

How disputatious a subject is Edmund Burke?

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Gregory Collins's hefty tome makes the argument that Burke himself contributed to the sciences of politics and economics that have protected liberty and promoted capitalism from the enlightenment era to the present. Collins argues that those who have venerated Burke as the champion of liberty were right. His legacy has been vindicated and advocates of market liberty do well to feel grateful to Burke. Here then we have a book then that will help latter-day Burkeans because rather than having to read Burke's complicated writings there is a systematic exposition of his economics and politics. One way of describing what Collins has achieved is a textbook in Burke's economic and political writings from first to last. Collins provides a lot of evidence underlining Burke's kinship with and influence upon Adam Smith. He shows that a strong rope of kinship can be traced too from Burke to a modern equivalent, the incomparable Friedrich Hayek.

Accolades and plaudits then are due to Collins and we welcome another contribution to the progress of knowledge. Knowledge is what this book is about, knowledge of politics, knowledge of the economy. Burke was almost always right and should be lauded once more as a seer, just as he was when what he said about the French Revolution came true. Collins's scholarship is impeccable and shows Burke's relevance for contemporary battles against both radical liberals and would-be socialists critical of free markets. Ammunition is made available by Collins for those today who want, like Burke, to smite down enemies among the radicals, including the descendants of Richard Price's politics, the dissenting pastor whose speech on the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille inspired Burke to write the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. If there is such a thing as human science, through the work of people like Burke it has made a real contribution to what we know about how the world does and ought to function in underlining the importance of private property, liberty and free markets. Burke's work needs to be labelled as significant in the tradition promoting right reason and reasonable politics.

Does the last paragraph get this book wrong? There is another reading of Collins's work. It is properly historical, bowing the knee to the great John Pocock and largely following the line of the meticulously justified recent reinterpretation of what Burke was up to, that of Richard Bourke in his *Empire and Revolution. The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (2015). Bourke recognised Burke as a politician whose position, generally in opposition or only briefly in office, meant that he tended to be on public display. Burke was perpetually in polemical battle and spectators scrutinised

Burke's beliefs for their consistency. What then made Burke into a Pantheonic figure? Bourke shows that it was first and foremost the conjunction of perspectives upon property, prescription, and precedent. Landed property grounded political leadership and gave it substance and independence. Property rights and how to pass them from generation to generation and person to person—occupation, possession and prescription, accession and succession—Burke defended in accordance with the textbooks in natural jurisprudence that formed the basis of his legal training. Setting aside the issue of the justice of the original acquisition of property, prescription meant long-term enjoyment of the rights of possession. Precedent meant how such rights had been formulated and defended in the English system of common law. The role of common law in politics in turn signified the importance of manners, the conventions and habits that played a major role in the formulation of codes of justice and morality enjoining deference in the face of social rank. Justifications of Britain's government became utilitarian, derived from the recognised benefits of peace and order over time rather than by reference to an original contract. Such government for Burke had to be prudent, advising on particular strategies in specific circumstances, weighing up the influence of laws and manners and the politics of the possible, following the brilliant Montesquieu's recommendations in *De l'esprit des lois* (1748). Politics becomes more of an art than a science. Principles signifying universal laws or rules of action become difficult to find. Right reason and reasonable politics unfold differently in one set of circumstances than they do in another.

Collins in many places follows Bourke. What we get then from Collins is a properly nuanced sense of Burke's complicated responses to the issues of his time from navigation acts to commercial treaties to poverty and to revolutions. Collins reads all of Burke's texts, outlines mostly a brief sense of context and then summarises the texts before moving on to the next chronologically. When the claim is made that Burke may have provided Smith with the idea of contemporary politics as being in need of the wisdom of Solon, for example, that Smith inserted into the 1778 edition of the *Wealth of Nations* (as well as in the 1790 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*), everything is properly documented. Is Collins's book then to be read in the tradition of recent work by intellectual historians, scholars of political thought and political economy who have reinterpreted what was happening in the final decades of the eighteenth century?

Humans are tribal creatures and different tribes do things differently. Among those who study the past in the form of the history of ideas, differences in approach are especially marked. Collins's book is reminiscent from certain angles of the work of Samuel Hollander on John Stuart Mill in carefully detailing every single contribution Mill made to economics and evaluating it by questioning how far it 'really' contributed to science, how far it made sense? Collins's book is better written than Hollander's work, more accessible and more informed historically. Collins's work is about economics but also about what we would call political science. There are two tribes there but any tensions between them are not those I am interested in. What I want to know more about is the relationship between Collins's historical analysis and his outline of Burke's legacy, the tradition that leads on to Hayek. Collins knows what works in politics. Burke was right, so was Hayek. What role then does the history play in the contemporary policy analysis? Is the history icing on the policy cake so that it is a good thing to be able say that your own claims about how the world works were once seconded by the great Edmund Burke? Or is the history playing a different role?

The reason for raising such an issue is because I was unclear when reading Collins's book what his intentions ultimately were as the author? To raise Quentin Skinner's famous question, what did Collins see himself to be doing as an author? The step-by-step guide to Burke on particular issues was very well done but then there seemed to be a leap into another kind of analysis, drawing lessons from or coming to conclusions of relevance to the present. Is this then the use of history, the move from usable past to present judgement? Perhaps Collins does not see the tension I'm alluding to; I'd like to know more about his own sense of tribal membership.

A second question is what is Collins's major reinterpreted claim about Burke? Scholars of course don't have to be original to be valuable. In Burke's case though there are at least two major perspectives that I would have anticipated engagement with, authored by historically-minded scholars whose works have had a singular impact over the past more-than-twenty years. The first is Donald Winch and the second

István Hont. Winch is not used much by Collins, and only once in the text in a discussion of how far Burke could be said to have been defending the status quo. Winch's Princeton PhD supervisor in economics, Jacob Viner, is engaged with more directly. Hont only appears in Collins's bibliography as the editor with Michael Ignatieff of *Wealth and Virtue* (1983). Let's consider Winch's view of Burke and, at higher speed, Hont's view too.

Winch's book *Riches and Poverty* appeared in 1996 and said a lot about Burke's political economy and his relationship with Smith. In 1995 Winch gave the Carlyle Lectures at the University of Oxford and these too contained a lot about Burke. As the writing is so good, being destined for a public audience, and as they can be freely downloaded from the website of the St Andrews Institute of Intellectual History, which holds digital copies of many of Winch's papers, I'll use the text of the lectures rather than Winch's book (they are not identical and someone should examine the differences).

Winch makes the point in his Carlyle Lectures that contemporaries in the 1790s were divided about Smith's legacy and his relationship especially to Burke. On one hand Smith was said by Winch to have an "almost telepathic sympathy with Burke" and on the other was "being cited by [Thomas] Paine as an example of all that Burke had failed to be as political analyst." Smith's description of Richard Price in a letter to George Chalmers of 22 December 1785 as "a factious citizen, a most superficial Philosopher, and by no means an able calculator" seemed, as Winch put it, "to tilt Smith's affinities firmly in Burke's direction, bearing in mind Burke's lament for 'the age of chivalry' in the face of 'sophisters, economists, and calculators', Price having the singular distinction of being all three in one." Did this mean that Smith was a Burkean or Burke a Smithian? Rather, to Winch the controversy revealed "how rapidly the business of using Smith to validate both ends of the political spectrum got going." Both ends of the political spectrum meant Burke and Paine. Winch warned that "any decent genealogist, worthy of his fee, can supply you with a plausible family tree". Burke's own legacy was equally disputable and what Winch had to say is worth quoting in full:

Before the recent celebrations of an alliance between the ideas of Smith and Burke became popular, those who were anxious to preserve Burke's 'conservative' reputation went to some lengths to prove that the alliance either did not exist, or that it was an unfortunate *mésalliance*. Hence what might be called *Das Burke Problem*: how can we reconcile his defence of the *ancien régime* with his boasts about his command of political economy and his equation of the laws of free commerce with the laws of God? The hard-headed economic side of Burke was certainly not the one that his immediate followers in England, the Lake poets—those who began the business of disseminating Burke's form of patriotic conservatism—were anxious to perpetuate. Indeed, as I shall show in next week's lecture, when faced with Robert Malthus's transformation of Smith's system they denounced the entire business of political economy as anathema (Winch 1995).

Winch's interpretation of Burke chartered what were termed his "moods". There were several Burkes because there were different moods at different times for distinctive topics. Burke "in some moods at least, was anxious to reverse the causal sequence: commercial progress depended on the maintenance of a particular form of polity and would not survive its destruction." This described Burke's position *viz-a-viz* the supporters of Revolution at Paris and their British apologists, termed by Burke the "political men of letters" who sought to eradicate the age of chivalry together with "the spirit of a gentleman and the spirit of religion".

Burke, for Winch, was not an optimist who associated the progress of commerce and politeness with gradual improvements in government. His position could not easily be aligned with the ideological parties of the day. Again, Winch is worth hearing from substantially:

Burke argued that a world constructed on commercial foundations alone could not survive the demise of those gothic or feudal institutions that had presided over its birth. More specifically, Burke

took up Paine's challenge to defend the hereditary principle not merely with respect to monarchy, but to the landed aristocracy as well. The landed interest provided the stability that no other order within society, mercantile, moneyed, or professional, could furnish. It was invested with the properties of permanence, serving to integrate all other interests in society, without which, in fact, the multitude, as Burke said, could 'scarcely be said to be in a civil society'. Hence too Burke's defence of those laws of primogeniture and entail that had brought his aristocratic 'great oaks' into being and by which the stabilising role of the landed classes was preserved.

For Winch, the relationship between Smith, Burke and Paine had to be reconstructed "jig-saw fashion", by which he meant that there were no seamless traditions or connections between the three men who shared some claims and disagreed about others. Burke, for Winch, was an exponent of the science of the statesman or legislator. The science taught, in accordance with the wisdom of Solon, that, in the imperfect world of the second best, something that worked in a particular set of circumstances would not work in others. History mattered and so did manners. There were no universal rules about property being needed to be defended in every possible circumstance. There were no universal rules about markets. What people believed mattered, especially in matters of religion. Furthermore, the late eighteenth century was a period of acute uncertainty about the future, when few could be sure that their own state would not either become weak or cease to exist. In consequence, it was necessary in discussing politics and markets to talk about how far whatever was recommended was compatible with national survival, which might depend on waging war.

What did you get if you put all the pieces of the jig-saw together? In Winch's eye what marked Burke out from such men as David Hume and Smith was his emphasis upon orthodox religious piety. Hume's scepticism and infidelity were dangerous. Smith's opinion of Christianity was masked but nevertheless probably similar to Hume's. For Burke, by contrast, religion was the very source of modern civility and it was madness to treat religion as mere superstition. Religion consoled the poor with regard to their condition. Smith affirmed providential order in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It was Winch's view that the author of the *Wealth of Nations* would have balked at Burke's assertion that the laws of commerce are the laws of God as suggested in *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*.

A further disagreement between Smith and Burke leads up to Winch's view of the clear-cut division between them. Smith had condemned the mediocre education available at the University of Oxford. In his *Reflections* by contrast Burke defended the "old ecclesiastical modes and fashions of English universities." Smith would have been appalled at Burke's argument that "Gothic and monkish education" was compatible with modern conditions of liberty. Winch argued that what was most distinctive about Burke's politics was his defence of the Gothic/feudal institution of the laws of primogeniture and entail. It might be said in reply that Burke does not discuss entail. Yet entail, like primogeniture, gave Burke's "great oaks" their size and substance. The point is that he wanted the great oaks to retain their present role in society especially as they helped to prevent French-style revolutions from breaking out. Burke went beyond the defence of landed property. He was saying that a state could not consider itself secure or any property intact unless vast territorial possessions continued inviolate. Burke's defence was not provoked by Paine's rude assault on nobility and primogeniture in the *Rights of Man*. Bourke has shown in *Empire and Revolution* that the defence of primogeniture was integral to Burke's perspective on English and Irish landholding from the late 1760s (Bourke 2015, p. 274f).

For Winch the contrast with Smith's position could not have been starker as Smith described primogeniture as contrary "to nature, to reason, and to justice", being derived from the absurd supposition: "that every successive generation of men have not an equal right to the earth....but that the property of the present generation should be restrained and regulated according to the fancy of those who died perhaps five hundred years ago" (Smith 1785, I, p. 383). Smith went on to attack entail as a means of "maintaining [the] exclusive privilege of the nobility to the great offices and honours of their country" adding abruptly that, those who have "usurped one unjust advantage over the rest of their fellow-citizens" think it reasonable that they should have another to prevent their poverty from rendering the practice ridiculous. Burke and Smith

could never agree in consequence on the wisdom of taxes on absentee landlords in Ireland and why Burke would have condemned Smith's proposal to subject idle and unimproving Scottish landowners to a tax on their failure to make good use of an asset that had communal benefits. Winch held that Smith wanted to reveal to the world dangerous injustices. Scotland was always in mind and the hope of Smith and Hume was that the progress of the right kind of commerce would replace the feudal nobility with better governors for the people. Burke ended up, from the perspective of Smith, Hume and their friends, defending a feudal equivalent of the mercantile system that had been responsible for Scottish backwardness. Collins does address this issue but plays down the division. In so doing he overplays the linkage between commerce and peace (a difficult argument to employ in a century of growing trade and ceaseless war). He seems unaware of the background argument that the Anglo-Scottish union would only be a success if the lairds, especially Jacobite lairds, were seen no more. Commerce had to operate to remove existing elites in Scotland if economic development was to occur and civil liberty established. Burke, in defending primogeniture, gave the impression of arguing against the operation of commerce in relation to ranks in general and therefore the impression of opposing a position that united those broadly described as authors of the Scottish Enlightenment.

One of the criticisms of Winch's work was that he did not take what we term international relations as seriously as he ought to have, given its importance to the enlightenment mind. Such a perspective was developed by Hont. To his eye it was vital in working out what Burke was doing to look at his final writings when he had to face directly the possibility that Britain would be destroyed as a polity because of the power of French republican patriotism. Hont's reconstruction of the science of the legislator was not only concerned with the careful natural jurisprudential recommendation of specific policies in particular circumstances. It was first and foremost about national survival, a fact that Burke faced head on in the final years of his life. It is worth hearing from Hont himself as he makes the argument with such clarity:

The French Revolution was caused by the bankruptcy of the French state as a consequence of a century of warfare, and consequently it was, initially, a revolt against Machiavellianism, nationalism and the military-financial quest of national grandeur. Its supporters focused intensely on ways of abolishing or reforming the state system that allowed this cycle of war to develop. The more radical wing wanted to abolish statehood as the culprit, as the cause and facilitator of nationalism. Herder was [among this group] and he wanted a stateless society, which he called a nation (a purely cultural and linguistic group entity without sovereignty and its unpleasant competitive consequences) to replace it. This anti-statism was the precise opposite of the idea of reinforcing the state with the psychological might of strong sociability, derived from ethnic or racial identity. Herder saw the pairing of nationalism with statism as a monster, as a super-nationalist entity driven by envy, hatred and the quest for recognition, and predicted that the bloodiest wars would happen when 'Fatherland would be pitted against Fatherland' in total war, replacing the moderate damage caused by past wars between prince and prince. It must be remembered that the nationalist turn of the French Revolution was caused by the war against France by an European alliance, of states, which Edmund Burke, for one, justified as a humanitarian intervention against disturbers of the continental peace of the European neighbourhood or commonwealth of nations (he used the Roman law of neighbourhood disturbance to justify the war legally) (Hont 2009).

What struck Hont, in a radical reinterpretation of the political thought of the time sketched out in the essay 'Permanent Crisis of a Divided Mankind', a chapter in his book *The Jealousy of Trade* (2005), was that the late Burke was making an argument that his earlier selves would have found difficult to stomach because it justified all-out war against France in the hope of crushing the fanatic and enthusiastic doctrine of republican cosmopolitanism being fomented in France. Entirely without precedent and altogether unexpectedly, republican cosmopolitanism was spreading like a deadly virus across the earth. Patriots in different countries were suddenly delighted to bow down to the French Republic and even give up their own nation

and national identity to become cosmopolitan republicans. The French revolutionary contagion amounted to the most powerful crusade in history. Zealots embraced it. It was a new reformation yet potentially far greater than that of Luther or of Calvin. Burke called for ceaseless and constant war to the death on republican France even if Britain itself was destroyed in the process. Markets and morals had to be directed to such an end. Burke sought in his final great work, the *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, to foster a British nationalism capable of vanquishing French republicanism or at least of defeating it in war. It is significant that Burke's position, arguing that the cancer had to be cut out or the patient would die, was exactly that of his nemesis Thomas Paine, who was making exactly the same calls for the extinction of contemporary Britain as a polity by war, being the state that was preventing republican cosmopolitanism from becoming a global force.

In reconstructing late eighteenth-century economic and political thought through ongoing controversy about the relationship between commerce and social ranks and commerce and international war for markets and empire, Winch and Hont emphasised the crisis-ridden nature of Burke's world and the difficulty of finding solutions. For Burke and others it was evident that the enlightenment had failed. The great achievement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been to put a stopper in the bottle of effervescent religious enthusiasm. Protestants were no longer murdering Catholics in large numbers. Instead, new forms of enthusiasm, often cosmopolitan and always acutely moralising and demanding particular self-sacrifice, were translating themselves into a social war that was becoming international. For Burke new strategies had to be formulated in the hope of preventing religious war from destroying the continent once again.

Collins has rather avoided making a grand interpretative claim about Burke and the period in which he lived in the manner of Winch or Hont. Perhaps his view is that Winch and Hont got Burke wrong despite their impact on Bourke, who as noted has been a major influence upon Collins. Alternatively, perhaps Collins's intention was to write for a broad audience and did not want to complicate the story being told. I would have liked to know Collins's view because, whether Winch and Hont were right or wrong, they put forward significant reinterpretations. It means that the Burke we get from Collins is a bit of the liberal hero, a bit of the prudent conservative, and a bit of the eighteenth-century politician, dealing deftly and employing his singular intelligence to reform where possible. Perhaps they are one and the same. At the end of his life though, Burke was convinced that any sacrifice, even the collapse of Britain in its contemporary form, was worth an end to republican cosmopolitanism. Republicanism cosmopolitanism in France and across Europe was fostering moralistic and fanatical politics that corroded the pillars upholding states. Burke's prediction, which came true, was that republican cosmopolitans, however devoted to the Rights of Man and the Citizen they might think themselves, could easily turn into terrorists or imperial-minded patriots serving the establishment of what was in reality a French empire.

The problem for Burke, as he had acknowledged in the failed attempt to reform the East India Company with Charles James Fox and in the failed attempt to bring Warren Hastings to justice, was the strength of Britain's mercantile system. The argument of Paine's that Burke found near impossible to refute was one that he himself had formulated and fostered alongside Smith, that Britain was a mercantile empire governed by a corrupt nexus of merchants and politicians whose power was such that they could pass legislation for their own profit but in the name of the public good. It smacked of hypocrisy and imprudence suddenly to describe such a polity as the acme of liberty and good government. That is why so many of Burke's former friends turned against him and why even when agreeing with him the historian Edward Gibbon called him a "rational madman" (Gibbon 1956, III, 229-230). From an eighteenth-century point of view Burke was faced with two accusations that he could not easily refute. The first, from a Hume-Smith perspective, was that in defending the existing structure of land ownership in Scotland and in Ireland he was turning himself into an apologist for a feudal aristocracy that had done damage in each country. This feudal nobility in England had turned itself into a commercial nobility addicted to war and empire, reaping in the process vast fortunes and erecting a mercantile system to perpetuate itself. Burke had been in the forefront of those assaulting Britain's empire as a mercantile system. He had failed on every front yet, it seemed to many, in the 1790s became the arch-defender of the mercantile system as the model polity for Europeans, a genuine alternative to republican cosmopolitan democracy.

Collins's eighteenth century is less bleak than Burke's. Burke's world was full of crisis and catastrophe. Never was a person more aware of the abyss either side of the tightrope. By the end of 1791 more and more countries were engulfed by revolutionary contagion. The eventual collapse had been anticipated by Burke because for him, as for almost every one of his generation, what existed in politics was bound to change given the contemporary addiction to war and empire. Like Smith, Burke had been working on what might be termed crisis tactics since at least the end of the Seven Year's War. Collins paints a Burke who always had an answer because his Burke lived in a world where what existed could be maintained and as such was likely to survive into the future. I'm not sure that the actual Burke believed that what existed could be maintained. Burke was trying to influence or abate the forces that were to unmake what had existed.

I'm not sure either whether the actual Burke would have considered our world to be any better than his. He might well have concluded that enlightenment had ended permanently, seeing fanaticism and enthusiasm permeating political discourse against the background of the mercantile system. The Burke of the final letters to friends, with their despondent and apocalyptic political judgements, was not sure if there was anything left worth conserving. Fortunately for Burke and his legacy, the French republican experiment imploded and, as Burke had predicted in 1790, a Caesar figure arose in the wake of democratic crisis in the person of Napoleon Bonaparte. In other words, normal politics were restored with different actors in the main roles. If Burke had lived a little longer, he may have felt relief and worked anew on the crisis tactics he laboured on during his last years.

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