

Summer Courses, Summer 2017
THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF EDMUND BURKE
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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).

Monday, June 26, 2017, 9:00 a.m. to Noon

Introduction

Readings:

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

Discussion 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

Readings:

- 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. 337–75 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)

Discussion Questions:

Speech on American Taxation:

1. Note that on p. 281 Burke announces that this speech will address two issues, one “narrow” and one “large.” We are skipping the “narrow” issue, which is a consideration of whether the Tea Tax, the last direct tax on the colonies, should be repealed. Instead we are focusing on Burke’s account of the “large and more complicated” question “comprehending the whole series of the parliamentary proceedings with regard to America, their cause, and their consequences” (281). With this focus, starting on p. 298, what are the four periods of policy toward the colonies that Burke identifies? Which does he like and which not? Why? In particular, how does Burke understand the morality of traditional British policy toward the colonies, i.e., before 1764 (see especially pp. 300–01)?
2. The main questions 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?
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, which is not assigned, 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*

Readings:

- Price, "A Discourse on the Love of Our Country," pp. 195–96 (1789)
- Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 3–70 (1790)

Discussion 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 Burkean (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.
3. 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 or why not?
4. 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

Readings:

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

Discussion Questions:

See previous day's questions for *Reflections*.

Friday, June 30, 2017, 9:00 a.m. to Noon

Reflections Cont'd

Readings:

- Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, pp. 168–210

Discussion Questions:

See previous day's questions for *Reflections*.