

ous. In the end, his conservative pluralism looks all too liberal because Kekes, like an increasing but still small number of academics, is a liberal who finds himself dissatisfied with contemporary liberalism. That he may learn from conservatism and impart his new found wisdom to other liberals is genuinely to be hoped for, but no conservative should be misled into believing that what Kekes defends here is a form of conservatism that any of them should embrace. The need for an articulate defense of an authentic conservatism thus remains. But for having made this need more visible, John Kekes deserves our thanks.

An Obsession with Contempt

IAN CROWE

Poisoning the Minds of the Lower

Orders, by Don Herzog. *Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. 559 pp.*

POISONING THE MINDS OF THE LOWER ORDERS, the author explains, was first intended as a book on conservatism, but it became an examination of the relationship between conservatism and democracy under the impact of the French Revolution and (which is evidently the same thing to him) a period investigation into the "politics of contempt." The title was chosen as being "a favorite verbal formula of the conservatives [and] also their most macabre nightmare," and one can piece together pretty much the whole 545-page argument from that. Not that Don Herzog,

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who is a thoroughly modern educator, wishes to make argument his priority. The style and the structure of the book suggest rather an emphasis on two other goals: encouraging the reader to adopt a less reverential and more rigorous approach to interpreting eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political and social discourse, and, through a resultant, non-nonsense objectivity apparently rare among historians and political commentators, to expose the nexus of ugly prejudices and assumptions shaping that discourse.

It is hard not to be impressed—and, believe me, after a few pages of the author's self-congratulatory style you will try very hard indeed—by the sheer scale of research presented here: an abundance of documents, referenced meticulously, cross-referenced sharply, and explored busily with genuine enthusiasm. Sadly, there is nothing impressive in Herzog's claim to objectivity or originality, except its gall. The author, necessarily an "unreconstructed liberal," claims that, in writing the book, he "hoped to strike a modest blow for the rationality of free speech by scrutinizing conservative ideas" and doing what only unreconstructed liberals can in this balkanized world of ideological warfare—that is, to dispel the fog of partisanship, prejudice, and lies: "There is...much here on conservatism, much of it sharply critical, all of it I hope relentlessly fair."

It is the characteristic of a certain academic approach to equate historical objectivity with weight of source material. Sheer bulk, however, rarely constitutes a conclusive proof of anything, and here the weight puts severe strains on Herzog's evaluative technique. Scant attention is actually paid to purpose or context in evaluating—as distinct from describing—the material, and the mass of sources laid side by side from a span of fifty years with no particular attention to type, comprising private letters, polemi-

cal tracts, scurrilous newspapers, novels, and serious works of scholarship, is vested with all the equality of a crowd of naturists, which is to say, a spurious and unnatural equality. "I don't trust the distinction between intellectual and social history," Herzog explains, "So I've ignored it." I am not convinced that this statement says as much as it seems to, but, more to the point, as a way to "situate the abstractions" of political and social language it fails emphatically.

The only "situating" being done here, in good progressive fashion, is word against word, quotation against quotation: a sort of constantly shifting landscape where our only coordinates are offered, diffidently, of course, by an unreconstructed liberal's focus on selected words. We can see the value of this approach in Herzog's references to the conviction of Tom Paine for seditious libel in 1792. The jury was "aghast" at, and seduced into becoming servants of oppression by, the opinion of the attorney general that the second part of Paine's *Rights of Man* had been printed at a very low price "for the express purpose of its being read by the lowest class of the people." We are meant to interpret this as an example of the malignant effect of an all-pervasive "contempt" in the (conservative) British Establishment, against which contextual facts such as Paine's precipitous flight to France, the incarceration of the French royal family, the massacre of nobles and clergymen in Paris, the proclamation of the Republic and the revival of French military fortunes are only, if they appear at all, so much dressing. Do these facts really impinge so little on the texts? Might they not rather reveal how "contempt" can be well deserved at times (by Paine) or confused with expressions of justifiable fear?

Ironically, it is Herzog's spin on all this that is old hat: "It matters that...Eaton [Paine's publisher] sometimes managed to evade the jailer's warm embrace. But

it matters, too, that others were convicted: not only in assessing the state and political culture of the period, but also in remembering [sic] some of the chilling effects surrounding such repression." A more stimulating, and less contemptuous, use of this evidence would have been to consider what Eaton's acquittal on the charge of spreading seditious material (twice—at times straddling the Terror!) tells us about that culture.

With this level of textual evaluation, (couched, inevitably, in the anachronistic jargon of "subversion," "political artifact," "self and others" and the rest), consider, if you dare, what Herzog does with the word conservatism itself—a key concept in his analysis, but one which was not in general use as a specific political term until beyond the period covered by the book.

Although Herzog scrutinizes "radicals," such as Cobbett and Bentham, who dealt in the politics of contempt despite their ostensible commitment to democratic politics, he hardly subjects democratic theory to the "withering critique" he promises in the preface. His overriding interest is the "combative conservatism" that he charts emerging from the impact of the French Revolution and that "threatens the lowly subjects with visceral contempt if they dare to step out of line and entertain dangerous presumptions about their status, perhaps...marking them as contemptible even when they dutifully defer. It dramatizes the political force of thinking that humanity itself is a dimensional concept, so that those of a higher social status are more fully human than others." Conservatives "traffic in contempt" as a matter of principle, which, the author adds magnanimously, might be thought less wicked than the hypocrisy of the radical democrats, and he is really obsessed with tracing an unbroken tradition backwards from "true" modern-day American conservatives and their (unspecified) "infamous

social agenda." Herzog's "conservatism," complete with favorite verbal formula, is no older than his most macabre nightmare.

Herzog offers an excuse of sorts for the chasm that yawns between these visceral definitions and his textual analysis. "As a pragmatist," he explains, "I conceive of political theories not as explorations of a timeless and abstract realm of fundamental questions, but as efforts to solve problems thrown up by contingent social change.... [T]he meaning of these theories is fixed in part by reference to the social world, both because particular terms refer directly to contingent social arrangements and because the social world provides background conditions of intelligibility, making it clear what one might be talking about in talking this way." Unfortunately, contingency, as was apparent in his evaluative techniques, is almost the last thing on his mind. He pays relatively little attention to change, telling us himself that "on the questions that concern me, change in this period was glacial." This, remember, is the period of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the Great Reform Act, Luddism, early Chartism, the extraordinary growth of Methodism, nonconformist emancipation, and the Irish rebellion.

For many conservatives, of course, and for Burke in particular, the whole point of a detailed investigation such as Herzog's would have been to discover, as far as possible, the play of constant factors behind passing circumstances. If you are not prepared to see this as, at least, a sincere exercise (and, ironically, Herzog's own treatment of "contempt" rests upon it), then you're hardly going to understand vital aspects of the nature and development of conservatism. However, a few essential characteristics of Herzogian conservatism do emerge through the commentary: the belief that "the scope of political agency is dramati-

cally limited," which Herzog calls "a deep structural prop in conservative politics," and a "freewheeling rejection of equality and dignity." The former enables Herzog to couple Burke and Malthus, though he accepts vaguely that Malthus had "a distinctive conservatism, utterly at odds with that of Burke." That shared characteristic is either evidence that Herzog has simply got these two thinkers wrong (his own assumptions prevent him from appreciating the significance of moral agency in Malthus's later works, though he refers to it, and lead him into the unsustainable argument—still propagated by some commentators—that Burke was driven by the concept of 'fallen' man), or that it is so broad a point as to be hardly worth saying (except, perhaps, to enlighten us as to why some academics and media types insist on calling hard-line communists "conservatives").

The latter characteristic, a rejection of equality and dignity, is seen to infuse the thought of Edmund Burke, who looms large in this study of conservatism. Burke, it is argued, posited a wide gap between the "polite argument of the political nation and the untutored loyalty of vulgar subjects," asserting that veils, illusions and prejudices were the only things fit for the inferior intelligence of the masses. We have heard this tired old mantra before, and there is not space here to argue point by point against its inaccuracies; but enough can be said of Herzog's initial comments on Burke to show that they present a valuable indication of the techniques of textual evaluation that have been illustrated above.

Chapter One begins with a critique of Burke's understanding of tradition, by which Herzog attempts to link weaknesses in that understanding to the construction of a politics of selective prejudice, ignorance, and illusion. But one word that does not appear, as far as I can see, in any of Herzog's varied quotations from Burke's writings, is "tradition." "At

bottom," Herzog says, "this [putative Burkean] conception of tradition requires narrative continuity with the past." No it doesn't. Burke's "stupendous wisdom," his "partnership between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born"—his sense of tradition, if you must—is part of the "contract of eternal society," that is, fundamental principles, grasped and conveyed by moral imagination, and applied in society through the exercise of prudence. Hairdressers practice cutting hair, lawyers practice advocacy, politicians, for the sake of us all, should practice to acquire prudence in a very high degree. That implies hierarchy and common sense, not institutionalized contempt. When it is understood, Burke's supposed distortions of historical fact largely disappear, and there is left no basis for asserting that Burke's hierarchical beliefs implied contempt of, or disdain for, the masses. Seen in this light, also, Herzog's use of terms such as prejudice and illusion is cumbersome, blunt, anachronistic. It is quite true that political equality is not a tenet of the conservative. It is not true that the consequence is contempt: it would be more to the point to examine how scientific, rationalist politics (not the great chain-of-being, which is lumped in with conservatism) has led to contempt of "the other," often in the name of equality and especially with regard to race. But, you see, some truths are self-evident to the "unreconstructed liberal." The "politics of contempt" is upheld by conservatives everywhere," and, the ancestral line must be worthy of its progeny. There's tradition for you!

There really is no escape from the subtext of contempt in this study of "the rich and bizarre tapestry of Britain." The proslavery crowd (conservatives) are contemptible in their contempt. The abolitionists (conservative), such as Wilberforce and the "good evangelicals of Clapham, radiating saintly Christian

brotherhood," scarcely fare better. What is all this jeering meant to prove? For an "endlessly ugly parade of contempt" you need only read the author himself on "Christian Cosmopolitans and their Jacobin Foes," which includes an extraordinary interpretation of William Blake's "The Little Black Child" as infused by contempt (that word again) for the negro race, and see rich resources shriveled up by this intense, relentless focus.

Sadly the obsession with contempt is not confined to the analysis. There is, in the very style of writing, much cynicism dressed up as sharp insight. People of the past are made to sneer, coo, snort, purr, blather, snarl, slobber, and sniff their way through their appointed quotations. This might go down well in the classroom, but it forms the least palatable (if consistent) aspect of the book in stripping the dead of their dignity and propagating contempt for the past.

"Proceeding...on an hypothesis that we address rational men," Burke wrote in his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly* (1791), "can false political principles be more effectually exposed, than by demonstrating that they lead to consequences directly inconsistent with and subversive of the arrangements grounded upon them?" Sadly, this book is founded on the very balkanization of academic writing that the author rightly bemoans in his preface; but I suggest two ways of recovering the potential to be found therein. First, use Herzog's excellent references and read the material yourself, according to his advice, not his example. Second, have fun identifying all the rich subtleties and varieties of conservative social and political discourse apparently hidden from unreconstructed liberals in their pursuit of relentless fairness.