THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF EDMUND BURKE

Alan Levine, professor, American University

Edmund Burke is the West's first and arguably greatest conservative thinker. He is an anti-philosophic philosopher and an influential statesman skeptical of what states can do. This week's reading analyzes a selection of Burke's political and philosophical writings to understand the paradoxes of his thought in the context of both the Enlightenment in which Burke lived and today's varieties of liberalism and conservatism.

Our readings give special attention to Burke's analyses of the moral and political implications of the American and French Revolutions through which Burke lived. These revolutions are arguably the greatest political events of modern times, and Burke was the only thinker of the times to support the American Revolution but not the French. Why? Answering this question involves understanding Burke's critiques of Enlightenment rationalism and the political and philosophical grounds of the modern movements for democracy and liberalism. In shedding light on the exact nature of Burke's conservatism, we will also attempt to compare it to contemporaneous and current strands of conservatism and liberalism in order to meditate deeply on the nature of political ideology itself.

Books:

- Edmund Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, ed. Frank M. Turner. Part of the series Rethinking the Western Tradition, Yale University Press
- Other readings are available in your course packet.
Suggested Background: I encourage you to read some historical background if you are unfamiliar with the basic events in America from 1754–75 or with the American and French Revolutions. You might also like to watch the PBS documentary “The War that Made America,” which is on the French-Indian War of 1754–63. This first global war created the conditions that are debated in Burke’s speeches on America.

Other Resources: To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: The Great Thinkers (http://thegreatthinkers.org/) and Contemporary Thinkers (http://contemporarythinkers.org/) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

Relevant pages include Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Burke, and Smith (on The Great Thinkers).

Sunday, June 25, 2017

3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m.  Summer Course Fellow Arrival and Check-in —
George Washington University, Thurston Hall (1900 F St NW)

Monday, June 26, 2017

9:00 a.m. to Noon  Introduction

- Harvey Mansfield, “A Sketch of Burke’s Life” in Selected Letters, pp. 29–35
- Burke, “An Essay Towards an Abridgement of History,” (1757), excerpt
- Burke, “Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents,” (1770), pp. 203–10; 268–76 only

Questions:

Essay on English History:
1. What are the main periods that Burke sees in English history? What characterizes each? What are their particular good and bad features? How does Burke explain them?
2. How exactly does Burke explain English historical developments? How according to him did change happen? Does Burke have a “theory of history”?

Thoughts on the Present Discontents:
This is a terrific analysis of the British government of Burke’s time and what Burke considers to be legitimate and illegitimate government, but, alas, the essay is too long for our week. I recommend reading the whole thing, but am requiring only the beginning and end.

1. pp. 203–10: What according to Burke does and does not hold nations together? Consequently, what is the task of a statesman?
2. pp. 268–76: What does Burke mean by “connexion”? What exactly is he praising and why? What do you think of his idea?
Tuesday, June 27, 2017

9:00 a.m. to Noon  Burke on the American Revolution

- Burke, “Speech on American Taxation,” (1774), pp. 298 [“Permit me then, Sir...”] – bottom 301; para from bottom of 328–29
- Burke, “Speech on Conciliation with American Colonies,” (1775), pp. 337–58 only
- Burke, Letter to Sheriffs of Bristol on the Affairs of America” (1777), pp. 401–11, 426–41
- Burke, “Sketch of the Negro Code,” (1780/92)

Questions:

Speech on American Taxation:
1. In this essay, Burke identifies and analyzes what he deems to be the four periods of British policy toward America. The assigned excerpt is Burke’s account of the first period, from the first settlements in America to 1764. How does Burke understand the morality of traditional British policy toward the colonies before 1764? What does he say are the benefits and drawbacks to the colonies? According to him, why do the colonies accept this policy? What provoked them?
2. This might be hard to answer based on the assigned excerpt alone, but the main questions of the essay are: what policy toward the colonies does Burke recommend and on what grounds? What principle(s) does Burke appeal to? Which does he reject?

Conciliation with the Colonies:
1. What is “conciliation”? What are the several reasons why Burke thinks conciliation is the best policy? In arguing this, to which principles does he appeal and not appeal?
2. What does Burke say is the predominant temper and character of Americans? What are the seven reasons he cites that made Americans this way (350–56)?
3. Given the American character, what does Burke deem to be the four ways of dealing with the colonies (see especially 358)? Which does he prefer and not prefer and why?

Should you wish to read on, ask yourself:
4. Why does Burke discuss Ireland, Wales, Chester, and Durham (369–74)?
5. Does Burke favor representation for the colonists in the British Parliament? Why or why not?
6. Note: the end of the speech includes Burke’s “six fundamental propositions” on America and “three more resolutions corollary to these” (376–95). I will quickly state what these are in class.

Letter to Sheriffs of Bristol on the Affairs of America:
1. Why is Burke so concerned with the partial suspension of habeas corpus law? Why according to him is the partial suspension so insidious?
2. What are Burke’s views on the following topics: prudence v. principle and the true end of legislation (426–28); liberty (430); equality (408 & 438); how and why the British Constitution is supposed to work; who Burke trusts; what makes government effective; and how to avoid corruption in a corrupt age?

Sketch on the Negro Code:
1. What is Burke’s view of Africans? Are they fully human?
2. What does Burke think of slavery? What does he propose to do about it? Is his plan partial or comprehensive? What are its main features and why?

3. Insofar as Burke advocates change, is his proposal “conservative”?

Wednesday, June 28, 2017

9:00 a.m. to Noon  Introduction to the Reflections

- Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France, (1790), pp. 3–70

Questions:
Reflections on the Revolution in France:
1. The Reflections is Burke’s masterpiece. You will see that Burke is writing (at least partially) in response to someone called Richard Price, and we read the last two pages of Price’s essay that so provoked Burke. What is it about his views that so outrages Burke?

2. The Reflections is quintessentially Burkan (and difficult for philosophers) in the way it moves between immediate questions of practice and deep theoretical reflections. This is not a text of systematic theoretical philosophy. Rather, much of the theorizing occurs to shed light on a practical point. As such, it comes often unexpectedly and without warning before flowing back into the practical analysis. Pay special attention to, and reflect on, the momentary but deep theoretical reflections.

For those of you who have read Locke’s Second Treatise, how does Burke’s form, method, and argument compare? In what ways is Burke similar to Locke and in what ways different? Does it make sense to label Locke a liberal and Burke a conservative? Why of why not?

As you read, focus in particular on Burke’s views of:

- liberty: British v. French, rational v. irrational, regulated v. unregulated;
- equality and inequality, natural and social;
- prudence;
- human nature, the state of nature, etc.;
- the nature and ends of government;
- the social contract;
- reason and its limits;
- the necessity of “little platoons” (p. 40);
- the royal family;
- chivalry and its benefits;
- religion;
- prejudice and superstition;
- philosophy, metaphysics, speculation, the problems of the new metaphysics;
- the new classes in France;
- the National Assembly;
- fanaticism;
- revolution: permissible? wise? What are its tendencies?
Thursday, June 29, 2017

9:00 a.m. to Noon  *Reflections Cont’d*

- Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 70–168

**Questions:**
See previous day’s questions for *Reflections*.

Friday, June 30, 2017

9:00 a.m. to Noon  *Reflections Cont’d*


**Questions:**
See previous day’s questions for *Reflections*.
SMITH
Ryan Hanley, professor, Marquette University

For this course, students will turn to Adam Smith, perhaps best known as the founding father of capitalism. Students will read and discuss excerpts from Smith’s landmark works, and examine the core concepts of Smith’s social vision, elaborating his views on economics, politics, ethics, religion, morality, and philosophy.

Books:

- Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Penguin Classics)
- Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (two volumes, Penguin Classics)
  - Note: for the purposes of the syllabus below, “Vol. 1” refers to *Wealth of Nations Books 1–3* and “Vol. 2” refers to *Wealth of Nations Books 4–5*.

Resources

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Relevant pages include Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Burke, Smith, and The Federalist (on *The Great Thinkers*).

Monday, July 3, 2017

9:00 a.m. to Noon  *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

- *Theory of Moral Sentiments*
  - I.i (pp. 13–33)
  - I.iii (pp. 55–78)
  - IV.1 (pp. 209–17)
Questions:
1. What is “sympathy”? How does it compare to what we today might call “pity” or “compassion”? What role does Smith think that sympathy plays in moral life?
2. What role do ambition and “vanity” play in commercial life, on Smith’s account? What sorts of virtues does Smith think commercial life can encourage? What sorts of “corruptions” does he think it can lead to?
3. What is the point of the story of the “poor man’s son, whom heaven in its anger visited with ambition” (p. 211)? What does it reveal of Smith’s understanding of the relationship of economic ambition to human happiness?
4. What is the “invisible hand” (p. 215)? And more importantly: what effect does it have on the distribution of goods?

Tuesday, July 4, 2017
9:00 a.m. to Noon  
Theory of Moral Sentiments

- Theory of Moral Sentiments
  - II.ii (pp. 95–110)
  - III.3 (pp. 156–80)
  - VI.1 and 3 (pp. 250–56, 280–308)

Questions:
1. What is the difference between justice and beneficence for Smith? Why does he consider justice to be more important politically? Does this lead him to dismiss beneficence as worthless?
2. Who does Smith consider to be “the man of the most perfect virtue” (p. 175)? How does this individual compare to conceptions of human excellence and perfection that various ancient and religious traditions value? That we value today?
3. What is prudence, according to Smith? What sorts of concerns does the prudent man focus on? What sorts of actions does prudence prompt him to undertake?
4. What is self-command, according to Smith? What sorts of actions does self-command lead us to perform, or not perform? What place might self-command have in a capitalist order?

Wednesday, July 5, 2017
9:00 a.m. to Noon  
Wealth of Nations

- Wealth of Nations
  - Introduction and Plan of the Work (Vol. 1, pp. 104–06)
  - I.i–ii (Vol. 1, pp. 109–21)
  - I.vii (Vol. 1, pp. 157–66)
  - II.iii (Vol. 1, pp. 429–49)
Questions:
1. Reread the end of TMS IV.1. What does Smith have in mind there when he speaks of “political disquisitions” (p. 217)? Is the Wealth of Nations a “political disquisition” of this sort?
2. What role does the love of beauty play in the opening chapters of WN? What is it about the rhetorical presentation of the story of the pin factory that makes it so effective?
3. Smith says that market orders are “not originally the effect of human wisdom” (p. 117). What then accounts for their regularity? What light might the story of the butcher, brewer, and baker shed on this?
4. WN II.iii returns to the question of our efforts to “better our condition” (p. 441). How does Smith’s account here compare to that given in TMS? Does he still think that vanity drives this, or are there other dispositions in human nature that encourage our commercial ambitions?

Thursday, July 6, 2017
9:00 a.m. to Noon  Wealth of Nations

- Wealth of Nations
  - III.i (Vol. 1, pp. 479–84)
  - III.iv (Vol. 1, pp. 507–20)
  - IV.ii (Vol. 2, pp. 29–49)
  - IV.ii.c (Vol. 2, pp. 66–77)

Questions:
1. What does Smith consider to be the likely social effects of the individual’s desire to better his condition? What role should the government play in encouraging or restraining this desire?
2. WN III offers a history of the end of feudalism and the birth of commercial society. To what particular historical actions and human passions does Smith trace this transition? What are the specific beneficial effects of this transition?
3. What is the difference between the practices of a “vulgar politician” and the true “science of the legislator,” according to Smith (p. 45)? What general rules does Smith think legislators should strive to follow?
4. Why does Smith defend free trade? What are the specific benefits that he thinks it brings? Why is he so skeptical of political efforts to regulate trade?

Friday, July 7, 2017
9:00 a.m. to Noon  Wealth of Nations

- Wealth of Nations
  - IV.ix.48–52 (Vol. 2, pp. 272–75)
  - V.i.a (Vol. 2, pp. 279–97)
  - V.i.f.1–18 (Vol. 2, pp. 348–54)
  - V.i.f. 48–61 (Vol. 2, pp. 368–75)
Questions:

1. Under the “system of natural liberty” (p. 274), to what three duties is the state limited? Why does Smith charge the government with these three responsibilities? What sorts of functions that we today commonly associate with government does he exclude from this list?

2. What is Smith’s complaint with university education? How does he use market-based mechanisms to improve it? Do you think that these are likely to work? Why or why not?

3. What is this “mental mutilation” that Smith discusses (p. 374)? How is it related to the division of labor for which he argues earlier in *WN 1*? What are its effects on political life? How does Smith propose to cure or manage these effects?

4. What does Smith emphasize in his discussion of religion? What are its effects on political stability? How does he propose to cure or manage these effects? How does this cure or scheme of management draw on certain market principles that he elsewhere emphasizes?

Saturday, July 8, 2017

| 11 a.m. | Summer Course Fellow Check-Out and Departure — George Washington University, Thurston Hall |

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