

Burke in Perspective

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Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the American Revolution, by Carl B. Cone. *Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957.*

THAT EDMUND BURKE WAS A political organizer and party manager is a commonplace. That his central concern as a statesman was the preservation of British institutions as inherited from the past, and the needful elimination of injustices and corruptions which threatened their stability, is likewise generally accepted. Burke's responses to affairs and issues in other parts of the world, from the American colonies through India to France, initially came from, and were sharpened by, concepts of British dignity, power, and influence, and the security of England.

Magnanimity toward other peoples, respect for institutions prevalent elsewhere, and bitterness against ideological revolutionaries all came from, and were a broadening of, his central preoccupations. Even his loyalty to the land where he was born was limited and shaped by the larger perspective of British national interest, realistically construed on an idealized concep-

tion of past achievement and present role. His works and days were given to a search for appropriate instruments which might secure stability in change; and to inform British politics with a principled vision of past growth, present greatness, and future destiny, against the perspectives of man's human finiteness, and the vision of eternity.

Himself mortally fallible, Burke reconciled these great purposes with his own ambitions and interests, and with the struggles for careers and rewards of relatives and connections. Where there was possible conflict of interest and duty, he honestly failed to perceive it, and was therefore able to attain a rationalized coherence without conscious calculation. His whole public life achieved a unity in advocacy and action on behalf of a liberal conservatism, liberating just because preservative and grounded in tradition, in the social inheritance as a living past, to be kept alive and healthy, and so surely though slowly improving.

Burke's own and his family's interests, and their consequent claims on public and government, appeared to him legitimate because legitimized by service to that purpose, and by that criterion he was able to distinguish more generally between cor-

ruptions in public life which necessitated reform, and demanded excision, and those which were legitimate rewards for creative service. In office, he caused to be made administrative changes in accord with his own principle, and to the detriment of pocket and influence. With an integrity which in part was consequent on too easy judgment from a distance, he in due course sacrificed party and broke long-lived friendships in the service of those same principles when he deemed them, and the stability of his own land, fundamentally threatened by the theory and practice of the French Revolution.

The preceding account, I think, is a fair summary of Burke's course and intent, acceptable alike to those who admire and defend him and to critics aghast at what they deem his powers of self-deception and rationalization, and convinced of the wrong-headedness of his doctrines and of the sinister consequences of their influence. I intend, in any event, to use it as basis for assessing Professor Cone's book; with the caveat that it is hazardous—though for scholarly purposes it often is imperative—to assess the theses of a work in progress, without the perspective of the whole, and lacking the benefit of the author's final summary.

The present volume goes only to the eve of the second Rockingham ministry. By utilizing the Burke papers recently made available—the author's avowed warrant for his undertaking—Professor Cone seeks here to put Burke's earlier career in new perspective; he likewise undertakes to give a more adequate account of Burke's off-stage life and avocational concerns, which yet constitute the context, and give the contours, of his central preoccupation.

On the political front, Cone strives to show that Burke was, in those years, first and foremost the party organizer and manager; that he developed a doctrine of party and sought to implement it in practice; that here was his real contribution, as transition from the old order of loose faction and royal influence, whose context

was the interest and power of a limited class which treated public affairs as a private preserve, toward the new order—for long still embryonic despite Burke's work—of principled, organized, and disciplined parties genuinely concerned with public issues and national welfare, appealing to and dependent upon an electorate ultimately to be based upon universal suffrage.

That Burke was not only regarded in these years by many of his contemporaries as dominantly a party man, in the service of Rockingham and the Rockingham Whigs; but that he also developed a new and ultimately fruitful theory and practice of the role of party and party discipline, Cone successfully demonstrates. He notes the efforts, and the short-run self-sacrifice, Burke made to prevent individual acceptance of office by members of the faction without concern for the collective interest; and likewise to prevent Rockingham and the party from going into office with brief and limited power. He observes also Burke's insistence that the party does have, and must have, a program grounded in principles; and must take office only when it can do so with a free hand to effectuate its principles: that is, on its terms, and not as an escape-operation for the king. Too great eagerness for office makes for short tenure where the king is not friendly, and gives no basis for achievement of coherent policies.

Such an analysis does make clear that Burke was moving away from notions of politics as a private preserve of intriguers, temporary alliances, and factions. Yet Burke was working within the established system, which he defended, and as Cone also insists, Burke had respect for the aristocracy, the big landowners. He had no sympathy for democracy; and, far from supporting, strenuously opposed parliamentary reform, the broadening or rationalizing of the franchise. What he demonstrated to the Rockingham faction was the consonance of enlightened self-interest and the support of principles, which he made

coherent for them. His was no clear teaching of the desirability of a two-party system, of the duty of an opposition to oppose—or of his Majesty's loyal opposition. His strategy and tactics were expedient operations within the established order; and, if he is a precursor of modern parties, he is so by inadvertence. Actually (though here Mr. Cone's second volume may require modified judgment) it would be exceedingly hard to show continuity between Burke's views and modern party organization; and here I venture to suggest that, for all the attempts to push origins back, and to discover early seeds and embryos, the modern system of government and party in England does clearly emerge, as was once taught, in the Victorian period, with Gladstone and Disraeli. Not Walpole, nor even the younger Pitt, was the first real prime minister, any more than Burke was the first party manager.

The meaning of Burke's party efforts is clarified by his own concept of the member of Parliament, and by his relation to the electors of Bristol, which Cone describes fairly and fully. Doctrine and behavior were here compatible. Burke insisted that local service—and he did his share—must be subordinated to national interest; and that the member, by qualification, location, and contacts, was in a better position to judge the national interest than those he represented, too often biassed by self-interest and uninformed as to the total situation, and lacking in a feeling for enlightened expediency.

In view of subsequent long-lived debate as to the nature of representation, and the use of Burke's doctrine as authority by one side, it would be erroneous to argue that such a position was in itself incompatible with later political practice. What is revealing, however, is that Burke, though he had stood for Bristol to acquire its influence and gain a seat for the Rockingham party, resolutely resisted any urgings to cultivate that constituency until too late; when, sure of defeat if he fought the election, he declined to poll. But both

the inaction which made such a step necessary, and the content of his speech itself, suggest the degree to which Burke was distant from modern parties and politics; and was (as Cone notes) less than fully in harmony with the political intrigue of his own day. No doubt the failure was owing in part to temperament, as Cone emphasizes; and is testimony to the degree to which, for all his politicking, Burke was no politician—not in the modern sense. The real point is, however, that Burke's concepts of politics and his practice were coherent because principled.

The defects in Mr. Cone's approach, and the limitations of the thesis he espouses, are revealed in his treatment of Burke on the American colonies: which, as the sub-title of the book suggests, is the secondary focus of this volume.

As against the vulgar concept, too often accepted by scholars, that Burke was not only the friend of the colonies, but also was a leading supporter of them in their struggle for independence, Cone is forcefully corrective. With justice, he insists that Burke did not seek or desire this independence; that his purpose was to prevent the demand and the struggle, and to preserve the Empire as it then was; and that, once the die was cast, Burke lost interest in the colonies, becoming reservedly critical and perhaps, behind the reserve, hostile toward the new United States. He put the colonies in Coventry; and the contrast before and after speaks volumes.

Burke's purpose before the event did not differ, therefore, from that of his opponents in British politics, the government of the day. The differences were in the strategy to be pursued, and the perspective behind it. Burke saw the whole empire; realized that the colonists believed themselves to be endowed with English rights of Whig derivation; recognized the justice of their viewpoint; and perceived that, were it conceded, their demands met reasonably, and their grievances removed, the whole empire would be strengthened. He

sought to preserve, not to destroy, the authority of the British sovereign: he attacked legalism and the narrow self-interest of mercantilist interests as destructive of a long-term mutuality of interest which he thought compatible with British hegemony.

Aware of the rightful claims of Britain, and respectful of the American interests of the members of the English governing class, he sought to reconcile these with what he felt were just demands by the colonists. Because the British government, and the interests behind it, proved niggardly in concession, the quarrel grew hot, and the colonial demands broader and more emphatic. In the light of his overriding purpose, and governed by the changing circumstances, Burke moved toward more generous concessions, in which direction alone stood some chance for success.

Mr. Cone thinks these moves a case of "too little and too late"—on the score that, by the time Burke got to advocating more liberal concessions, the colonists already wanted still more, and were unwilling to settle for less. Burke, out of touch with their temper, irrelevantly urged today what they might have welcomed yesterday. This criticism perhaps is just; and it is even conceivable that a prompt British acceptance of Burke's views at the outset would have whetted, not slaked, colonial appetites. Later, concession doubtless would have achieved little: it is a commonplace of politics that, while the generosity of firm strength begets both admiration and submission, belated reform based on uncertainty and weakness normally encourages and strengthens opposition, begets new demands, and ends in resistance.

Conservative magnanimity of Burke's sort has to possess governing powers, and to use these promptly; or it becomes irrelevant, losing both its enlightenment and its efficacy. The point is not that Burke misjudged the colonists, but that the liberal conservative, then and now, finds himself in an impossible position when confronted by intransigence on the one side and exasperation on the other. The

historical outcome may then be tragic; and it at best is unlikely, except on a long and particular perspective of national destiny, to be the best in its day available to statesmanship. In particular, the difficulties of enlightened conservatism are great when vested interests at home confront demands for independence in colonies where advanced doctrines of freedom have taken root. The enlightenment of moderate conservatism needs to be counterbalanced by the moderation of enlightened liberalism. That achievement, arising from shared culture, may reflect and strengthen consensus. But in relations between peoples, and especially unequal peoples, the likelihood of discovering each in the right place is not great.

The root criticism of Professor Cone's analysis is, then, that he does not assess Burke as a philosophic statesman; nor seriously estimate the strength and weakness of his position, which, given all the flaws of personality and faults of interest, still had coherence from the outset. Burke on principle developed — and applied — his anti-doctrinaire doctrine; but his insistence on the pragmatically expedient and the politically possible course always was subject to, and arose from awareness of, direction and goal. It is fatal to overemphasize the play of politics; and deliberately to take the view of Burke's contemporaries, that he was a pure politician, is myopic. Cone's view that Burke did not become a political thinker before the *Reflections* —with the implication that his earlier teaching is retrospective construction—is error: the essential ideas were formed (though not known to his contemporaries) before his entry into public life.

At root, I fear, this book suffers from its author's lack of grounding as either political philosopher or political scientist. His criteria for assessment are not clear and coherent; the particular judgments are almost random, without over-all context.

That root judgment made, I must add that Professor Cone also fails as a biog-

rapher. He brings in, true, the whole background of Burke's public life; he comments on his many interests and associations. Nevertheless, no picture of the whole man in his setting emerges. Discussion of Burke as theorist of aesthetics, as collector of pictures, as patron of artists, as landed gentleman, as agronomist, as clubman and associate of intellectual and cultural leaders, as head of a family, as ardent and generous host, and as inept manager of personal finances and unfortunate investments, does not end in a rounded picture. These reports, rather, though so conscientiously made, interrupt the central record of political life. With some exasperation, one senses that the materials for a broader biography, which would clarify man and times, politics and culture, philosophy and

political theory, all are present. They need to be used. Given our rich resources in biographical materials for this period; given the special quality of personalism in its culture and public life; given modern sciences usable by the historian, by happy consonance the path is open for real reinterpretation of an age in all its variety, and with deepened meaning.

Edmund Burke, on Mr. Cone's own showing, is peculiarly suited to such treatment. For we now have the materials; and he, so deeply committed to the ideal pattern of his day, and in love with its aristocratic order, developed a range and depth of feeling not readily reconcilable with that order on its own premises. To have missed this chance is a pity. One can only hope that another will take it.