On Enlightenment and Revolutionary Ideology

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Edmund Burke: The Enlightenment and Revolution, by Peter J. Stanlis, *New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Pubs., 1990. 290 pp. $34.95.*

PROFESSOR PETER J. STANLIS' new book consists of a series of essays reassessing the antirevolutionary critique Edmund Burke unleashed against the French Revolution two centuries ago. Clearly, Burke's critique challenged and eventually helped change the European perception of a revolution celebrated initially as an event that would regenerate the world. Burke was the first prominent public man to argue that the Revolution was, in essence, a militant, messianic ideology reified in frightening new forms of power—a revolution that constituted a radical break with European history. Burke was then, the first to recognize the Revolution's importance as an epochal event in world history.

Stanlis approaches Burke's critique from three perspectives: he establishes Burke's prerevolutionary vision of European civilization and then shows how it impinges on his critique of both the Enlightenment and the Revolution. With regard to the first, he responds to those who have criticized Burke for being consistent in defending the Americans, the Irish, and the people of India from oppressive state power, while attacking a revolution that had supposedly liberated the French people from a repressive regime. Stanlis maintains that, given Burke's vision of a collective European order and his revolutionary critics' propensity to insist on superficial similarities, Burke responded consistently to a revolution that was radically antihistorical.

In the book's first part, he reviews Burke's traditional understanding of the moral Natural Law—a tradition reflected in Aristotle, Cicero, and a series of Christian texts underpinning Burke's world view. Burke's dialogue with the past and with this tradition ensured its inherited presence in his own works; indeed, Stanlis was the first to illustrate the importance of the Natural Law in Burke's thought and to suggest how Burke confronted the Revolution with the collective weight of Western tradition. He is especially perceptive in documenting how Burke envisioned the

moral Natural Law incarnated into the concrete circumstances of different European countries and cultures—the common law and corporate institutions through which an eternal principle, the "Word", was made flesh. Indeed, for Burke the Incarnation was the principal paradigm of man's concrete interaction with a transcendent order. Stanlis, hence, highlights a contrast between the way in which Burke fleshed out a principle accommodating the concrete circumstances of a particular time and place and the tendency of Enlightenment and revolutionary ideology to reduce concrete complexities to mathematical formulas and rationalist abstractions.

Since Burke saw the Revolution as an extension of Enlightenment ideology, he contended that it was paradoxically propelled by old ideas enforced by new institutional forms of power—the Committees of General Security and Safety, the revolutionary courts and armies—in short, the entire revolutionary apparatus and the endeavor to compel concrete people to fit impossibly abstract ideological categories. Thus, as Stanlis notes, the language of "natural rights"—a language reappearing as "the rights of man" in the Revolution—first appeared during the Enlightenment and was criticized by Burke in his prerevolutionary writings. Later, Burke saw that as the Revolution constantly clashed with reality, it would continually redefine itself as well as universal "rights" now exclusively "revolutionary," existing only for those citizens who fit the shifting ideological categories of citizen and patriot. To Burke the Revolution was the Enlightenment militant; it was a mutation in the body politic of Western Europe, a communal Europe interconnected by its common sources: Roman law, Christian morality, and Teutonic customs—the *respublica christiana* which had succeeded the Roman empire. Since Europe was connected by a series of historical, corporate links, Burke understood that the Revolution's attack on any "link" (for instance, the traditional French constitution) was an assault on the entire historical structure of Europe.

In his chapter on "Burke and the Law of Nations," Stanlis stresses this European interconnectedness by discussing specific international laws conforming to the concrete realities of individual European states. Thus, in reaffirming "the Law of Nations," Burke followed the tradition of Suarez, Grotius, and others who contended that a law of nations reflected Natural Law, but he also recognized that individual countries often failed to comply with these international laws. Stanlis reminds us that Burke also criticized British deviations from the Natural Law; in 1780, for instance, he condemned the British East India Company for violating the international principle that neutral ships have free access to world trade. A decade later, however, Burke realized that the new revolutionary crisis had radically changed traditional European agreements and understandings. Convinced that the survival of Britain and the European commonwealth was at stake, he soon called for a collective, interventionist war against revolutionary France. Having broken a series of traditional European understandings, France was, according to Burke, "outside" the moral boundaries of Europe. But his call for an international war was again based on the precedent of Natural Law, specifically Vattel's axiom that threatened nations have the collective right to intervene in any country jeopardizing international stability. Even when he made exceptions, Burke thought within the context of the Natural Law tradition.

In the two chapters titled "Burke and the Rationalism of the Enlightenment" and "Burke and the Sensibility of Rousseau," Stanlis discusses how Burke's critique of the Revolution was an extension

of his critique of the Enlightenment. Burke's great insight was that both Enlightenment and revolutionary ideology inevitably turned into what they ostensibly opposed. In this context, Stanlis provides an historical overview of the Enlightenment's cult of reason and the ideological endeavor to methodize concrete societies along mathematical, "rational" lines. The result, as Burke noted, was the ironic deification of the irrational, since the idea of shaping concrete institutions and people to fit abstract theories culminated in the Revolution's endeavor to make this Enlightenment fantasy a reality. The Revolution, for Burke, was an unprecedented explosion of ideological insanity into European discourse and ultimately into the European world. But in addition to this cult of irrational reason, there was a contradictory cult of feeling that also had repercussions for eighteenth-century Europe—a century that was as much an Age of Sensibility as a so-called Age of Reason. Burke detected the schizophrenic transmutations of Enlightenment thought (contradictory cults of reason and feeling) in revolutionary ideology, and he underscored Rousseau's role in creating an ideology of sensibility.

Stanlis evaluates this phenomenon in "Burke and the Sensibility of Rousseau." He shows that Rousseau formulated an aesthetic theory based on "authentic" sentiment—a theory that subsequently influenced and colored the thought of revolutionaries such as Robespierre and St. Just. They, in turn, fleshed out the authoritarian tendencies on Rousseau's thought. Although the importance of Rousseau's influence in the subsequent formation of a revolutionary ideology was a cultural commonplace in the 1790's, it was rejected by various nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians (mostly French) who denied the role of these ideas in the making of the Revolution. This denial, of course, was itself based on an idea classically formulated by Marx and Engels in the nineteenth century, that only material factors causally form the ideological conditions of a given society. This reductive premise has been steadily discredited by recent scholarship, and Stanlis' contribution complements the studies of Carol Blum and others who have established an incontrovertible nexus between Rousseau and the Revolution.

Stanlis suggests how sensibility—the public display of sentimental, "humanitarian" feelings in the eighteenth century—became politicized during the Revolution. The result was an ideology of feeling that placed compulsive emphasis on politically correct ways of expressing sentiment and emotion. The proper revolutionary response became, therefore, an egotistical exercise in celebrating one's superior political sympathy for the "oppressed", while displaying indignant hatred for the "oppressors." To Burke these divisions illustrated the contradictions within a Revolution continually turning into what it supposedly opposed. For instance, the failed enforcement of revolutionary abstraction in the name of "reason" was, for Burke, an exercise in ideological insanity, while the emphasis on true and "natural" emotional responses underscored the Revolution's artificial, programmatic conformity. Sensibility turned into rage whenever ideological abstractions failed, and a theory of reason led with crazed logic to the guillotine. Burke saw a connection between Rousseau's love for an abstract humanity and his hatred for concrete human beings—a connection reproduced in the revolutionary rage against people who did not correctly respond to revolutionary theory. In this context, he saw the Revolution as the culmination of contradictions crystallized by Rousseau and the process by which sympathy turned into a rationalization of hatred once it became "natural" to detest the enemies

of all that was "revolutionary." Stanlis notes that as early as *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756), Burke had satirized the dangerous implications of Rousseau's ideas thirty years before his influence on the Revolution had become a cultural commonplace.

Burke's earlier critique of Rousseau and the Enlightenment prefigured his antirevolutionary critique. Later, in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), he declared that the Revolution was a revolution in manners and sentiments and that an ideological revolution had preceded and prepared the political revolution. Burke was not an antirevolutionary *per se*. He defended a people's right to rebel, albeit as a last resort, but he saw the French Revolution as an obsessive reification of old, discredited ideas that were fundamentally reactionary. This aspect of Burke's critique is often misunderstood, for Burke contended that the Revolution's ideological base was an old rationalization of power and oppression in the name of liberty—an ideological experiment first attempted in the failed Puritan revolution of the 1640's. Unlike the Puritan revolution, however, the French Revolution was being successfully transmitted throughout Europe.

Burke's critique of this Revolution consisted, *inter alia*, in again focusing on its contradictory transformations: how a Catholic nation became a militant anti-Christian state and how a self-professed rationalist ideology turned into a ferocious explosion of insane frenzy. Burke stressed the revolutionaries' secret attraction to the oppressive power they demonized and how their exaggerated descriptions of the old oppressive regime mirrored what the Revolution had become. The upshot was that all differences or opposition provided both the pretext and the rationalization for the repression or elimination of all that was "counterrevolutionary." For Burke, the Revolution thus perpetuated the very contradictions it obsessively tried to control or erase. The corollary, especially during the Terror, was that frustrated revolutionaries would project the very contradictions they had generated onto the counterrevolutionary opposition they had created.

Since Burke endeavored to confine the Revolution's contradictions within France, he was alarmed when its supporters in England began blurring the British Revolution of 1688 with the French Revolution of 1789. In his last chapter Stanlis reconsiders the basis of Burke's alarm. He notes that, with regard to 1688, Burke used the word *revolution* in the traditional sense of a restoration or return to an original point—as, in this context, the restoration of a constitutional monarch and the return to constitutional law. In contrast, he referred to the *revolution* in France in its relatively modern sense of a complete overthrow of a government and hence the radical transformation of society. His implicit distinction between the two meanings was a way of distinguishing between the two revolutions, but he also concentrated on what he considered to be the genuine similarities between the French Revolution and its Puritan counterpart. Since portentous echoes of the 1640's reverberate throughout Burke's antirevolutionary *oeuvre*, Stanlis provides a salubrious corrective to Bruce James Smith's recent argument, in *Politics and Remembrance* (1985), that history (the 1640's) becomes problematic for Burke whenever it is associated with revolution and regicide, and thus he tries to conceal the inconvenient past. Stanlis, in contrast, shows that Burke continually connected the French Revolution with its English precursor.

Of course, Burke did ignore certain inconvenient facts in his presentation of the events of 1688, such as William of Orange's active pursuit of the crown and

the illegality of the Convention Parliament in offering it to him. But in presenting a traditional Whig version of the Revolution, Burke highlighted the reform and reconciliation it actually effected, endeavoring to "return" the English people's attention to a revolution that really worked.

Stanlis ends with a review of the Glorious Revolution's historiography, concluding that Burke's representation was more historical than the one his revolutionary opponents were presenting. He also insists that Burke's critique of the French Revolution was an implicit critique of Locke and that Burke was among the first to recognize the radical implications in Locke's writings. Stanlis argues cogently that although Burke rarely mentioned Locke, he was implicitly responding to him throughout many of his writings. For example, Burke's rejection of a fictional state of nature and the "natural rights" supposedly constituting the contractual relations between a government and its citizens was an extended critique of yet another Enlightenment idea popularized by Locke and the Revolution. As Stanlis observes, Burke continually returns to the Revolution's ideological origins.

It is appropriate today, when revolutionary empires are collapsing, that the writings and paradigms which reinforced them are also collapsing. It is equally appropriate that the dominant historiography that celebrated and sustained the Revolution's incestuous view of itself is also being challenged and overthrown. If revolution, in its original sense, is a return to what is basic and fundamental, then Peter Stanlis, as Novalis said of Burke, has indeed written a revolutionary book.