

On the Use and Abuse of Edmund Burke

The Portable Edmund Burke

edited with an Introduction by Isaac Kramnick.

Penguin Press, New York, NY, 1999.

Isaac Kramnick introduces his anthology of Burke's Writings and Correspondence, *The Portable Edmund Burke*, by recognizing the Irish-born, British M.P. and self-described "philosopher in action" as the "intellectual source of one of the world's most influential visions—conservatism. His writings and speeches," Kramnick claims, "are the bible, and he the prophet of that ideology," as Marx is of communism and Locke of liberalism. And yet, Kramnick's Burke—for this is decidedly Kramnick's version of Burke—offers a conservative vision and ideology that is "grounded in skepticism," and "stands in revolt against the eighteenth century and, as [Burke] saw it, the 'smugness of adulterated metaphysics.'"

Kramnick offers us an admirably diverse selection of Burke's works and correspondence. In addition to the standard fare of extracts in Burke anthologies, such as *Reflections*, *Speech on Conciliation with the Colonies*, and *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, there are more unusual choices: *The Reformer*, *Notebook*, *Abridgement on the English History*, *Sketch of a Negro Code*, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, *An Account of the European Settlements in America*,

Letters on a Regicide Peace, et. al. Interestingly, and prudently, to my mind, Kramnick practically reduplicates the selections from the *Reflections* used by Peter Stanlis in his anthology, even down to the elliptical marks, though Kramnick makes no reference to this fact. This is somewhat ironic given that Stanlis is included among the American "cold-warriors" whom Kramnick accuses of appropriating Burke for their own purposes. More of that to come.

Concerning the charge of skepticism, what did Burke reject and what dogma did he disown? Burke did reject the political rationalism of abstract, *a priori* reasoning, especially when applied to the realm of politics and society in disregard of custom and circumstances. Such reasoning for Burke was particularly reflected in the "dogmatism of philosophers" such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Helvetius, and Paine. This type of reasoning in supporting radical change in society is destructive of custom, tradition, ordered liberty, and deliberate change. What Burke embraces, according to Kramnick, is the "art of governing" as "pru-

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dential management” and administration. “Governing, according to Burke, is ‘a matter of the most delicate and complicated skill’” (p.xvii).

Burke’s skepticism, then, is a rejection of “the optimism and rationalism of the liberal theory of human nature. Deep reservoirs of evil and sin lurk in human nature.” Thus, “To govern is to restrain man,” and “the source of Burke’s [conservative] ideal is, of course, religion” (p.xvi). So it is that the prophet of conservatism offers an entirely negative vision rejecting the *philosophes* vision of secular perfection, insisting “on the inevitability of sin, suffering and imperfection...in a prose style of compelling grandeur, that...has attracted to his name the legions of disciples who spread his teachings to this day” (p.xiv).

Of course, there are degrees of skepticism, from radical, to mitigated, to simply practical skepticism regarding contingent matters. Kramnick’s charge of skepticism fails to take account of Burke’s healthy view of reason’s abilities to ascend even to metaphysical truths. It is laudable that Kramnick includes selections from Burke’s *Philosophical Inquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, but there are passages from the *Inquiry* which place Burke squarely in the center of classical philosophical realism, and they are passages not included in Kramnick’s anthology. In the *Inquiry* Burke clearly affirms the *principle of causality*, claiming “as there will be little doubt that bodies present similar images to the whole species, it must necessarily be allowed, that the pleasures and the pains which it excites in one man, it must raise in all mankind, whilst it operates naturally...for if we deny this we must imagine that the same cause, operating in the same manner, and on subjects of the same kind, will produce different effects; which would be highly absurd.” Taking this principle of causality, recognized in this passage by a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, Burke

concludes in the *Inquiry* concerning reason’s ability to know God’s existence: “It is by a long deduction, and much study, that we discover the adorable wisdom of God in his works”; and, “The more accurately we search into the human mind, the stronger the traces we everywhere find of His wisdom who made it.” Burke finds the ability of reason to follow this path to be anything but easy, but it is not impossible.

But even in the selections included in Kramnick’s anthology, we find passages which no “skeptic” would have written, such as the passage in Burke’s *Tract on the Popery Laws*, in which he acknowledges the Natural Law, and a human nature. Against the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland Burke holds that “They have no right to make a law prejudicial to the whole community ...because it would be made against the principle of a superior law, which is not in the power of any community, or of the whole race of man, to alter—I mean the will of Him who gave us our nature, and in giving impressed an invariable law upon it.”

Kramnick focuses on Burkean interpretation and finds Burke’s work appropriated and distorted on two extremes since World War II, one British and one American. The British view is dominated by the positivist historian Louis Namier, and his disciples, who see in Burke a gross mystification disguising mere interest, a man guilty of “hypocrisy and cant,” consumed with “blatant egocentricity,” and a mere “party politician,” according to Namier, “with a minority mind.”

Perhaps even more shocking to Kramnick is the rescue of Burke by his “American friends,” who set out to use (or abuse) Burke for their dreaded cold-war conservatism of the 50s and 60s, with their mission being nothing less than the “defense of Christian civilization.” Kramnick holds that “In neither case is [Burke] regarded with scholarly detachment.” Instead, “His

name evokes passion and polemics." Now if the reader is smitten by a measure of irony here, it may be due to Kramnick's own book, offering the most eccentric interpretation of Burke ever presented, perhaps commending him to the renown publishers of the Penguin Press, on *The Rage of Edmund Burke*, which is a psychobiography of Burke where "rage" is reduced to Burke's repressed homosexuality. Kramnick's own "scholarship," or version thereof, leads him to lump certain scholars together as "woosers... in the first blush of their love affair with [Burke]." And "uppermost in their minds,"—according to the confidently non-skeptical Kramnick, who can readily read others' motives and psychological impulses, is "the threat of world communism." And who are these scholars, or "woosers?" They include Russell Kirk, Ross J.S. Hoffman, Francis Canavan, and Peter J. Stanlis among others.

Kramnick offers a few select quotations from two or three of the above, none containing any reference to the "cold war" or championing Burke as the main weapon of the cold warrior-*cum*-Burke scholar. Kramnick's effort to brand the scholarship of these avowed American "woosers" seems hastily made, rather like his quoting from Russell Kirk's seminal article, "Edmund Burke and Natural Rights," which he incorrectly cites as "Edmund Burke and National Rights," and his reference to Peter Stanlis' *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*, which he lists as being from pp. 247-249, when it is actually pp. 247-248, which capitalizes words that Stanlis does not, introduces commas where Stanlis did not, drops an entire sentence without use of elliptical marks, and omits the word "political" from



Stanlis's phrase "Burke's political philosophy." These would be minor points except that they serve to cast doubt on the academic integrity of esteemed scholars.

Granted, Hoffman couples Marx and communism with the radical democratic doctrines of Rousseau and the resulting Jacobinism; but insofar as Burke's thought denounces all forms of tyranny, is it in any way excessive for Burke scholars to find in him matter for reproach against all forms of highly centralized collectivism? But to dub the serious work of Kirk, Stanlis, and Canavan as simply the work of "Burke's cold war disciples" is advancing a thesis upon the splenetic thread of *ad hominem*. It would be more accurate to refer to Stanlis and Canavan as Thomists or Aristotelians in that they argue for a basic compatibility between the ethics and politics of classic thinkers in the tradition of Natural Law and justice, than as "cold war disciples." Both Stanlis and Canavan are not aware of ever having referred to the "cold war" in any of their writings on Burke.

To deny that the scholarly achievement of Kirk, Stanlis, and Canavan on Burke is subordinated or misused for "cold war" purposes is not to deny the robust rebuke by Burke of tyranny in all its forms, especially the virulent form of Jacobinism manifested in the French Revolution. What marks off the tyranny of the radical democratists of Burke's own day is the assertion of the arbitrary will of "the people" unchecked by ancient opinion, just prejudice, human nature, institutions, and private property, as well as religion and civil manners. It is the emergence of the unbridled will, gaining ascendancy over the latent wisdom revealed in custom and tra-

dition, rather than a will in just subordination to the Natural Law applied to circumstance through practical reason and prudence, that Burke excoriates. As Burke concludes in his *Reflections*, “A perfect democracy is therefore the most shameless thing in the world.” He warns that any notion of the “will” such as the “will of the people” or the arbitrary will of the sovereign, should never become “the standard of right and wrong.” Burke proclaims in his *Appeal from the New Whigs to the Old Whigs*, that “Neither the few nor the many have a right to act merely by their will, in any matter connected with duty, trust, engagement, or obligation” (p. 489).

Kramnick’s Burke is full of “frenzy” and

“fury,” at once a skeptic and an empiricist, possessed of a “prose style of compelling grandeur,” who pleads “for order, for stability,” and “for submissive obedience.” What is missing from this portrayal lies before the reader in Kramnick’s own anthology. Here, Burke offers us a political philosophy rooted in a Natural Law ethic, grounded in an affirmation of a human nature, shaped by custom and tradition, but free to make ethical decisions, prizing an order that is measured against the criteria of the common good, acknowledging a transcendent Deity, opposed to geographical morality, and able to speak to all ages. This is the proper and enduring use of Edmund Burke.

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