

METAPHYSICS OF EDMUND BURKE'S POLITICAL LEGACY AND THE PRESENT SOCIETY

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Abstract

While it is easy to pin point the political contributions of theorists like Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau etc. scholars usually disagree on what should constitute Edmund Burke's unique political legacy. Hence, he has often been characterized as the father of modern conservatism, an opponent of the natural law theory, an advocate of the principle of separation of power and the unrepentant critic of British imperialism. He has also been characterized as the foremost advocate of the American Revolution and the most outspoken critic of the French Revolution. The list could go on and on. These characterizations usually present Burke as an inconsistent political theorist, who vacillates from one political ideology to another. While not disputing the inconsistency charge against Burke, this paper employs the method of analysis to investigate the implication of Burke's contribution to the growth of political ideologies and what implication such contribution can have for current Nigerian society. The paper discovered that this contribution does not lie in the consistency of his thought but in the rich complexity of his thought and disparity he drew between theory and praxis in the political arena. The paper thus agrees with Burke that the application of political principles for change, especially in a time of great social and political turmoil like ours, should not only take cognizance of existing institutions but should not also be revolutionary, gradual and institutional. The paper therefore concludes that anybody who would destroy long standing political institutions and cultural values in order to impose abstract meta-political concepts of rights and justice is grossly mistaken. The recommendation of the paper is that any attempt to change the existing structure of society should both be cautious and gradual since social institution, whether considered just or unjust is the result of complex and sophisticated interactions and concession of conflicting human values.

Introduction

Edmund Burke's political philosophy as interpreted over the years by scholars is like the famous fable of blind men describing an elephant. On this ground, Burke has been associated with many and often conflicting political ideologies. For instance, Burke is recognized by most modern conservatives as the founding father of conservative political philosophy. Kramnick (Kramnick, 1977, 96) had argued that "Edmund Burke lives in the popular imagination as the prophet of modern political conservatism." "Burke" insists Kramnick "stands to conservatism much in the same way that John Locke stands in relation to liberalism, or Karl Marx to communism: as a foundational thinker who established the basic parameters of discourse defining these political ideologies." For much of the history of

Burke's scholarship, however, this was not how he was received. According to Morley (1993, 76) "Burke has led many lives in different periods of historical reception. He has been celebrated as a utilitarian reformer, a romantic critic of the Enlightenment, a Christian philosopher of Natural Law, and most recently a sophisticated critic of British imperialism and theorist of cultural difference." In international affairs, Burke has been claimed as a robust realist, perhaps most notably by a onetime United States' United Nations Ambassador John Bolton (Morley (1993, 76). For others, he is a master of post-colonial thought (Ryan, V. 2001). Most post-colonial thinkers see Burke's critique of imperialism, at the time when such liberal thinkers as Bentham and Mill justified empires particularly in India, as what sets Burke apart from the major political philosophers among English-speaking thinkers (Wood, N. 1964).

All of these interpretations illuminate distinct patterns of thinking in the rich tapestry of Burke's writing without giving the reader any confident sense of interpretive finality. There is something in Burke that resists being fit into the ready-made paradigms that often frame scholarship in the history of political thought. In this paper, we do not intend to place Burke into any of the normal categorization of the mainstream ideological schools. Our desire is to undertake a rigorous analysis of Burke's ideas in view of putting to rest once and for all, the controverted quest for his political legacy; and in so doing draw implication of what such rich legacy holds for contemporary. The excursion will begin with a delineation of the main tenets in Burke's theory of state. From this, it focuses on Burke's legacy, its implication for our time.

1.0. The Tenets of Burke's Political Theory

1.1. The Nature of Man

All societies are based on a particular view of human nature. Today's view, springing from Enlightenment philosophy, is that people are equal, interchangeable units of production and consumption. Differences of race, nationality, culture, gender and ability are seen as obstacles to social harmony which must be removed. Burke witnessed the emergence of this line of thought and condemned it. The intellectuals of his age blamed 'special ties' for causing conflict and injustice. A typical example of such thinking was Richard Price's *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*. Price (Hayek, 1960, 168) argued that patriotism was "a blind and

narrow principle, producing contempt of other countries” and he called upon people to become “citizens of the world.” Burke’s (1907, 27) most famous tract, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, strongly attacked Price. Instead of forcing people to conform to a model of an ‘ideal society’, Burke started by studying man’s true nature. He observed that real people were not abstract “men” but Englishmen, Frenchmen, Indians and the likes. Burke wrote: “We begin our public affections in our families... we pass on to our neighborhoods.” He accepted that human beings have distinctive identities, that we love our kin above strangers and that this must affect the type of society we create. It is not morally bad; it is simply the way we are. “To love the little platoon we belong to in society is the first principle of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind.”

Writing in the Age of Enlightenment, Burke parted rank from such philosophers as John Locke, who championed a faith in the perfectibility of humankind. Rejecting revolutionary change predicated on a facile faith in individual will, Burke held a particular disdain for Jean Jacques Rousseau, who argued that all rights and liberties were inherent in individuals in a pre-social state, and that political allegiance was a voluntary exercise that could be revoked if the state no longer served the general will of the people. Although his age was one of increasing secularization and faith in individual volition, Burke's political philosophy had deep religious underpinnings as he believed that the original covenant between God and man both prefigured and predestined the nature of all social contracts. Thus, government had a positive duty to provide a moral framework for the cultivation of a virtuous society. Burke’s spirited and thoughtful defense of faith, order, and historical continuity distinguish his contribution to political thought.

1.2. The Nature of Society

Like Aristotle, Burke believed that man is by nature a social animal. Therefore, he rejected every political theory of the origins of society based on the *a priori* assumption of a primitive or pre-civil “state of nature,” such as those propounded by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He refuted them with the aphorism, “Art is man’s nature.” Theories based upon a supposed “state of nature” were to Burke “the fairy land of philosophy” (Hayek, 1979). They were highly dangerous because they ignored history and opened the door to ideological, abstract speculations that substituted for the facts of history fictions that were

then taken for reality in practical politics. Social contract theories invariably conceived of society as consisting of so many isolated and self-sufficient individuals rather than corporate human beings living in organized communities. Burke was aware that the corporate conception of man requires studying him in the history of his development as a social animal that has always lived in society. This according to him was what the social contract theory philosophers failed to do. Instead of studying man and society in their organic nature Hobbes had substituted monarchical will, Locke majority will, and Rousseau collective will, and that all of them ended by replacing community with some form of collectivism.

Consequently, in defending the family, locality and nation, Burke stood for a natural, organic state as opposed to an artificial one based on planning. At a time when machines like steam engines were transforming the economy, many argued that society could also be planned and precision engineered. The French Revolution was an attempt to redesign a country in this way. Burke, along with the Romantic poets, preferred to base society on evolutionary nature, making it “a permanent body composed of transitory parts.”

Burke’s idea on society was also deeply informed by the thought of the Scottish Enlightenment. Philosophers such as Adam Ferguson, David Hume, and Adam Smith had conceived society and its complex web work of institutions—law, “manners,” morals, customs—as the outcome of a prolonged “process of cumulative growth” whereby man had advanced from a level of primitive savagery to high culture and civilization (44, 70). On such a view, social order appears as a product of the interplay of historically evolved institutions, habit and custom, objective law, and impersonal social forces. In the opinion of their contemporaries, what the Scottish philosophers had done was successfully to “resolve almost all that had formerly been ascribed to positive institution into the spontaneous and irresistible development of certain obvious principles,—and to show how little contrivance of political wisdom the most complicated and apparently artificial schemes of policy might have been erected.”

Burke understood social institutions to be the product of a complex historical process characterized by trial-and-error experimentation. He emphasized that the conditions of human flourishing must be cultivated through comprehension of the forces that sustain social order. To Burke’s mind, such cultivation demanded fine judgment, “prudence,” respect for the given and the grown. Through his eyes, civilized society appeared as a fragile growth;

arrogant and presumptuous “meddling” inspired by “visionary speculation” threatened to disturb the delicate social web-work and undo the work of ages, erode the historically transmitted ‘prejudices’ that upheld civilized society against the vulgar and the barbaric (Hayek, 1979, 52). Both Burke and his descendant Hayek were leery of the untutored and unsocial impulses that lie beneath man’s acquired civility; and each endeavored to refute all doctrines that undermined the authority of those “repressive or inhibitory” social rules that alone enables men to live together in any degree of freedom or peace (Hayek, 1960, 70).

Thus, Burke’s ‘conservatism,’ his profound regard, even reverence, for the intricate evolved pattern that was the British constitution. He revered that constitution because he perceived in it the foundation of the Englishman’s “ancient, indisputable laws and liberties”; he knew the “treasure of liberty” was hardly a ‘natural right,’ but the hard-won product of history and evolution. As we shall see, Burke’s reverential attitude toward human society was further deepened by his religious convictions. Particular historical societies were, for him, spiritual phenomena, “clauses in the great primeval contract of eternal society (Burk, 1881, 188); they were not things to be manipulated and controlled in accordance with fabulous schemes wrought by restless metaphysicians puffed up with self-importance and intellectual pretension. Thus, for Burke, the contemptuous dismissal of ‘irrational’ tradition, the desire to ‘wipe the slate clean’ and design society anew, merely testifies to a profound ignorance regarding the nature of social reality.

1.3. The Role of Reason in Human Affairs

Perhaps no other area of Burke’s thought is as congruent as his understanding of the role of reason in human affairs. Hayek (1988, 81), elaborate Burke’s position as: 1) the priority of social experience (or tradition) over reason; 2) the notion that inherited social institutions embody a “super-individual wisdom” which transcends that available to the conscious reasoning mind; and 3) the impotence of reason to ‘design’ a viable social order. Hayek learned from Burke, in short, that civilization is not the creation of the reasoning mind, but the unintended outcome of the spontaneous play of innumerable minds within a matrix of ‘non-rational’ or ‘supra-rational’ values, beliefs, and traditions. Burke’s insights into the limited role of reason in the social process became nothing less than a cornerstone of the Hayekian theoretical edifice.

Burke's enemy and object of constant attack is Enlightenment rationalism. Perhaps the most characteristic attribute of Enlightenment thought was its cavalier dismissal of 'irrational' tradition as mere superstition and prejudice. Through Enlightened eyes, inherited values, institutions, and customs appeared as the very embodiment of ignorance, 'reason' as the tool that would liberate man from the ancient fetters of oppression. Indeed, individual 'reason' was endowed with a most profound and exclusive constructive authority. Burke (1907, 32) argued on the contrary that there is an "intelligence incorporated in the inherited system of rules of conduct as well as in man's explicit thoughts about his surroundings." It is fair to say that for Burke rationality is as much an attribute of the social process as of the individual mind, a quality found "not only in the isolated individual consciousness but also in the network of evolved social institutions." The crucial aspect of such a view is that "men are in their conduct never guided exclusively by conscious rational understanding but also by rules of conduct of which they are rarely aware, and which they certainly have not consciously invented" (2001, 27).

Burke regarded the Enlightenment, as one of his interpreter's put it, as a "destructive movement of the human intellect, an intellect free from all social restraints convinced it can remodel society" in any image it chooses (Hayek, 1960, 110). Thus, Burke regarded the same phenomenon—the 'constructivist' mentality that recognizes no limits to the authority or competence of human reason—as a grave threat to the preservation of civilized order. For, Burke, the preservation of free government and civilized society depends upon man's willingness to be governed by certain inherited rules of individual and collective conduct whose origin, function, and rationale he may not fully comprehend.

The rationalist contempt for tradition, by contrast, is typically accompanied by the demand for the radical reconstruction of traditional moral and legal rules; from Rousseau through Rawls, the construction of new moralities and legal systems has been a major preoccupation of social theorists. Perhaps no other thought is as uncongenial to the modern rationalist temper as the idea that man is not free rationally to determine or 'choose' his ethical or legal framework; modern thought bears little trace of that "strong impression of the ignorance and fallibility of mankind" that long served to suppress such rationalistic hubris. Burke warned, however, that the endeavour to destroy inherited customs, morals, and prejudices must also destroy the humanistic liberal society engendered and sustained by such phenomena. Reason,

he warned, “is like a dangerous explosive which, handled cautiously, may be most beneficial, but if handled incautiously may blow up a civilization” (Hayek, 1978, 7).

1.4. Past, Present and Future are one

“People will not look forward to posterity”, Burke wrote, “who never look backward to their ancestors” (2001, 33-38). His famous definition of society was that it was a contract between the living, the dead and those who are yet to be born. Each individual is merely a cell in a larger body. The individual dies, but the body carries on. Therefore it is the body that matters. If we accept that we are citizens in an ‘eternal society’, we must never turn our backs on tradition because this age-old wisdom is the experience of our race. Tradition is a better guide to action than is abstract reason. This is because “the individual is foolish. The multitude is foolish; but the species is wise, as a species it almost always acts right” (218). Modern society embraces a dynamic change and sees the past as obsolete. It destroys the old to build the new. Burke called this ‘a liberal descent’ and warned against “unsocial, uncivil, unconnected chaos”. He urged respect for institutions on the same grounds as for men: “on account of their age and on account of those from whom they are descended”.

1.5. Putting our People First

Burke’s desire to make Britain into “one family, one body, one heart and soul” has important moral implications. Are we obliged to put our nations’ first, as we do with our families, even when outsiders and foreigners are more in need of our help? Must we stand by our own and related people in every conflict even when the world decrees that they are wrong? Burke’s answer to both questions was yes. He denounced Britons who befriended foreigners whilst oppressing their fellow countrymen. “To transfer humanity from its natural basis, our legitimate and home bred connections, to lose all feeling for those who have grown up by our sides....and to hunt abroad after foreign affections is a disarrangement of the whole system of our duties.” Such ‘displaced benevolence’ was ‘fatal to society’ and worse than bigotry (31).

1.6. Equality: A Monstrous Fiction

“As a Christian, Burke acknowledged a certain moral equality of mankind that is to be found by virtue in all conditions.” But egalitarianism as a political programme he opposed on two grounds. Firstly it was unjust; as it relied upon compulsion, encouraged envy and inevitably

leveled people down since leveling them up is impossible. (We know it is impossible because people are genetically unequal. Secondly, equality undermined the natural order of things, nature being hierarchical. Burke (1852, 1987, 62) believed that: “Political equality is against nature. Social equality is against nature. Economic equality is against nature. The idea of equality is subversive of order.” Since defying nature is unworkable, equality is “a monstrous fiction” (Ayling, 1988, 156). At worst, ambitious elites use equality as a pretext to reallocate resources to themselves. At best, well intentioned people see equality as no more than a benign aspiration. They think it would be just in theory but of course not when applied to themselves in practice, lest this endanger their own privileges. This is perhaps the greater error. Abstract principles, however appealing, cannot be applied directly to solve real political problems. Any attempt to do so will have futile or harmful results. There is no such thing as a political principle which is good in itself, but not practicable. If it is not practicable then it is not good.

1.7. Evaluation

Implication of Burke’s Legacy to Present Day Society

An appreciable evaluation of Burke’s political ideas and its implication for present day Nigerian society can only be achieved within the context of liberalism. This is because not only is liberalism the dominant ideology of our time but also because Burke develops his political ideas in response to enlightenment liberalism, especially the form embodied in the French Revolution. As Mehta (2013, 85) summarizes “liberalism’s core beliefs include the limits to political authority, constitutional principles of representation, universal suffrage, or claims of self-determination, including those of minority groups.” Indeed, liberalism grounds these core beliefs in an understanding of human nature that recognizes these capacities universally in all human beings.

Attempts by liberals, starting from the time of the French Revolution, to enthrone these values expressed especially as in the natural rights of men have been generating consequences that most times are not in the best interests of societies. Basically, there are two of these consequences that worth examination and which Burke’s political ideas can help today’s societies to address. The first consequence is the attempts to use revolution to force the structure of society to conform to these so called immutable rights of men. These attempts

are exemplified in the French Revolution and other bloody revolutionary trends that have swept the length and breadth of the globe since the so called natural rights of men were discovered by Enlightenment scholars. In each case and whenever and wherever these attempts to forcefully restructure societies occur, the justification by the revolutionists is always the same: the wish to overhaul the structure of societies and mould them in such a way that the natural rights of man are realized.

Burke's warning of the anti-social and anti-human consequences that such ill-conceived revolution harbour for the society is valid for our time. According to Burke, the natural rights of man that is important for civilization are not the abstract rationalists' conception of natural liberty projected by the Enlightenment. True, such rights are built in human nature, but their practical expression are manifested in the age honored traditional values and institutions that protect such values. Burke's position on this is informed by his believe in the limitation of pure reason to discover these natural principles of rights and justice. On his account, they cannot be discovered by human reason alone. Rather, they are the products of complex relationships between men, men and their environment and men and God. With the passage of time, these values are circumscribed within traditional institutions and become an ageless sources of interaction between the living and the dead. This way, these values through these institutions, connect all human beings who has passed through them, the past, the present and future generations. This is why Burke is very much in love with such institutions and warns that any attempt to replace them with ill-defined idea of metaphysical natural right would spell doom for man.

This is not to say that Burke is against civilization or change in human society. As an avid defender of constitutional freedom, Burke's contention is that any such change should be institutional and must come about gradually through the complex natural interaction between man and these institutions. Burke's voice is very important to the world today but especially to our country Nigeria when on account of institutional failure of the past, many young people are on the mission to tie the society down and build it afresh from their amateurish notion of liberty and justice. Changing for the better should be welcomed, but such change has to go hand-in-hand with existing institutions. These time-honoured institutions must not be jettisoned because they are the embodiment of the finest efforts of the finest mind in

society. They define a society and give the people their identity. To jettison, such institution is to deprive the people of their identity and a people without identity are no people at all.

Another problem that Burke's political legacy can help our society to address is associated with the differences in values and pace of civilization between societies. This problem lies in the suitable conditions, especially cultural conditions that permit a people to actualize the liberal capacities. Without the flourishing of "specific cultural and psychological conditions woven in as preconditions for the actualization of these core capacities," we encounter what Mehta calls liberal "exclusions, not inclusions" (49). Now there are civilizations that lack these preconditions, and in so lacking them, there is a place for justification of empire within the context of liberalism. In fact, there is a virtual imperative that liberalism seeks to guide, direct, and rule those who are as yet unable to actualize their capabilities, which lie dormant within their human nature. There is a space between the liberal conception of human nature and a civilization lacking the necessary preconditions to actualize these capacities. It is here that liberalism encounters the 'other' as stranger, with no familiarity, or sufficient basis for empathetic equality. Thus, the paradox of liberalism: it is Universal in its rationalist teleology towards self-determination via freedom and equality, and yet there are backward peoples not yet ready to realize their *telos*. This particular understanding has been used in the past by liberal scholars such as Mill and Bentham to justify slavery and colonization. In our time, it is especially used to justify wars and economic sanctions to promote democracy and other liberal ideals.

Herein enters Burke. His position that society cannot be organized purely on rational grounds is inescapable no matter how the liberals try to avoid that. Burke's insistence that civilization is the result of time honored interaction of people, their environments, values and the institutions that arise as a consequence of such interactions is an ultimate rebuke to the different forms of cultural imposition rampant in our time. It follows that Burke would frown at the men and women of our time from Europe and other parts of the civilized world who think they are doing humanity a favour by forcing people from less successful country to democratize. While people can be helped to build institutions that encourage democratization, civilization cannot be imposed from outside. It must not also bear the mark of Western civilization. Since it is the result of the complex relationship between people and their environment, it must be peculiar to people according to their environment and experiences.

Now, saying all this does not imply that Burke is against the existence of general principles that can be understood as so by all people. In other words, it is certainly the case that Burke's thought constitutes a full-fledged assault on abstract reason as applied to the spatial-temporal realm of politics. Yet Burke himself refuses to exclude universals from his thought as he claims in his "Speech on the Petition of the Unitarian Society" that "I never govern myself, no rational man ever did govern himself, by abstractions and universals." Burke (1792, 36) continues in the very next sentence, claiming that "I do not put abstract ideas wholly out of any question; because I well know that under that name I should dismiss principles, and that without the guide and light of sound, well-understood principles, all reasoning in politics, as in everything else, would be only a confused jumble of particular facts and details, without the means of drawing out any sort of theoretical or practical conclusion. For Burke, while principles are necessary for practical matters, they are "to be guided by circumstances," for to judge "contrary to the exigencies of the moment he may ruin his country forever." In commenting on this passage, Francis Canavan (1991) correctly points out that principles are necessary in making concrete moral judgments, but that principles must work in tandem with prudence, which Burke held to be the first of the moral virtues, as did Thomas Aquinas, as prudence takes into consideration principles while regarding circumstances. Thus, on the whole, Burke's importance and the legacy he bequests to our time constitute principally on his acceptance of the limitations of human reasoning and the role the same should play in the organization of society.

1.8. Conclusion

Despite Burke's valiant resistance, the 'French' doctrines he feared and despised have proved more congenial to the modern temper than the English ideals Burke himself championed. The past several centuries have witnessed the triumph of 'political freedom' over liberty-under-law; the fondness for techniques of conscious organization over spontaneous coordination; positivistic jurisprudence and scientific social science; Comte, Marx, and 'managed competition'; the war against traditional morality; the demand for rational justification of values; democratic despotism and radical equality; centralization of political power; officious universal interference—each and every one a derivative of the armed doctrine Burke dreaded.

Hayek, the most vocal advocate of conservatism - championing Burke's cause a century and a half later, did so, then, under the most unfortunate circumstances, for the twentieth-century

mind has been profoundly shaped by Enlightenment doctrines; the more “modest and humble creed” of Burke and his Whig forebears has long been on the defensive (Hayek, 1960, 8). The English ideal, the ideal of a “free government that tempers the opposite elements of liberty and restraint in one consistent work”, does not seem to set the modern heart on fire. Perhaps, however, it is still possible to hope that Burke’s and Hayek’s mutual “exertions in the struggle for the liberty of others” may yet prove not to have been in vain. Be that as it may, the integrity and wisdom of these two great thinkers constitute a steady beacon to inspire and guide those who are disheartened by the current headlong thrust towards metaphysical concept of human rights and social justice that have been threatening to undue not just civilization but also the human species itself.

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