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Date: March 10, 2021

Reflections on the Revolution in France, by Edmund Burke

Main Idea. In this excerpt from 1790, the Anglo-Irish philosopher and one of the founders of political conservatism Edmund Burke (1729–1797) comments on the French Revolution (1789–1799) and laments the course it took. He writes that a state and government ought to be built on ancient traditions and rules. Those rules should be inherited from "canonized forefathers" (p. 65) and no one should add something unnatural to them; creating a government from scratch fills him with disgust. Addressing the French people, he tells them they threw away their great heritage and forgot their honor. Had they built on the existing foundations, they could have had the best government and state ever. Building on ancient tradition would have lead to a rich, flourishing, strong, and admirable country, constitution, monarchy, and people. At the end of this excerpt, he states that virtue will bring happiness regardless of social standing, and telling a commoner anything else is fiction; civil classes are established for the benefit of the commoner as much as for the benefit of the lord.

From a memory studies perspective, he is advocating for remembering the values and virtues of previous generations or even societies. Those should be used to guide or build current society. In a way, he seems to say one should never forget what the forefathers did because their ways should inform if not govern current decisions.

Terms. • political conservatism • ancient, indisputable laws and liberties • canonized forefathers • low born servile wretches • Maroon slaves • moral equality of mankind

Select Quotes.

- "The Revolution was made to preserve our ancient, indisputable laws and liberties, and that ancient constitution of government which is our only security for law and liberty" (p. 65)
- "You had all these advantages in your ancient states; but you chose to act as if you had never been moulded into civil society, and had everything to begin anew. You began ill, because you began by despising everything that belonged to you" (p. 66)
- "You had a smooth and easy career of felicity and glory laid open to you beyond anything recorded in the history of the world; but you have shown that difficulty is good for men" (p. 67)

Questions.

1. Do you agree with Burke's view of revolution?
2. If we follow Burke's way of creating government and society, can we ever truly improve either one?
3. Do you remember the values of your forefathers and do you think of them when making decisions?
4. Looking back, do you agree with Burke's assessment that the French Revolution threw away a great opportunity and did not realize its full potential?