**Burke on rationalism, prudence and reason of state**

Ferenc Hörcher

The aim of this essay is to show that Burke’s criticism of French Enlightenment rationalism and the political theology of British revolutionary dissenters, like Priestley and Price, is not a form of irrational reactionary dogmatism. In this sense the chapter criticizes the picture painted of Burke by Strauss and others, and presents him rather as an enlightened and rational critic of dogmatic rationalism as a political ideology. Relying on such different interpreters of Burke as Pocock and Canavan, I argue two points:

1. To show that Burke was in favor of a more realistic understanding of politics, as he thought that radical changes are not possible without even more radical risks. And…  
2. To argue that accepting this more realistic, skeptical account of the political possibilities of change, does not commit one to relativism, as far as the defense of basic values are concerned in politics.

The first point is argued with reference to Hume’s political skepticism, and the well-known analysis of the Scottish Enlightenment and Burke by Pocock. The paper admits that those who claim that Burke comes close to the early modern discourse of reason of state have a point. Yet the present venture is dedicated to offer a more complex view of his position. Secondly, I argue that he in fact is not a relativist. This thesis is supported by Canavan’s Aristotelian-Ciceronian analysis of Burke. Burke’s skepticism about changing the world of politics is not value relativism, but a form of virtue, called by the ancient Romans as *prudentia*, by the Greek as *phronesis*, and it was carried over into Christian moral theory as a practical and intellectual virtue What is more, Burke’s prudence can be interpreted as coming close to “reason of state” in international relations. Finally, this paper is going to show that the Burkean defense of prudence in politics is in fact laying the groundwork for the modern political philosophy of conservatism, as understood in the British context, consisting of such values as common sense, tradition and the rule of law, all of them compatible with political rationality.