

Edmund Burke and Revolution

EDMUND BURKE's active political career in the House of Commons extended from 1765 to 1794 and involved him deeply in the affairs of the American Colonies and their revolution with Britain; in economic and parliamentary reforms in England; in the protracted and difficult political affairs of Ireland and of India; and, finally, in the violent ideological battle over the French Revolution. Except for a year in 1765-66 and a few months in 1782, when Burke's party leader, Lord Rockingham, was Prime Minister, most of Burke's twenty-nine years in Parliament were spent in opposition to the various administrations of King George III.

During his long political career, and until his death in 1797, Burke had many occasions to write about political revolutions in their relationship to the historical inheritance of the laws, customs, institutions and structural organization of European society and to the great ends for which society is constituted — the establishment, preservation and extension of men's moral and legal right to life, liberty, and property under a system of constitutional government and legal justice. It will be my purpose in this essay to describe and analyze Burke's convictions about political reform and revolution, as expressed in his interpretation of three very different revolutions — the English Revolution of 1688; the American Rev-

olution of 1776; and the French Revolution of 1789. Finally, in the light of Burke's convictions about revolution, I shall make some personal observations on the nature of contemporary revolutionary movements.

I. The American Revolution

IN December 1765, shortly after becoming Rockingham's private secretary, Burke was elected to the House of Commons for the pocket borough of Wendover. Two years earlier, the Treaty of Paris had put an end to the Seven Years' War (1756-63), in which the elder William Pitt, as leader of the Whigs in the House of Commons, had brought Britain immense gains in her overseas empire in America. But the new King, George III, had dismissed Pitt in 1761, and had appointed as Prime Minister a royal favorite, the Scottish Earl of Bute, whose unpopularity with the English and personal ineptitude forced him to resign in 1763. Bute was succeeded by George Grenville, who wished to have the American Colonies help to pay the vast expenses of the recent war, waged largely for their protection, and therefore he proceeded to tax the Colonies and to restrict their trade in favor of English merchants. The Americans complained, and, in an effort to force them to comply, Grenville imposed further restrictions, this time upon their civil liberty, by general warrants and restraints on public discussions of their grievances. In the year of Burke's election to Parliament, the Grenville administration passed the Stamp Act, which so intensified Colonial discontent that public reaction forced the King to recall Grenville. From the beginning the Rockingham Whigs had strongly opposed the Grenville policy, which the King approved, so that reluctantly, on July 10, 1765, George III appointed Rockingham as Prime Minister.

The first Rockingham administration lasted only a year and twenty days until

Peter J. Stanlis is Chairman of the Department of English at Rockford College. He has taught at Ithaca College, University of Michigan, Wayne State University, and the University of Detroit. Dr. Stanlis is the author or editor of *A Methodology for Studying the Services of Local Government*; *Edmund Burke: Selected Writings and Speeches*; *The Relevance of Edmund Burke*; and *Edmund Burke, The Enlightenment and the Modern World*. Currently he is the editor of *Studies in Burke and His Time*.

July 30, 1766, when the King's opposition to its repeal of the Stamp Act and the opportunism of the Bedford Whigs combined with the ambition of Pitt to force it out of office. During its brief tenure the Rockingham administration had conciliated the American Colonies by reversing completely the Grenville policies. Upon Rockingham's dismissal Burke published *A Short Account of a Late Short Administration* (1766), the first of several defenses of the Rockingham Whigs. Among the achievements of Rock-



Edmund Burke

"A political philosopher in defense of the traditional principles of European civilized society."

ingham, Burke noted the following: "The distractions of the British empire were composed, by the repeal of the American stamp act; But the constitutional superiority of Great Britain was preserved by the act for securing the dependence of the colonies. . . . The personal liberty of the subject was confirmed, by the resolution against general warrants. . . . The lawful secrets of business and friendship were rendered inviolable, by the resolution for condemning the seizure of papers." Of these achievements John Morley, an outstanding nineteenth-century writer on Burke, wrote: "Nothing so good was done in an English parliament for nearly twenty years to

come." Burke's aim in his pamphlet was to show the British public that in one year Rockingham had succeeded in restoring the confidence of the Colonies in the British government, and that the Rockingham policy was the only sound and proven method of at once maintaining British sovereignty and Colonial civil and commercial liberty.

A pamphlet by George Grenville, accusing the Rockingham Whigs of bringing financial ruin to Britain by reversing his policy of taxing America, provoked Burke's reply, *Observations on 'The Present State of the Nation'* (1769). In Burke's second defense of his party, he attributed Britain's misfortunes in the Colonies to the political theory behind Grenville's policy of taxation, to "the injudicious tampering of bold, improvident, and visionary ministers," such as Grenville, whose "grand scheme" of taxing the Colonies he denounced as contrary to past experience and based upon metaphysical speculations in politics. This was Burke's first attack upon political ideology. Burke's characteristic distrust of *a priori* reasoning in politics is everywhere evident in his strictures against Grenville. He objected to Grenville's "high talk of Parliamentary rights, of the universality of legislative powers, and of uniform taxation," without regard to the concrete circumstances of each colony or to the consequences of his acts. Grenville's policy and theory violated moral prudence. Burke cautioned: "An attempt towards a compulsory equality in all circumstances, and an exact practical definition of the supreme rights in every case, is the most dangerous and chimerical of all enterprises." Burke disapproved of Grenville's "introduction into a discourse relating to . . . practical government" such "speculative inquiries," because like Aristotle he held that politics was a practical science aimed at establishing the social good, not a theoretical science to establish what is intellectually true. Grenville's series of trade regulations, "which caused an universal consternation throughout the colonies," and his system of taxation, were wholly untried schemes based not on past experience but upon "mere abstract principles of government." Burke then asserted one of his most fundamental political principles: "Politics ought to be adjusted, not to human reasonings, but to human nature; of which the reason is but a part, and by no means the greatest part." This is one of the grand themes in all his writings and speeches on the prac-

tical politics of the American Colonies, Ireland, India, and France. Burke's *Observations* . . . concluded that unless such speculative theories as Grenville's were abandoned, and "until the ideas of 1766 are resumed," and Rockingham's policies were once more followed, that Britain and the Colonies would become increasingly alienated, and revolution against British rule could occur.

The year after his attack on Grenville's American policy, Burke wrote his first, great pamphlet in the literature of politics, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770). This is the crucial document for an understanding of Burke's conception of government by political party. In Burke's time the Whigs were not a united party. Indeed, the very conception of political party in any modern sense did not exist. Burke's pamphlet was the first attempt in British politics to formulate the idea of party as a respectable vehicle in politics. Members of Burke's party, the Rockingham Whigs, regarded themselves as different from other Whigs, because they acted as a party upon publicly declared political policies and not merely as a faction seeking royal pensions or pursuing economic self-interest. Burke's claim has not been allowed by some twentieth century historians, such as Sir Lewis Namier, who regarded the Rockinghams in general, and Burke their chief spokesman in particular, as hypocrites who cleverly disguised their ambitions and self-interest under the cloak of appeals to constitutional principles, party policy and political reforms. Nevertheless, it is clear that the pamphlet was in part a manifesto of the Rockingham Whigs and their policies. But in a larger sense Burke's pamphlet set forth a practical means of reforming English politics without revolutionizing English society. It was an excellent statement of how Burke believed that innovations could be introduced into politics, in the instrumental part, without altering the traditional structure of government, centered in the three-part division of power between the King, Lords and Commons.

But there was also an immediate pressing purpose behind Burke's pamphlet, centered in the constitutional crisis which, from 1765 to 1782, involved the King and the House of Commons in a struggle over the policies governing the American Colonies, the use of the royal prerogative, and economic reforms to limit the extent of royal patronage and thus control the executive branch of government. John Morley has

well summarized how Burke and his party met the King's appeal to power through prerogative: "The revival of high doctrines of prerogative in the Crown was accompanied by the revival of high doctrines of privilege in the House of Commons." According to Burke's analysis (which Namier and other modern historians have denied as valid) the main source of trouble lay in the King's desire to establish personal rule through the appointment of his own ministers. Burke believed that the appointment of ministers should depend on whether they were acceptable to the majority in the House of Commons. The view of the King resulted in the dominance of the executive branch over the legislative branch of government; with Burke, this was reversed. To Burke, the King's attempt to make his view prevail destroyed the principle of the balance of power. Thus, Burke argued for "restoring the constitution to its original principles," which included a House of Commons "independent" of the Crown "for its powers, and its privileges," and exercising "its old office of control." The practical alternative urged by Burke was to replace royal influence through favoritism with party government in the House of Commons.

BURKE was not able to persuade the King and his ministers of the folly of trying to raise revenue by taxing the American Colonies. In 1767 the Townshend Acts put new duties on imports, and produced new violent reactions in the Colonies, which boycotted British goods and resisted the payment of customs. To enforce its authority the British government sent troops to ports that had resisted, and in 1770 the "Boston massacre" occurred. In the same year Lord North became Prime Minister, and remained in office until 1782. From 1767 to 1782 Burke drew up all the principal official protests of his party against the King's American policy. During that period his warnings that Britain was following a disastrous colonial policy were fulfilled.

In May 1771 Burke became the agent in Britain for the New York Colonial Assembly in Albany, a post he retained until hostilities began. As one of "the real well-wishers to the Colonies," he did all in his power to prevent the outbreak of hostilities, by reconciling British sovereignty and American civil liberty in its internal affairs. This included the power of the Colonies to

tax themselves. But more and more Burke came to believe that the whole object of the King's ministers was to subordinate the Colonies to the arbitrary will of the Crown. He noted that this policy was first tried with success against the East India Company. He wrote to the New York Assembly that even the dividends of the East India Company were brought "into an entire dependence upon the Crown." It was in the light of such policy that Burke interpreted the Mutiny Act, the Restraining Act, the Boston Port Bill, the revocation of the Massachusetts Bay Charter, the suspension of *habeas corpus*, and the priority given to claims by Quebec over land grants in northern New York. He cautioned the New York Assembly to be vigilant against such trespasses of their legitimate interests and constitutional rights. He hoped they would be of "the party that resisted but would not revolt." As agent for New York, Burke held himself responsible only to the Assembly which had hired him, not to the Crown, and he opposed an attempt by the Board of Trade, acting for the King, to make the nomination of colonial agents depend upon the appointed royal governors. By such practical means Burke sought to preserve the balance of power within colonial governments and to keep royal prerogatives within bounds.

In his *Speech on American Taxation* (April 19, 1774), Burke reviewed the series of blunders that had accompanied the imprudent and innovative schemes to tax the Colonies. He pointed out that under the Act of Navigation, which from 1660 to 1764 had been "the cornerstone of the policy of this country with regard to its colonies," a Parliamentary revenue from America "was never once in contemplation." Up to 1764 Britain was content with "commercial regulation" without revenue from taxes. A revenue tax was a revolutionary innovation which the Colonies had resisted, and which had alienated them from Britain. All the peace and prosperity which Britain and her Colonies had enjoyed together for a century and a half had been disrupted by the speculative and revolutionary theories and policies initiated by Grenville in 1764. Burke urged his colleagues to "oppose the ancient practice of the empire as a rampart against the speculations of innovators." Toward the end of his speech he put forth his characteristic faith in tradition and historical experience, in opposition to abstract political metaphysics:

*Consult and follow your experience.
 . . . Revert to your old principles. . . .
 Leave America, if she has taxable matter in her, to tax herself. I am not here going into the distinctions of rights, nor attempting to mark their boundaries. I do not enter into these metaphysical distinctions; I hate the very sound of them. Leave Americans as they anciently stood, and these distinctions, born of our unhappy contest, will die along with it.*

In brief, Burke believed that Britain could reconcile her sovereignty and Colonial freedom only by reverting to the system in force prior to 1764. But if Colonial expressions of particular grievances to be redressed were treated by Parliament as a denial of the entire sovereignty of Britain and led to the rejection of all complaints, the Colonies would in time become convinced that Parliament desired not peace through reconciliation, but unconditional submission. "If that sovereignty and their freedom cannot be reconciled," Burke asked, "which will they take? They will cast your sovereignty in your face. Nobody will be argued into slavery."

But Burke was painfully aware that time was running out for Britain, even when on March 22, 1776, less than a month before hostilities began at Lexington and Concord, he delivered his *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*, in which he made his final appeal for Britain to conciliate her Colonies. The King's determination to subdue the Colonies by force was strengthened by initial British military victories. Bolstered by victories abroad, Lord North also used his great majority in Parliament to restrict civil liberty at home by partially suspending the Habeas Corpus Act. North's action was in part the occasion for Burke to write his final important work on the American Revolution, *A Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* (1777), in which he enlarged upon his defense of constitutional liberty in opposition to government conducted by abstract metaphysical rights of sovereignty.

Fourteen years later, when Burke was charged with being inconsistent for having attacked the French Revolution after having defended the American Revolution, he made his most revealing statements on his interpretation of the American Revolution. Men such as Tom Paine and the Reverend Richard Price, who favored political revolutions in the abstract, had made the serious error of supposing that Burke's defense of

the American Revolution was based upon an abstract right of rebellion in citizens against any government, regardless of its behavior. But in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), Burke answered his radical critics by denying "that the Americans had from the beginning aimed at independence," and "that, on the supposition that the Americans had rebelled merely in order to enlarge their liberty," . . . he "would have thought very differently of the American cause." According to Burke, the American Revolution was justified not on any abstract or arbitrary "right" of revolution by citizens, but as the final resort of the Americans, after many petitions to secure redress of specific grievances had been rejected, against an administration which persisted in abusing its sovereign power. Indeed, Burke's *An Appeal* . . . makes precisely this point about revolution in any society, regarding the abuses of power. This work provides the key to his interpretation of all three great revolutions—the Revolution of 1688, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution. Concerning the Americans, Burke stated that "he always firmly believed that they were purely on the defensive in that rebellion. He considered the Americans as standing at that time, and in that controversy, in the same relation to England as England did to King James the Second in 1688." The enormous implications in this statement are further magnified in the light of Burke's remark on the French Revolution, that France was "a country wherein not the people, but the monarch, was wholly on the defensive."

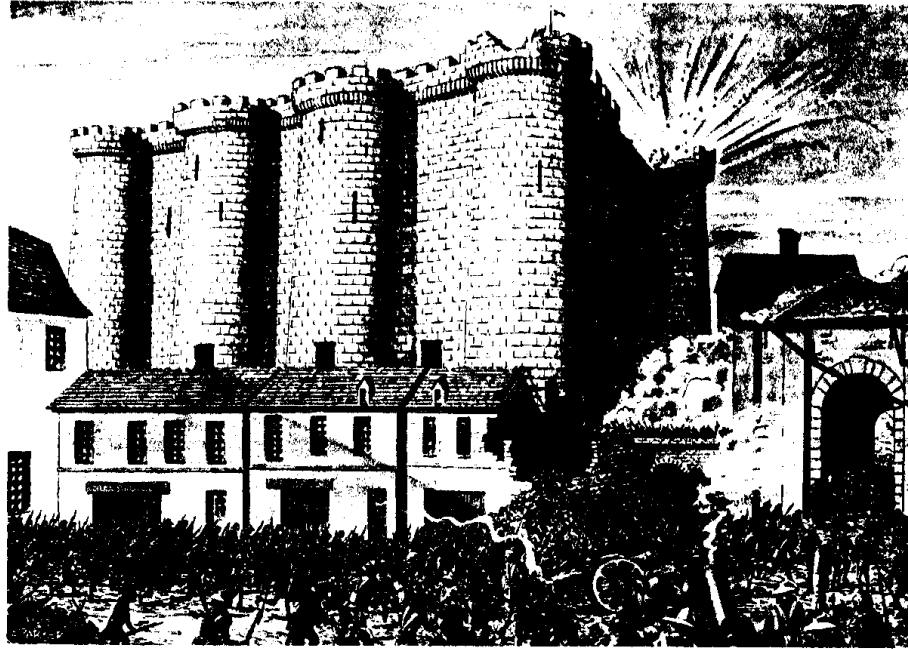
Burke clearly believed that the constitutional law of a nation provided the moral, legal and political norms of government, not the arbitrary will of any individual or body in the state or in society at large. Therefore, the essence of revolution consisted of violations against the established constitutional laws and customs of society, not merely rebellions against an administration in power. Revolution could come from any source—from a king such as James II, against the established Protestant religion of England; from a king such as George III, against the traditional political rights of Englishmen or colonists regarding taxation and representation; or from citizens at large, such as the French, against a king who had not acted in a tyrannical manner. From the position of constitutional law and limited government and the great purposes of civil society regarding life, liberty and property, a rebellion of angry citi-

zens aimed at restoring traditional liberties against the repressive policy of a particular administration was really a conservative reaction against the revolutionary abuses of legitimate sovereign power. From Burke's constitutional point-of-view, the real revolutionaries in the American Revolution were King George III and his ministers, not the Americans.

II. The French Revolution and The Revolution of 1688

ALTHOUGH even from the beginning Burke was apprehensively cautious about the French Revolution, it should be noted that his immediate public response to it was not hostile. In *A Letter to M. De-pont* (1789) he stated that he was prepared to allow events to determine the position he was to assume toward the Revolution. Up to October 1789 he said that if the French were to establish a new social order, he hoped it would be one in which life, liberty and property were protected and in which civil liberty and social justice would exist for all French citizens. But when more than 300 of the more moderate deputies to the National Assembly failed to appear after the government was pressured by mobs to move from Versailles to Paris, and when the Jacobins and extreme radicals soon after came to dominate the National Assembly and proceeded by edicts to demolish the entire traditional legal, political, religious and social structure of France, Burke became convinced that the French Revolution was a destructive and evil force, aimed not at reforming economic and political inequities, but at founding French society anew, on the basis of revolutionary ideological dogmas.

So long as the French Revolution confined itself to the internal affairs of France, Burke's growing convictions of its folly and danger remained private. But his distrust was intensified into alarm when Englishmen began to express their strong approval of events across the Channel, and to hold up the National Assembly as a model to be followed by Britain. On November 5, 1789, Dr. Richard Price, a Dissenting radical minister, gave a sermon to the London Revolution Society, to celebrate the centennial of the landing in England of the Prince of Orange, which act marked the triumph in England of the bloodless Revolution of



Storming of the Bastille

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1688, which forced the abdication of King James II. Dr. Price's sermon, called "A Discourse on the Love of Our Country," praised the French Revolution as an extension of the principles of the English Revolution of 1688. Burke had throughout his life admired the Revolution of 1688 as the most ideal example of a sound and constitutional method of making important changes in civil society. Nothing could be more false and mischievous, Burke believed, than Dr. Price's confusion of the bloodless and constitutional events of 1688 with the violent and arbitrary innovations of the French Revolution. Burke's reply to Dr. Price's sermon was the origin of his most famous and influential political work, published in November 1790 — *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Burke believed that such seventeenth-century Whigs as Sir John Hawles, General Stanhope, Sir Joseph Jekyl, and Sir Robert Eyre, who were instrumental in bringing about the Revolution of 1688, had determined the constitutional form of the British government. He described 1688 as "that period of our history . . . when the constitution was settled on its actual foundation."

Since 1688 both Whigs and Tories believed in a constitutional hereditary monarchy, limited in its powers and prerogatives by the balanced orders of the Commons and Lords. To Burke, 1688 was a revolution "not made but prevented," that is,; it prevented the executive branch, in the person of King James II, from subverting the traditional balance of power between Crown, Commons and Lords in favor of the Crown. During the 1770's, apart from party politics, Burke's opposition to the extension of the prerogatives of King George III was based upon precisely the same principle and interpretation of the British constitution. The Revolution of 1688 maintained the traditional structure of the English state, but qualified by positive law the condition under which the hereditary executive branch could be held. It did not make the monarchy elective rather than hereditary as Dr. Price claimed; nor did it signify that the people of England were free to change their government at will for any or no reason. Burke's views of 1688, and of the balanced powers of the English state, were unimpeachable articles of political faith during his entire public life.

Dr. Price's interpretation of 1688 as the triumph of England's general will, and nothing else, implied that such revolutions in the abstract were the ideal solution for social problems. He therefore praised 1688 not as an act of moral necessity to preserve civil and religious liberty, but as evidence that revolutions should provide the regular means of making future political changes in society. In answering Dr. Price in the *Reflections* . . . , Burke noted that "King James was a bad king with a good title, and not an usurper. The King was charged with "a design . . . to subvert the Protestant Church and State, and their fundamental, unquestionable liberties: they charged him with having broken the original contract between king and people." In forcing James II to abdicate, Burke said of the English people, "Their trust for the future preservation of the Constitution was not in future revolutions." He rejected the theory that 1688 set a precedent for a belief in history as progress through violent revolutions.

On the contrary, Burke argued, 1688 was not prophetic of future revolutions, but looked back in history for its normative principles: "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." Burke acknowledged that "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation." But change is not necessarily a digression from the established norms of society: change is a power to preserve as well as to alter or destroy a system of government. Burke's principle of social change is a constructive power to reform abuses without destroying the frame or structure of the existing body politic: "Without such means it might even risk the loss of that part of the Constitution which it wished the most religiously to preserve." On this principle Burke argued that "all the reformations we have hitherto made have proceeded upon the principle of reference to antiquity." A reformation to conserve traditional freedoms was the exact opposite of revolutionary innovation, which destroyed the order of society. To Burke, 1688 was in no way an ideological revolution: it left the inherited structure of English society wholly unchanged.

In all these basic ways, and in many other points, the Revolution of 1688 was the furthest antithesis from the assumptions, methods and consequences of the

French Revolution. If Dr. Price's revolutionary theory were true and men could change society "as often and as much and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions," then "the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken; no generation could link with the other; men would become little better than the flies of a summer." In a great passage in which he argued that "society is indeed a contract," Burke rejected the whole tradition of Locke's revocable social contract, that any group of citizens could dissolve the social contract at their pleasure or arbitrary will. In this Burke claimed that he voiced the conviction of most of the English people: ". . . The very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror." But in *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs* (1791), Burke admitted that the French Revolution set forth on principle the idea of a revocable social contract, revocable at the arbitrary will of the populace: ". . . What was done in France was a wild attempt to methodize anarchy, to perpetuate and fix disorder."

BURKE believed that where sovereign power is badly abused and tyranny is great and sustained, it was the right and even the duty of citizens to resist such government in order to restore the true purposes of the state. But the justification of a revolution against the state was not an initial abstract "right" to repress wrongs, but the last resort of wise and good men:

The speculative line of demarcation, where obedience ought to end and resistance must begin, is faint, obscure, and not easily definable. It is not a single act or a single event which determines it. Governments must be abused and deranged indeed, before it can be thought of; and the prospect of the future must be as bad as the experience of the past. When things are in that lamentable condition, the nature of the disease is to indicate the remedy to those whom Nature had qualified to administer in extremities this critical, ambiguous, bitter potion to a distempered state. Times and occasions and provocations will teach their own lessons. The wise will determine from the gravity of the case; the irritable, from sensibility to oppression; the high-minded, from disdain

and indignation at abusive power in unworthy hands; the brave and bold, from the love of honorable danger in a generous cause: but with or without right, a revolution will be the very last resource of the thinking and the good.

This statement from the *Reflections* was amplified in *An Appeal . . .*, where Burke's objections to easy revolutions against governments are strongly underscored:

Without attempting . . . to define, what never can be defined, the case of a revolution in government, this, I think, may be safely affirmed — that a sore and pressing evil is to be removed, and that a good, great in its amount and unequivocal in its nature, must be probable almost to a certainty, before the inestimable price of our morals and the well-being of a number of our fellow-citizens is paid for a revolution. If ever we ought to be economists even to parsimony, it is in the voluntary production of evil. Every revolution contains in it something of evil.

In the same work, with his eyes fixed upon the revolutionists in France, Burke wrote: "The burden of proof lies heavily on those who tear to pieces the whole frame and contexture of their country, that they could find no other way of settling a government fit to obtain its rational ends, except that which they have pursued by means unfavorable to all the present happiness of millions of people, and to the utter ruin of several hundreds of thousands." Clearly, to Burke, established societies and governments constituted the norms, and the whole burden of proof for making changes in society rested upon reformers and revolutionaries. Burke's doctrine of political prudence, which required men to take historical circumstances into strict account, and his faith in the capacity of men to make necessary changes in society by due process of law made him a gradualist and reformer, and caused him to reject revolutionary violence except under strong and persistent tyranny.

Critics of Burke have frequently charged him with having changed his political principles between the American and French revolutions, from a liberal to a conservative philosophy. But there is a strong consensus among Burke scholars that he held firmly to essentially the same political principles throughout his life. John Morley disposed

of the charge of changed principles or inconsistency as follows: "There is no difference in social spirit and doctrine between his protests against the maxims of the English common people as to the colonists, and his protests against the maxims of the French common people as to the court and the nobles; and it is impossible to find a single principle either asserted or implied in the speeches on the American revolution which was afterwards repudiated in the writings on the revolution in France." It was not that Burke changed or was inconsistent in principle, but that the sources of oppression in the two revolutions were altogether different—in the American, from the King and Parliament against the Colonies; and in the French, from the revolutionaries, in the name of the nation, against the King, nobles, clergy, and the whole legal, social, political, religious and economic inheritance of France and even of all Europe. As Morley said, Burke "changed his front, but he never changed his ground." Woodrow Wilson also defended Burke's political consistency: "He was applying the same principles to the case of France and to the case of India that he had applied to the case of the colonies." The great change was not in Burke's political philosophy, but in the attitude toward social change revealed in the French Revolution.

Burke was the first public man to recognize that the French Revolution was unique in European history, that it signaled a great and enduring change in the convictions of men regarding reform and revolution in society. It was not aimed at reforming specific ills in French society, but at destroying the whole inherited structure and order of French and European civilization. The French Revolution, particularly in its early proletarian stage, was the first revolution to make ideology the norm for changing society. It was founded on an entirely new theory of man as a materialistic creature, and on a mechanistic rather than an organic conception of social institutions. In these vital matters and in its fanatical spirit, it differed completely from the moderate and bloodless Revolution of 1688, and in essentials from the American Revolution. These earlier revolutions had modified certain details in the structure of society or in the means of succession to power or the conditions of sovereignty. In addition, the American Revolution had prevented the establishment of an hereditary nobility and monarchy. Otherwise, they were in perfect

harmony with the common law of England and with the Christian religion, the chief forces which shaped the laws, manners and customs of basic European institutions.

The principles and the fanatical spirit of the French Revolution were precisely the things Burke had always feared and opposed. The Revolution, he noted in the *Reflections*, involved primarily "a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions." In his *Thoughts on French Affairs* (1791), he called it "a revolution of doctrine and theoretical dogma." In a letter to his son in November 1792, Burke called the Revolution "an event which has nothing to match it, or in the least to resemble it, in history." He believed that the Revolution violated "the whole system of policy on which the general state of Europe has hitherto stood," that the revolutionaries wished to make themselves "paramount to every known principle of public law in Europe," and that they sought to establish "principles subversive of the whole political, civil, and religious system of Europe." In his *Letter to a Noble Lord* (1795), he referred to the Revolution as "a subject of awful meditation. Before this of France the annals of all time have not furnished an instance of a *complete* revolution. That Revolution seems to have extended even to the constitution of the mind of man." Burke summarized his impressions of the strange and powerful effect the Revolution had produced on the imaginations of men, in his second *Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796): he found it "a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre" which "subdued the fortitude of man," and went "straight forward to its end, unappalled by peril, unchecked by remorse, despising all common maxims and all common means." For him the events of 1789 initiated "a revolution in dogma;" they were "a total departure . . . from every one of the ideas and usages, religious, legal, moral, or social, of this civilized world." It is no wonder that Burke, believing this, felt compelled to become a political philosopher in defense of the traditional principles of European civilized society.

III. Modern Revolutions

IT would be contrary to Burke's principle of prudence and to his intense skepticism toward speculative theory in politics, to assume the mantle of a prophet and claim

to know what he would have said about modern revolutions. But in the light of Burke's reflections about social change, reform and revolution, it is possible to make some personal observations about contemporary revolutionary movements.

In perceiving that the French Revolution was the great watershed in the political life of Western civilization, Burke showed remarkable intuitive power about man as a political animal. He understood that the old "Christian commonwealth of Europe" had been dealt a fatal blow and that the coming age of "sophisters, economists, and calculators" would permanently alter the entire social order of the West. All of the essential elements in the French Revolution which Burke discussed are still functioning in modern revolutions. The French Revolution is the prototype of all modern ideological revolutions, and especially of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. Practically every modern revolution — whether Communist, Fascist, Nazi or nationalist — has been ideological, nihilistic, or both, and all have aimed at some form of doctrinaire, illiberal, one-party, socialistic totalitarian rule. These *total* revolutions also follow the example of France under Napoleon in making use of mass conscription of armies, a phenomenon unknown before 1789, but characteristic of modern revolutions.

To the principles and abstract slogans of the French Revolution Karl Marx added his own ideology, but he drew its spirit and many of its assumptions, methods and objectives from the example of France. Marx refined upon the exploitation of envy and hatred in the cause of class conflict, upon the necessity of violence and its exaltation as a constructive act in total revolution; and he crowned his own contribution to modern revolutionary theory with historical determinism and dialectic materialism. The French Revolution and Marxism have combined to convert modern ideological revolutions into a world-wide constant process in modern history.

Marxism made its ideology the universal social norm for truth and morality, by which all societies are to be judged. Its massive and continuous assault on all non-Marxian established societies is, in effect, a constant undeclared war against civilization, which forces all established traditional societies to be perpetually on the defensive. Marxism teaches that those who do not believe they have their full share of economic goods, equalized in theory through public

ownership under the state, are free to take what they want by force. It appeals to all those who suffer want or inequities, and claims to be best fitted to find solutions for them. It holds up an ideal of theoretical perfection, and condemns all institutions and nations and systems which fall short of its realization. Marxism is an element in the psychology and ideology of almost all modern revolutionary movements. It may make use of nationalist aspirations, but it transcends nationalist revolution because its materialist and economic foundations, and its philosophy of history claim world-wide validity.

The passion for ideological speculation, which Burke first attacked in Grenville as political "metaphysics," has continued through the nineteenth century and has become a raging epidemic in the twentieth century. Since 1789 modern revolutionaries do not address themselves to particular grievances in order to secure redress from wrongs through reform. Grievances merely provide the excuse or occasions for revolution. Where they are lacking, phony grievances must be created in order to justify revolution. Like Marx, ideological revolutionaries regard reform as bad, because reforms keep the established social order functioning and prevent *total* revolution by providing solutions to problems. An ideological revolutionary is not one who carries social reforms further than others, as is so often assumed; rather, he is the very opposite of a reformer. The same applies to Freedom. The modern revolutionary does not attack abuses of power in order to establish or restore freedom for all men. The common myth that a revolutionary is a lover of liberty who carries freedom in society further than most men is shattered by the fact of his objective of *total* revolution. For *total* revolution is totalitarian, and destroys freedom under constitutional law. In truth, the modern revolutionary is a doctrinaire fanatic who is convinced that he and he alone has the "Truth" which will solve all of the world's unsolved problems. To make his ideology triumphant he must appeal to freedom, but his freedom is a disguise for raw power.

Ideology provides the modern revolutionary with his sense of reality and conscience. To him these are abstract absolutes. They give him a fictional vision of a perfect society, from which there is no appeal to the real achievements of men in history. Ideology despises the virtues of moral prudence and of historical insight;

they are regarded as mere human weaknesses or illusions and impediments to immediate revolutionary success. For if ideology provides truth and reality, the achievements of men in history are merely roadblocks to the realization of ideal perfection through revolution. The revolutionary rejects history for the same reason that he rejects reform. The hatred of history so characteristic of modern revolutionary thought is a necessary part of its ideology. For to study history is to learn the range of what men have said, thought and experienced; what they have done and failed to do; and how short of absolute perfection their actual best achievements have been. Since the revolutionary wishes to destroy the historically established society, to study it would be like having a murderer study his victim before killing him. It is better to ignore history and replace it with his fictional vision of a perfect society.

Therefore, the ideological revolutionary is not interested in any comparisons be-



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tween one historical nation or economic system and another. For example, it does no good to point out to him that the chief agricultural problem of the American free market economy is what to do with its annual surplus, in contrast to the Soviet Union's collective farm system, which, with equal resources in fertile land and a much

larger expenditure of labor, produces such scarcity that Communist Russia has to import food. The revolutionary will commonly point to some flaw in the American system and condemn the entire system out of hand because it does not measure up to his fictional perfection. Imperfect concrete historical experience may be the best that men have ever achieved, but the ideological revolutionary's vision of perfection is his reality, and anything which falls short of his vision must be destroyed. Burke called such thinking *metaphysical insanity*. The revolutionary ignores the fact that even among revolutionaries there is nothing like agreement in speculative theory of what constitutes perfection, that one revolutionist's meat is another revolutionist's poison, and that not the achievements of history but the claim of having abstract perfection in ideology is the greatest illusion of any man.

Since the revolutionary assumes that his ideology provides the only acceptable norm for reconstructing society, he also assumes that the burden of proof in any conflict between established society and revolutionaries falls wholly upon society. The established order must prove its right to continue to exist. It cannot do this, but its attempts at defense are shattered by revolutionary dialectics and propaganda. The assumption of absolute true norms in ideology makes the revolutionary behave as though he has a monopoly on moral virtue and concern for human welfare, even while he is committing atrocities and doing violence against the civil and natural rights of many innocent people. Through his ideology the revolutionary acquires a genius for willful self-deception. It enables him to bridge the gap between his noble "ideals" in theory and his destructive behavior. He knows that one cannot make an omelet without cracking eggs, and he is prepared to crack many eggs even for a small but perfect omelet.

Undoubtedly, many such revolutionaries are psychotic personalities — alienated from history and society, humorless, full of rage and hatred, envying the successful, sadistic in their repressed lust for violence and power over others. By combining with others equally sick and sifting their twisted emotions through the comforting screen of speculative theory, their violence against society gives moral meaning to their lives. Ideology serves them in the same manner as drugs serve "the now generation." Ideology is the opiate of the modern revolutionary. The revolutionaries demand instant

gratification for their personal ego and vanity, not in private pleasure, but in public attention and recognition, and in their simple and instant solutions to complex social problems. Instead of reform by tantrum they seek total change by fiat. They assume that rather than a knowledge of the complex problems of economic production and distribution, and enormous labor and planning, all that is necessary to eliminate poverty is an abstract absolute hatred of it. In rejecting human experience, empirical facts, skill in method, etc., as factors in solving social problems, the ideological revolutionary projects his psychotic personality as the sole measure of reality.

The assumption that revolution is the constant norm and that the burden of proof rests with historical society is often part of the general psychology of many people who despise revolution. This has been most evident in recent years among leaders in established social institutions. This psychology has a devastating effect on their ability to defend society. It creates in heads of states, churches and universities a sense of guilt for not having made a more perfect social order. It compels them to listen favorably, or at least attentively, to even the wildest charges of revolutionaries. They are shamed by claims that the rebels, full of youthful "idealism," have better solutions to social problems. They are intimidated by the sensationalism of the press, which often reports the charges and claims of the revolutionaries as though they were the revealed truth of God. Instead of decisive action in defense of society, the will of many of these leaders becomes paralyzed, and their inability to resist effectively gives the initiative to the revolutionaries. This has been the common pattern in revolutionary actions against many American universities during the past several years. Thus, with organization, planned objectives of violence, and fanatical energy, a few dedicated revolutionaries can spread havoc through the institutions of society.

Much has been written in recent years about the theory underlying the actions of modern revolutionaries, in their subversion of states, their attacks on free economic systems, and their destruction of basic institutions, such as the Church and the university. A close reading of Burke on reform and revolution provides many unusual insights into the nature and spirit of many modern revolutions, and particularly of the most vital role of ideology.