

## Misinterpreting Burke

PETER J. STANLIS

**Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism**, by Michael Freeman, *Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. 250 pp. \$21.00.*

THIS BOOK LACKS a preface or introduction, so that Mr. Michael Freeman very early in the first chapter announces his subject, his method, his theme, and the structure of his study: "This is a study of Burke's system of ideas," not "a study of what Burke thought," but "a systematic reconstruction of what Burke said," that is, "his fundamental ideas." He notes that although Burke was not "always consistent," he nevertheless produced "a fairly coherent body of thought," and proposes to "examine in sequence, his metaphysics, his epistemology, his moral theory, his theory of society, his theory of government and his theory of political change." Freeman devotes the first eight chapters to the foundations of Burke's political and social theory; the final six chapters, which are the main thrust of his book, are devoted to Burke's theory of political change and his critique of political radicalism and revolution. Undoubtedly, Freeman structured his book in two parts on the premise that a preliminary valid knowledge of Burke's political and social philosophy is necessary in order to appreciate fully his critique of political radicalism. It is highly ironical, then, that despite his very badly garbled account of Burke's political theory, Freeman has written a very perceptive account of Burke and revolution.

In the last six chapters Freeman argues that in the face of the French Revolution,

which Burke detested and feared, he "proposed a general conservative theory of revolution and of political radicalism in order to combat and refute the general radical ideas he believed the revolutionaries to hold." Since the French Revolution is the archetypal model for all twentieth-century revolutions, Burke's philosophical case against it is of great significance to our era:

The central general thesis of Burke's critique of political radicalism was this: there is a law of nature which states that revolution, which is the pure practical implementation of radical political theory, leads necessarily via anarchy to tyranny. The thesis is important because, if it is true, political radicalism rests upon a false theory. If political radicalism is to be rendered plausible, Burke's critique must be overcome.

Burke's critique of the French Revolution is important to philosophical conservatives and radicals alike, because since 1789 there has been a continuous struggle between these basic rival philosophies.

Early in his study Freeman defines the cardinal differences between radical and conservative political beliefs:

The radical believes that the problems of the old order cannot be solved, its evils not cured, within the framework of that order. He concludes that a fundamentally new order is required and is prepared to use extreme political means to the end of bringing it about. The radical has an opponent: the generalized conservative. The conservative be-

lieves that societies should be thought of as having been built through centuries of human endeavour; that any actual society will be imperfect, containing a mixture of good and evil; that the good should be carefully conserved and the evil carefully remedied; that radicals do not recognize the good that exists and, in their impatience to cure the evil, destroy the good without replacing it with the better. To the conservative, the radical is mistaken about the old order, the revolution and the new order. He does not appreciate the first; he overestimates what the second can achieve; and he does not realize the "speculative" or "illusory" character of the third. To the radical, the conservative is at best complacent about the evils of the old order, at worst an apologist for oppression.

Although this statement sharply polarizes the conflicting philosophies, it is clearly a vast oversimplification and requires to be fleshed out with the specific and complex details of radical and conservative conflicts over the meanings of such key political concepts as freedom, tyranny, equality, order, justice, and mercy. The conflict goes deeper than Freeman indicates, because often what the conservative believes is good is considered evil by the radical, and vice versa.

Freeman notes that there is a broad range of positions among such political radicals as Thomas Paine, Karl Marx, and Mao Tse-tung, although all were ideological revolutionaries. He fails to note that conservatives also differ greatly among themselves, although all are anti-revolutionary. Burke is an ideal archetypal conservative because he was not merely anti-revolutionary, but made a very strong positive case in defense of the philosophical foundations of the historically established European society. In doing so, he threw the burden of proof upon political radicals and revolutionaries regarding whether and how changes should be made in civil society.

Unfortunately, in his first eight chapters Freeman does not well fulfill his declared

intention to "examine, in sequence" Burke's "metaphysics, his epistemology, his moral theory," etc., and his failure to do justice to each of these vital elements in Burke's total political and social philosophy results in a large number of crude statements. It is necessary to understand Burke's philosophy as a whole, even while examining any one part, in order to avoid errors of omission and commission. Freeman makes no attempt to describe and analyze the complex but unsystematic relationships between Burke's metaphysics, his epistemology, his belief in natural law and constitutional law, his conception of the moral nature of man, of Church and State, which underlie his appeals to history, prescription, prudence, etc. Consequently, he does not understand Burke's political and social philosophy as a whole. Instead, Freeman touches lightly many of the basic elements in Burke's thought, treats them in isolation as abstract categories, sets some needlessly against others, often badly misunderstands Burke and then introduces speculative irrelevancies in an effort to clarify a point, makes value judgments on Burke's character or beliefs based upon his own neo-Marxist ideology, and declares Burke to be, amid his many virtues, blind to "reality," ignorant, complacent, or callous about evils in society, and politically inconsistent. His errors on Burke are further compounded by his inadequate knowledge of the great range of meanings during the eighteenth century of such key terms as "nature," "natural," "reason," "rational," "progress," "romanticism," etc. A tendency to use abstract diction runs through much of Freeman's study and vitiates some of his explications of Burke's thought.

A good example of Freeman's weakness in method and understanding are his remarks on Burke's metaphysics. Instead of describing Burke's metaphysics in detail, and showing its connection with moral natural law, and both together with his empirical epistemology and theory of history, Freeman dismisses Burke's metaphysics with contempt and separates it from his epistemology: "Burke's

metaphysics is banal and unpersuasive. His epistemology carries much more force." And again: "Though Burke's metaphysics are in the rationalist natural-law tradition, his epistemology is strongly empiricist." Freeman ignores the fact that Burke's Christian metaphysics, which includes the moral nature of man, and therefore the moral natural law as perceived by man's "right reason," is not an abstract transcendent unreality, separated and remote from human nature in society, but a concrete, immanent, and therefore empirical reality, embodied in Church dogma and in man's institutions, systems of law, and customs throughout history in European society. Burke's providential view of history as "the known march of the ordinary providence of God," and his statement that no moral questions are ever abstract questions, connects his metaphysics and his belief in natural law with his epistemology. Freeman is aware that Burke's epistemology is "strongly empiricist," but he is unaware that it is also normative, through religion and natural law, because the nature of man is ethical as well as physical. Freeman's assertion that "Burke's metaphysics collapsed under the impact of the French Revolution," infers that historical events invalidate philosophical truths, that descriptive facts nullify prescriptive norms, that *de jure* law is destroyed by *de facto* will, that whatever is, is right, because might makes right. Nothing could be further from the spirit and substance of Burke's political philosophy than the philosophical materialism which underlies Freeman's description and analysis of Burke's views of man in society.

Many of Freeman's most appalling gaffes spring from his very rigid and literal-minded interpretations of Burke's metaphysical and religious principles. Burke's belief that God created man with the capability of organizing government, and that therefore, indirectly and metaphorically, God "willed the state," prompts Freeman to assume that human frailty was eliminated and the state was perfect, so that he asks: "If God willed the

state, why should it need to be checked?" Burke's belief that men are morally bound to obey God's eternal moral laws in society and that man's free will does not make his relationship to civil society voluntaristic is translated by Freeman: "Burke does at times talk like a materialistic determinist." Burke's appeals to Christian charity toward the poor, as an obligation of faith enforced as a principle of revelation, is secularized by Freeman into mere "humanitarianism," or charity based upon sentimental feeling. Because Burke believed God was not indifferent to human affairs, and since He had allowed the French Revolution to occur, this meant, according to Freeman, that Burke's God was "the God of revolution." Burke's Aristotelian conviction that politics is a part of *practical* reason rather than of *speculative* reason makes him a "pragmatist." A similar error occurs in Freeman's interpretation of Burke's appeals to utility as part of the basis of law; this makes him "a Utilitarian." Burke was convinced that the English constitution had improved through many refinements over many centuries; Freeman asserts that this makes Burke a believer in the idea of "progress" as a law of history.

A source of equally serious errors lies in Freeman's failure to distinguish between *philosophy* and *ideology*, between "truth" and "reality" as ends pursued by the mind and total nature of man, and the speculative discursive reason of man which assumes that its private projections of ideas constitute the sole source and test of abstract "truth" and "reality." Freeman subsumes all ideas and human thought under the Marxist jargon of "ideology." In his appeals to history and moral prudence, in his lifelong attacks upon "the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction," Burke was one of the most anti-ideological political thinkers in Western civilization. Yet to Freeman, "He was a blatant ideologist." We are informed that "Burke was a quasi-perfectionist and quasi-perfectionism is the dominant ideology of the western world today...." Freeman applies his analysis of Burke as a supposed "ideologist" most crudely in economics and

class distinctions. Because Burke was critical of the extravagant life-style of wasteful wealthy people, Freeman attributes to Burke the Marxist "surplus value" labor theory: "The rich live off the surplus value created by the poor." But since elsewhere Burke denied that the wealth of the rich *caused* the poverty of the poor, he is accused by Freeman of inconsistency. Freeman assumes that Burke's belief in a free market, competitive, capitalistic economic system precluded any of the poor from rising out of their poverty, that the poor were all locked into a caste system, and that no man of business could pursue his legitimate self-interest without being vicious: "To the poor Burke preaches resignation; to the bourgeoisie he justifies avarice." Burke's rejection of the state as the proper social agency to relieve the suffering of the poor is construed by Freeman as "forbidding pity for the starving." In each of these instances, and throughout his study, Freeman assumes the Marxist dialectics of class warfare, and charges Burke with having been complacent about the evils in the established order of Europe. In short, according to Freeman, it was impossible for Burke to defend the Christian commonwealth of Europe without being guilty of inhumanity to man.