

Edmund Burke and the eighteenth-century debate on poverty

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Gregory Collins' excellent study of Edmund Burke's political economy is, in some ways, an unapologetic exercise in historical redemption: "scholars", he writes in the introduction, "have already made great strides in broadening our apprehension of Burke by refuting caricatures of him as a coldhearted reactionary" (Collins 2020, p. 4). However, he maintains, such efforts have primarily focused on reassessing the delicate balance between Burke's instincts for political and social reform and his well-known "disposition to conserve institutions" (p. 4). What recent studies by Bourke, Bromwich and Norman have achieved for Burke's reputation as a political writer, Collins aims to do for his reputation as a political economist.

As he is all too aware, this is no mean task. As always with Burke, the historian's task is complicated by the fact that he was a practising statesman as well as a philosophical writer. Throughout his career he discussed a wide range of context-specific political and economic issues, which often makes it challenging to identify coherent philosophical principles underpinning his thought. In addition, Burke's status as a modern-day icon of conservative thought requires untangling layers upon layers of ideological appropriation by various "-isms". This includes seemingly contradictory assessments of Burke as a staunch defender of the economic interests of ancien regime aristocracy and as a proponent of free-market capitalism.

Luckily for his readers, Collins does a fine job of cutting through modern labels to recover the general principles of Burke's economic thought, which he convincingly describes as—not uncharacteristically for late Enlightenment political economy—"aiming to sustain the virtues of market liberty while protecting against its debasing tendencies" (p. 527). In other words, Burke's commitment to tradition and culture was combined with an unshakeable commitment to "preserving the underlying sources for civil progress" (p. 532). This explains Burke's steadfast support for the kind of free-market economics associated with classical liberalism. Burke emerges from Collins' retelling as a paradoxical godfather for Anglo-American conservatism.

The book undoubtedly succeeds in persuading that Burke's economic ideas rest on a coherent set of general principles that cannot not adequately be described by words such as "reactionary" or even "conservative". Perhaps Collins' goal of "refuting caricatures" proves most challenging, however, when he examines Burke's engagement with the contemporary debate on the "labouring poor": Burke's reputation is arguably at an all-time low among historians and philosophers of poverty, welfare, and economic justice. This is not a new development, as Burke has long been seen

as anticipating the harsh turn taken by British poverty laws in the nineteenth century. His most-often cited contribution to the debate, found in his *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795, first published in 1800), is his striking observation that “those who labour ... are miscalled the Poor” (Burke 1800, p. 2) and ensuing critique of the expression “labouring poor”, dismissed as “[base and wicked] political canting language” (Burke 1800, p. 3). The passage has been described as a “momentous portent of the future”—an early attempt to introduce a formal distinction between the poor deemed deserving of compassion and charity (the old, the sick, the infirm), and those able-bodied people who could work and should therefore not be eligible for government relief (Himmelfarb 1984, p. 68).

As Collins notes, Burke’s reputation as a “blind defender of the interests of the landed aristocracy at the expense of the impoverished” endures to this day (p. 108); indeed recent works still lament his “often staggering indifference to the suffering of the poor” (Pitts 2006, p. 62, cited in Collins, p. 108).

Against the latter charge, Collins mounts a convincing defence. “Burke’s attitude towards the lower social order”, he pushes back, “continues to be misunderstood” (p. 108). The misunderstanding persists because Burke’s economic ideas have tended to be viewed through ahistorical lenses such as “liberalism” or “capitalism”. Instead, Collins suggests, Burke’s political economy, including his views on poverty and welfare, must be located within several overlapping eighteenth-century intellectual contexts (p. 12). These contexts include not only his staunch opposition to French revolutionary discourse in the 1790s, but also the economic crises that marked the end of the eighteenth century and the resulting calls for new public policies in support of the poor, as well as his early enquiries into the roots of Irish poverty. Most importantly perhaps, Collins points to Burke’s Christian commitment to the moral duty to aid the poor, exemplified by his own private charitable endeavours. Collins’ argumentation amounts to an appeal to consider Burke’s intentions as relevant context for his admittedly unforgiving advice against all forms of government support for the poor, and his presumption in favour of allowing market mechanisms to play out unhindered:

Burke, in fact, did exhibit a lasting concern for the poor, for he harboured a firm belief in the power of private charity and the morality of market liberty ... Such imperatives, he maintained, would ease the mean condition of laborers in a far more effectual fashion than state meddling in the market or public expressions of pity (p. 108).

Burke, the argument goes, did demonstrate significant concern for the plight of the poor, both throughout his public life, and via his private charitable activities. Importantly, the harsh non-interventionist policies he is often castigated for advocating did have the intended long-term aim of *improving* the situation of the poor (“a Free trade”, Collins quotes him as writing on p. 341, “is in truth the only source of wealth”, and therefore an “obvious” remedy for the Poor). That Burke may have hoped to see a decrease in poverty might appear self-evident to modern readers, but it is in fact revealing of his position within much broader eighteenth-century debates about poverty, which Collins alludes to but doesn’t fully develop—understandably so, since his primary topic lies elsewhere.

Delving deeper into the complex, long-running debates about poverty that Burke was building upon would provide richer context for his scathing rejection of the language of the “labouring poor”. Most obviously, as illustrated by the above quote, Burke positioned himself against Mandeville- or mercantilist-inspired arguments about the supposed “utility of poverty” (Furniss 1920, p. 17; Martin 2015). Rather, he followed Adam Smith (amongst others) in analysing the growth of commercial opulence as improving living standards for all, including the poorest members of society. Also similar to Smith’s was his attempt to redefine or reconceptualize the notion of poverty itself. Since the mid-eighteenth century, and against a background of increasing poverty and cyclical economic crises, arguments had begun to emerge that were questioning the traditional understanding of the poor as those “without income from property or profession and, therefore, dependent upon their manual labour for living” (Cowherd 1977, pp. 1–2). Such reconceptualizations of the poor ranged from Montesquieu’s redefinition of poverty as the absence of work in *Spirit of the Laws* (Montesquieu 1989, XXIII, 29), to Smith’s argument that poverty was a relative, socially- and

psychologically-constructed state. They also included more empirical arguments such as the data gathered by Burke's friend Arthur Young to demonstrate that labourers had seen their standards of living steadily increase in the eighteenth century - leading Young to conclude that "the *labouring poor*... is a term that means nothing" (Young 1771, p. 298). Considered in this longer context, Burke's oft-quoted assertion that "those who labour ... are miscalled the Poor" no longer reads as the opening salvo in a nineteenth-century quest to deny relief to the able-bodied poor, but rather as the culmination of a decades-long debate about the conceptualization of poverty in commercial society.

Many of the themes skilfully analysed by Collins in his discussion of *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, including Burke's relative understanding of poverty, his insistence that rising standards of living had significantly improved the lived experience of "the poor", his rejection of public schemes of charity, and his attempts to grapple with the effects of cyclical economic crises upon the labouring masses, are illuminating in their own right, and help build a fuller and more nuanced understanding of Burke's political economy. But they would also gain from being read as adapting—and sometimes adopting—a series of novel arguments developed in enlightened Britain and Europe in the previous decades. Of course, there is limited scope to do so in a monograph focused primarily on Burke himself. Yet, reading *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* as a late contribution to an Enlightenment debate would only strengthen Collins' efforts to overhaul Burke's reputation for cold-hearted indifference toward the poor. It would also open up fruitful avenues for rediscovering enlightened writers' debates about poverty, which have long stayed in the shadow of their famous—and infamous—nineteenth-century heirs.

NOTES

- 1 <https://www.open.ac.uk/people/ap24436>

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