

Contributions of Edmund Burke

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Abstract: This inquiry seeks to establish that Edmund Burke offered insights into liberalism as well as conservatism. Burke studied and critiqued the French Revolution, from which he drew many impressions that would mold and shape his philosophy on life and morality of man. It helped shape his view of the relationship between church and state, the duties of the state and laws that govern it, and the framework for justification of a class hierarchy. Burke gained his insights on liberalism from his observations and critique of the French Revolution, reinforcing his beliefs in individuality and the ability of individuals to have certain freedoms of choice within their lives. Burke’s impressions on conservatism were perhaps the more influencing of the two impressions. Burke’s belief of religion being essential to instill the right moral order among men, along with a societal class system, would reinforce the idea of protecting the few from the many in a society. (Words: 154)

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This inquiry seeks to establish that Edmund Burke offered insights into liberalism as well as conservatism and examine the impressions that the French Revolution had upon him and his insights. To gain a broader understanding of the influences and ideology of Edmund Burke this inquiry will examine some of the original work of Burke as well as critiques of other influential men of the time. By examining Burke's original work, it gives the most unadulterated view of Burke and the lessons and principles he set out to establish from his learnings, and possibly how his influence permeates throughout our modern society today.

Burke (2001, 24-5) took great influence in his philosophy from the events of the French Revolution and the political life of England in late 1700s. Burke himself was a Whig and member of the church of England and could be said to be a supporter of reform albeit only through the proper legal avenues. Burke (2001, 25-6) was born an Irish citizen but held aspirations of joining the upper echelons of the old older English elites and politicians. Burke wasn't shy of hiding his Irish heritage but yearned for the life that he knew England could afford him through education and a more promising economy. This promising economy and the societal foundations that England had laid out and which Burke enjoyed, was of great influence to Burke's overall ideology and philosophies regarding the relationship between religion and state, the role of the government in society, and the overall class hierarchy, which Burke believed was the stitching holding the fabric of society together. Burke (2001, 34) was not a defender of the totalitarian monarchy system that England had employed historically before his time. Burke supported the notion of a societal class hierarchy, with business owners and nobility at the top. The upper class, working in tandem with government, with a key point in upholding religious values which inevitably created a system of law-abiding and controlled lower classes. The point of this system like, some of the American counterparts had argued for in their battle for

independence in 1776, was to protect the few from the many through laws and systemic protections from the state.

Impressions Drawn from French Revolution

Before the Revolution, Burke (2001, 31) purported that a country must have an established religion, aristocracy, as well as a monarchy and democracy with each working in supporting roles for each other. Burke being a religious man, believed that inequality arising in society was due to the decisions made by God and naturally from the market, and that it was a necessary consequence to further society by having a system of haves and have nots. Burke (2001, 150) observed the French Revolution as an illegal endeavor akin to an occupying force declaring sovereignty over lands which they rightfully had no authority and the betrayal of the business and industry leaders who supported the revolution.

Burke (2001, 152) saw the lower classes revolting against the monarchy and church that France had embraced as immoral because no due process was followed by the rebelling side. This seems somewhat contradictory, as one would know that the ruling party in France along with the church would never grant more liberties or freedoms nor economic prowess to the lower classes if it happened to threaten their status and rule. Burke (2001, 163) trusted in liberty and the establishment of rights through constitutions or a type of 'bill of rights', however Burke also sympathized with the ideas of divine right and hereditary appointment if it was written into law. Burke (2001, 69) appears to have despised the violence and lawlessness that he believed permeated and accompanied the French Revolution. Burke (2001, 69-70) concludes that France was similar to England, and like England, could come to work through the problems that led to the Revolution in a constitutional and humane manner. Burke (2001, 69-70) viewed the erosion of the church and the establishment of a new egalitarian government as the ultimate erosion of

the very stitches that held society together. By eroding the sense in civic duty and honest living that moral beliefs that the church epitomized, Burke saw only chaos in a sense of greed taking over. Class warfare and what could be described as combatting rent-seeking from citizens to the government would tear the country apart. Burke (2001, 255) was astounded at the redistribution of wealth and the betrayal of the owners of industry, since property that rightfully belonged to the monarchy and the church was stripped of their ownership and redistributed. Burke (2001, 261) also saw in the French Revolution a violation of the unwritten contracts that exist and permeate through societies. Burke seemingly sympathized with Aristotle on the subject which could be summed up to betraying the hand that has fed you and made you strong. Burke (2001, 260) summarized that reform should be taken with care and acted upon like helping a wounded family member rather than through usurpation or subversions. By viewing the French Revolution as an act of usurpers, Burke only saw future usurpation and randomized acts of revolution as being the new norm. The Revolution was a candlestick for other bad actors to destabilize the civil order that educated man had built. Without the power structure of a state supported by a religion or church which helped keep manners, behaviors, and the lives of citizens and nobility in check, Burke only saw a power-vacuum of moral hazard. This would involve lower classes growing tired and jealous of the upper classes and lead to cycles of violence and rebellion to pursue and achieve the interests of the majority over the minority delving into lawlessness and reverting society to more primal instincts.

Through the reforms that the National Assembly made and the leading politicians that were newly established, Burke saw hypocrisy of the old system seeping through legislation. Burke (2001, 264) claimed that property of the Church was used as collateral for the debts that France had racked up, which was set before under the rule of the monarchy and assumed by the

new National Assembly. Burke (2001, 267) insinuated that the National Assembly, owned many government bonds. He saw this as hypocritical because it mimicked the old power structure of which the lower classes rebelled against. In fact, the general confiscation of property during the revolution from the people of nobility was one of the greatest crimes according to Burke. Burke (2001, 280-1) not only saw it as hypocritical but dangerous that throughout the Revolution one's whose property was taken or confiscated was cherry picked because of status and who they interacted with in life. He named many religious ministers and people of the same status who were spared having their property taken, while some of the political elites with who they worked with lost theirs almost immediately.

Burke (2001, 290-1) concluded that the men and organizations carrying out the reclamation of property were of the lowest morally in the population: the murderers, rapists, thieves, and whatever other horrible crime could be concocted. Motivated by greed and the new establishment of which Burke described as hypocritical, they would fight amongst themselves for the land as well as rebel against the nobility that hired them to confiscate the land from the church and previous monarch. Burke (2001, 291) saw this power struggle between the two as leading to an oligopolistic system, and no better in pursuit for their freedom as they were before the revolution. Burke (2001, 293) made his feelings clear on his preferred state of government in the later pages, professing to yearn for a monarchical kind of rule as compared to a potentially dangerous democratic republic. Burke sympathized with the idea that the will of the king or monarch was less likely to be swayed into doling out unjust punishment, and that democracy would essentially devolve into mob rule with mob justice. Burke (2001, 295) maintained that evil could come from the monarchy itself but that the establishment of a main aristocracy, religion, and social order would keep that evil in check through social order.

Burke's Liberalism

Although it is known that Burke despised many aspects of the French Revolution, he also held some ideals close to him that even today would be considered more liberal in political circles. Burke (2001, 181) surmised that people had the liberty to at least choose which church they would join. He saw the different categories of Christianity not as a divine right but because man was stubborn in his own beliefs, which was a sign of character and natural for man. Burke (2001, 298) also stressed the importance of the powers of parliaments over monarchies. He greatly sympathized with England's own revolution of 1688 which had the houses and parliamentary groups established and held authority on policy in line and even above the crown. Burke (2001, 414) also entertained the idea that anyone wanting to work and show pride for himself through his skills should be able to do so. This became evident when he helped craft policy to allow the minority religious groups to begin finding other labor jobs throughout England. Burke (2001, 416) was known to fight for some of the rights and treatment of persecuted groups in England and Europe like the Irish Catholics of which he was raised. He also supported rights for some of the native American population, and colonial Americans.

Burke (2001, 200) was not a proponent or fan of the totalitarian rule of the old French monarchy before the revolution. Burke saw room for change and improvement and sympathized with the downfall of the totalitarian French monarchy. Burke (2001, 266-7) deduced religion and the Church as a sort of check and balance upon the monarchy. Ultimately this would stop a monarchy from carrying out tyrannical rule Burke concluded.

By stopping the church from tyrannical rule, it highlighted the belief of Burke (2001, 415-16) that everyman had a right to liberty, individualism, and protections for private property from unjust actions and seizure. Burke (2001, 417) professed those citizens should be kept in

check through the unwritten rules of class hierarchy and church influence of what is morally righteous. The policy would strengthen their confidence in both a government that acts within the moral rules of their religion and by ensuring policy beneficial to the top nobility through their connections to the church. This unfortunately goes somewhat against the liberal values in independence and free thought that some would interpret Burke to be fully behind, but shows the hypocrisy that Burke was dealing with in formulating his own thoughts and philosophy about the French Revolution from some of his experiences in England.

Burke's Conservatism

Burke's philosophy showing his preferment for a more conservative ideology is rampant throughout his criticisms of the French Revolution. Burke (2001, 53) saw the erosion of the French military as an unnatural consequence leading up to revolution. Burke (2001, 55) saw dark negatives from this as mutiny became prevalent, Burke insinuated that men that make up the military ought to have a strong sense of civic duty and pride in their national identity. Burke saw the mutiny and violence as another example of civilized society in France breaking down in a lawless state with no control. Burke (2001, 317) also concluded that the erosion of the church in France was an attack on Christianity, since he deeply held the belief that a nation's population ought to owe some of their time and overall devotion to a major religion. Like England, Burke concluded that reform could be made for both the monarchy and the church through what he described as an ancient constitution and its procedures like that of England. Thomas Paine (2010, 8) saw himself as a proponent of systems that undermined that of kings and totalitarian monarchs. Paine suggested these systems were somewhat archaic for the progress of nations of his time. Paine described Burke as being sympathetic and of no ill-will towards the monarchs of France or England. This was due to the policies and advancements that they had helped other

countries with like United States leading up to 1776 or some of England's policy. Paine (2010, 11) accused Burke of sympathizing with the French monarchs and pledging support to the Queen through his defense of their rule. Paine saw this as Burke's acceptance that a monarchy was okay in any form, as long as it upheld the standards of the established class system, of which many of the French people in lower classes were abused and suffering from.

Burke as mentioned before, believed the suffering of the lower classes was a necessary evil, in return for the peace and stability of the nation. As a great critic of Burke, Paine (2010, 12) also framed Burke's view of political issues not as a battle between the truth or potential lies, but as a battle between morally good people and morally evil individuals. Paine (2010, 12) was sympathetic towards the idea that man was not morally evil from the start but morally righteous and good. This directly conflicts with Burke and his philosophy for why religion and an overbearing monarch are needed.

Paine (2010, 29-0) purported that Burke disavowed the principles that many believed were bestowed upon the British after their own revolution. The principles, which concerned liberty and the freedom of choice, to punish, or overthrow a government that wasn't acting in the collective's best interest were what Paine accused Burke of abandoning. Burke greatly rejected this notion according to Paine because of the previous statements that English Parliament had made about the rights and duties of their citizens and the overall theme of servitude to the sovereign, supporting institutions and nation.

This falls in line with Burke's overall philosophy that is potentially influenced by Aristotle, that no man or group shall violently rebel against a legally placed system in which they have participated and benefitted from. Burke purported that citizens were afforded the opportunities because of the government and the monarchy, which the lower classes should've

been grateful for. Paine (2010, 32) was in disagreement with Burke's belief that the laws and regulations put in place by government and protected by the church did not govern for all of eternity. Paine (2010, 35) was a proponent of change that should come from within each successive generation, of which new externalities in life and opinions would arise and could be dealt with. Paine (2010, 36) insinuates that Burke romanticizes the absolutism of the previous English regime, a regime that Paine claims afforded Burke many of the luxuries and status that he enjoyed. Paine was trying to highlight the obvious bias that Burke had for this system. This principle of Burke's Paine (2010, 39) explains, not only gives undue and overwhelmingly powerful rights and governing authority to the power structure that Edmund Burke enjoyed in England. It also affords undue credence that feudalistic systems are just and the will of the people. Using this philosophy in the United States and other nations in modern times would cause individuals to follow a more direct interpretation of the laws and regulations that were made at the inception of our nation by the few. This would therefore render us powerless against the modern tribulations and negative externalities that arise through individuals trying to exploit the original system, markets, or government.

Burke demonstrated sympathy through his beliefs with the idea that governments and institutions should not be reformed unless the overwhelming desire to do so is through legal and constitutional avenues. However, it also shows the hypocrisy in that Burke delegated those laws first laid out as righteous and approved by the governing minority will be law of the land for eternity. This idea reinforces that making legal changes to a system that epitomizes classes of rich and poor not only would be impossible for lower classes. The class hierarchy would also frame it to be immoral and unjust in that people who rightfully are poor are unjustly and greedily fighting for a new system or rules that benefit them.

Conclusion

This inquiry has sought to establish that Edmund Burke offered insights into liberalism as well as conservatism, fostered from his study and subsequent criticisms of the French Revolution. It can be well noted that of the conservative principles that Burke sympathized with, many are still very relevant and alive today, as well as the few liberal principles in which he also sympathized with. Foundational pillars for Burke like the establishment of a government, a state sponsored religion, nobility working with the upper levels of government and religious values of morality along with church doctrine keeping the minority in check are principles that we are now seeing much of the population disagreeing over currently in the United States. It is evident in the modern republican party in the United States as well, with an oath to uphold Christian values throughout society and creation of groups like the Heritage Foundation to uphold not only those same values, but also the notion of a deep class system, of which they consider just and completely legal.

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