke, at bottom, an exponent of the natural law, not so different from Hooker and even Aquinas, or was he, as Leo Strauss contended, someone who broke decisively with the natural law tradition in political thought? What was Burke's relation to Hume? The Whig seems to be at odds with the Tory, but perhaps there is more affinity below the surface than is suggested by these opposing labels, for Hume's moral philosophy may not be as skeptical as it seems when attention is focussed on his most quotable declarations about how reason must serve the passions and how statements in the indicative mood cannot imply statements in the optative mood.[9]

Only with respect to 'historicism' have I found it possible to draw something like a conclusion – the basis for a broader 'thesis' – from reading Burke's Reflections, for I find it difficult to make sense of that book's argument without an assumption that can be called 'historicist.' Of course, 'historicism' and 'historicist' are used as shorthand for a number of different ideas. I am using them here to refer to Burke's way of rebutting the claims of the radicals about popular sovereignty and the right of the people to 'cashier' a king. Confronting the turmoil in France, Burke did not revert to the Tory belief in 'divine hereditary and indefeasible right,' but neither did he accept the 'democratic' reading of social contract theories. He seems to me to be saying that much of great moral and political significance happened between the most remote past ('the beginning of political societies,' as visualized by Locke) and the present day. Very broadly, one could say that our collective knowledge has increased (particularly various kinds of practical know-how), our sympathies have been extended, and our moral intuitions have been refined. With these changes has grown an awareness that wisdom and virtue confer both rights and responsibilities – the right to govern others and the responsibility to care for them. The radicals of Burke's time tended to see the changes they

observed in a different light, which they called 'enlightenment.' They thought they were witnessing the emergence of humanity as a whole from a world of darkness and superstition into the light of reason and universal benevolence. (As one of them said, 'the light of science' had shown that the mass of mankind had not been born 'with saddles on their backs, nor a favoured few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God.') Burke was by contrast a more 'classical' thinker: he seems to have understood the changes preceding his own time as the emergence of some into a somewhat clearer light, but for the rest, no more than an alteration in their superstitions – from a superstitious belief in monarchy to an equally superstitious belief in its antithesis, democracy.

It may be misleading to use such big words – 'historicism' and 'historicist' – for this modest change. Whether such language is justified would depend on a closer scrutiny of what Burke wrote not just in his Reflections but in his other works as well. I have just scratched the surface of his thought, but I hope that enough has been revealed to dispel two interpretations of his conservatism that tend to mislead those encountering it for the first time. First, there is the idea that Burke's conservatism, like any conservatism, or indeed any of the rival 'isms,' is essentially a matter of values: political theories are basically collections of values, and all are free to mix and match these values to suit their interests and tastes. From this perspective, Burke's value commitments, however they are to be explained, biographically or historically, are more important than any reasons he may have given for them. Second, there is the idea that nothing in Burke's Reflections is more theoretical than his opposition to the spirit of theory in practical affairs. He shows the danger of an abstractly moralistic approach to politics. Theory simplifies and thus distorts the reality that practical men and women have to grapple with. By exposing the folly and evil of the first revolution made by 'men of letters,' Burke teaches us to put our faith not in theory and theoreticians but in the prudence of those with practical experience in the school of hard knocks.

I have been trying to outline an alternative to these easy and familiar ways of summing up Burke's thought. I have highlighted his defence of authority. It provides, at least in outline, a scientific and historical justification for political authority that differs fundamentally from the most important competing interpretations – that such authority is based on divine command (and apostolic succession) or on individual consent. The first of these more traditional views has the disadvantage of inflaming religious passions; the second, of sapping the foundations of social order. Burke's theory, on the other hand, better accommodates some important facts: that we learn from experience, that some learn faster and better than others, and (more debatably) that our insights determine our responsibilities. Its weakness is perhaps the encouragement it gives to 'historical relativism,' as may be suggested by some concluding reflections on the revolution in conservatism since Burke wrote.

Burke Today

Burke's conservatism bears surprisingly little resemblance to today's conservatism, at least in the Anglo-American world, and this complicates the use of his Reflections as the classic text of conservative theory. The divergence between his conservatism and ours was less

apparent a generation or two ago, when socialism was still a live option. Its revolutionary and democratic slogans, like those of the Jacobins, stood in sharp contrast to Burke's sober realism. The situation is now quite different, however. Liberal socialists like Bob Rae are on the defensive and they find some merit in Burke's apparent willingness to defend any status quo, even that of a disfunctional welfare state. Conservatives, on the other hand, now seem to be the zealots in the grip of a theory about free markets (the fiscal conservatives) and popular sovereignty (the moral majoritarians), and their invocations of Burke often seem half-hearted.

Burke's opposition to 'abstract theory' was more specifically an opposition to democratic theory. This creates some basic difficulties that are not easily brushed aside, for we are now more or less comfortably settled in the volcano he warned us about. A balanced constitution of the kind he favoured would now be a radical innovation based not on experience, it would seem, but on some abstract theory dreamed up by intellectual dandies like Russell Kirk. Such balance as we in fact have depends on the political power of senior bureaucrats (lawyers, accountants, economists, pollsters, statisticians, etc.) and judges – groups that tend not to be very popular with either fiscal or social conservatives.

Similarly, our contemporary piety has more to do with the kinds of things called 'political correctness' than with those now collected under 'religion.' Sincere private commitment to a 'faith community' involved in good works still earns some worldly credit, but any significant departure from the norm of religious neutrality in 'the public square' raises an alarm. To restore an established church of the kind Burke favoured would be a shocking departure from our moral and political axioms, beyond anything contemplated by our social conservatives. Even our mild-mannered fiscal conservatives tend to be seen as dangerous dissenters: they must deal with the widespread suspicion that they, like Dr Price, are wild-eyed fanatics bent on denying truths that appeal not just to our bare reason but also to our deepest moral intuitions. The defenders of our secular orthodoxy, on the other hand, might find much of interest in Burke's defence of prejudice, if only they could overcome their prejudice against prejudice.

Finally, Burke's theorizing is surprisingly close in spirit to contemporary social science. He was unquestionably an elitist rather than a populist democrat. But the question is, what kind of elitist would scorn the help of the professors of metaphysics but welcome the assistance of farmers and physicians? Well, an elitist who was more 'empirical' than 'normative' and more 'quantitative' than 'qualitative.'

In short, one is tempted to ask whether there is any justification any longer for regarding Burke as a genuinely conservative writer. Not only does his rhetoric appeal to some socialists and liberals, but there is more than a touch of neo-conservatism and aristocratic radicalism in his reasoning, which should perhaps be given more attention when presenting his political thought to today's students. At the very least, the problems created by the divergence of his practical conservatism from ours have to be recognized or our students are going to be totally confused about why they are being asked to struggle with his bewildering Reflections.

Endnotes

1. Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 43-59, which is given the title quoted above in the analysis of Burke's text by Oskar Piest, in the edition published in the Library of Liberal Arts (Bobbs-Merrill) in 1955. Henceforth references to the Reflections will be to the Pocock edition by means of parenthetical page numbers in the text.

2. Horace, Ars Poetica, 466-7 (trans. Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library).

3. John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, II, 4.

4. Richard Price, A Discourse on the Love of Our Country (London: T. Cadell, 1789), 34-5. Cf. Burke, Reflections, 14.

5. 'Observations on the Conduct of the Minority,' in Works of Edmund Burke, ed. F. W. Raffety (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), V, 328. The passage continues: 'This confounds, in a manner equally mischievous and stupid, the origin of a government from the people with its continuance in their hands.' Unfortunately, the Reflections are lacking in short, quotable statements of the fundamental principle of revolutionary politics that Burke rejected, but see his introductory remarks, pp. 12-14, and the observations near the end on discipline in democratic armies, especially p. 193: 'The right of a man . . . is to be his own governor and to be ruled only by those to whom he delegates that self-government.' In the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the relevant article is the third: 'Le principe de toute souveraineté réside essentiellement dans la nation: nul corps, nul individu ne peut exercer d'autorité qui n'en émane expressément.'

6. There is a good statement of this natural aristocracy as Burke conceived it in his Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs: 'A true natural aristocracy is not a separate interest in the state, or separable from it. It is an essential integrant part of any large body rightly constituted. It is formed out of a class of legitimate presumptions, which, taken as generalities, must be admitted for actual truths. To be bred in a place of estimation; to see nothing low and sordid from one's infancy; to be taught to respect one's self; to be habituated to the censorial inspection of the public eye; to look early to public opinion; to stand upon such elevated ground as to be enabled to take a large view of the widespread and infinitely diversified combinations of men and affairs in a large society; to have leisure to read, to reflect, to converse; to be enabled to draw the court and attention of the wise and learned, wherever they are to be found – to be habituated in armies to command and to obey; to be taught to despise danger in the pursuit of honour and duty; to be formed to the greatest degree of vigilance, foresight, and circumspection, in a state of things in which no fault is committed with impunity, and the slightest mistakes draw on the most ruinous consequences – to be led to a guarded and regulated conduct, from a sense that you are

considered as an instructor of your fellow-citizens in their highest concerns, and that you act as a reconciler between God and man – to be employed as an administrator of law and justice, and to be thereby amongst the first benefactors to mankind – to be a professor of high science, or of liberal and ingenuous art – to be amongst rich traders, who from their success are presumed to have sharp and vigorous understandings, and to possess the virtues of diligence, order, constancy, and regularity, and to have cultivated a habitual regard to commutative justice – these are the circumstances of men that form what I should call a natural aristocracy, without which there is no nation.' Works, V, 100-101.

7. There is a broader and more pungent formulation of the same basic point in the 'Letter to a Member of the National Assembly': 'As to the people at large, when once these miserable sheep have broken the fold, and have got themselves loose, not from the restraint, but from the protection of all the principles of natural authority, and legitimate subordination, they become the natural prey of impostors. When they have once tasted of the flattery of knaves, they can no longer endure reason, which appears to them only in the form of censure and reproach.' Works, IV, 285.

8. Cf. Burke's early and strangely revealing Vindication of Natural Society.

9. Cf. Burleigh Taylor Wilkins, The Problem of Burke's Political Philosophy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 46-7 and 50-5.