Book Review

Conservatism Psychoanalyzed

The Rage of Edmund Burke: Portrait of an Ambivalent Conservative. *By* Isaac Kramnick. *New York: Basic Books,* 1977. Pp. xiii, 256. $12.95.

Reviewed by Vernon Bogdanor†

Edmund Burke has always seemed to speak directly to men in troubled times. Since his death in 1797, he has remained a contemporary. One consequence of this timelessness is that Burke has been appropriated by his interpreters, so that their depictions of him have been in the nature of self-portraits rather than realistic studies. The canvases have reflected the ideology of the critics rather than the complexity of Burke.

I

The capture of Burke by his admirers began during his lifetime. After the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790, George III, willing to overlook Burke's support of the American colonists, told him: "[y]ou have been of use to us all . . . . I know that there is no Man who calls himself a Gentleman that must not think himself obliged to you, for you have supported the cause of the Gentlemen."[1] And the rationalist Gibbon, ignoring the integral role that defense of religion played in Burke's strategy, welcomed the *Reflections* as "a most admirable medicine against the French disease."[2]

In the nineteenth century, however, attention was focused on the liberal rather than the counterrevolutionary Burke. Writers as diverse as Macaulay, Buckle, Stephen, Morley, Lecky, and Woodrow Wilson saw him as a constitutionalist and advocate of moderate reform. Gladstone was deeply influenced in his attitude toward Irish home rule by

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1. 6 THE CORRESPONDENCE OF EDMUND BURKE 239 (A. Cobban ed. 1967).

2. THE PRIVATE LETTERS OF EDWARD GIBBON 237 (R. Prothero ed. 1896), *quoted in* I. KRAMNICK, THE RAGE OF EDMUND BURKE 39 (1977) [hereinafter cited by page number only].

Burke's speeches and letters, and his papers include numerous references to Burke's speech on conciliation with the American Colonies. In stating his position on the Home Rule Bill in 1886, Gladstone admonished: *"Follow the old Whig tradition"* of Sheridan, Gray, Fitzwilliam, Fox, and "above all Burke."[3] Confronted with the seemingly illiberal sentiments of Burke's later counterrevolutionary writings, such as the *Letters on a Regicide Peace,* Buckle and Morley, at least, felt uneasy. Morley took refuge in the agnostic opinion that "the questions at issue are still unsettled,"[4] while Buckle roundly asserted that Burke had gone out of his mind, that "the balance tottered" and "the proportions of that gigantic intellect were disturbed."[5]

Since 1945, the emphasis has returned to Burke's status as a counterrevolutionary. Dicey was the first to appreciate that the polemic against the French Revolution could be adapted for use against the Bolsheviks; "he hit upon the simple but effective expedient of substituting 'Russia' for 'France' in a number of Burke's most ardent counter-revolutionary invectives."[6] In developing this insight, Ross Hoffman and Paul Levack suggested that Burke's political thought was founded on a Christian and conservative interpretation of Natural Law, "on recognition of the universal . . . law of reason and justice, ordained by God as the foundation of a good community."[7] Conservatives such as Russell Kirk,[8] Francis Canavan,[9] and Peter Stanlis,[10] founder of *The Burke Newsletter,* followed and extended this interpretation of Burke.[11] By 1962, Thomas Copeland, general editor of Burke's *Correspondence,* expressed the apprehensive hope "that Burke really is durable, for it seems beyond question that if the conservative quarrel runs its course, both sides are going to misuse him. Several of those who invoke his authority have already shown how simplified an image of his personality will suffice them . . . ."[12]

A rather more sophisticated attempt to use Burke as a buttress for a

3. Gladstone Papers, British Museum Mss. Additional 44672, f. 108 (emphasis in original).

4. J. MORLEY, BURKE 210 (1888).

5. H. BUCKLE, 1 HISTORY OF CIVILIZATION IN ENGLAND 467 (2d ed. 1871).

6. O'Brien, *Introduction* to E. BURKE, REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE 56 (Pelican ed. 1968).

7. R. Hoffman & P. Levack, *Introduction* to BURKE'S POLITICS xv (R. Hoffman & P. Levack eds. 1949).

8. *E.g.,* R. KIRK, EDMUND BURKE (1967).

9. F. CANAVAN, THE POLITICAL REASON OF EDMUND BURKE (1960).

10. P. STANLIS, EDMUND BURKE AND THE NATURAL LAW (1958).

11. For other proponents of a natural law interpretation of Burke, see C. PARKIN, THE MORAL BASIS OF BURKE'S POLITICAL THOUGHT (1956); L. STRAUSS, NATURAL RIGHT AND HISTORY (1953).

12. Copeland, *The Reputation of Edmund Burke,* J. BRIT. STUD., May 1962, at 78, 88.

conservative position has been made by a diverse group of American intellectuals reacting against the unfulfilled hopes of the Johnson years and the utopian certitudes of the New Left. Prominent members of this group include social theorists such as Nathan Glazer,[13] Daniel P. Moynihan,[14] and James Q. Wilson;[15] political scientists such as Edward C. Banfield,[16] Andrew Hacker,[17] and Jeffrey Hart;[18] and the Yale constitutional lawyer Alexander Bickel, who sought to harness Burke to a philosophy of constitutional restraint à la Frankfurter.[19] These otherwise disparate thinkers have in common a recognition that the intractability of political and social life defeats the simplicities of liberal ideology. Experience in government has frequently been the source of disenchantment, since it has shown the unreality of the exaggerated hopes attached to politics. Those who have been affected by this experience "may not always refer to Burke or invoke his name and principles but their reflexes are Burkean."[20]

II

The recent publication of Burke's collected correspondence has provoked a renewed awareness of the complexity of his character and thought. It has become clear that labels such as "liberal" and "conservative" are too general and imprecise to do justice to this complexity. The new perspectives revealed by the correspondence were first analyzed by Conor Cruise O'Brien in his introduction to a recent edition of the *Reflections*[21] and in his T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures delivered at the University of Kent in 1969.[22]

O'Brien realized that Burke's relationship to the French Revolution was an ambivalent one. This had first been noticed by Mary Wollstonecraft: "Reading your Reflections warily over, it has continually and forcibly struck me, that had you been a Frenchman, you would have been, in spite of your respect for rank and antiquity, a violent revolu-

13. Glazer, *On Being Deradicalized*, COMMENTARY, Oct. 1970, at 74.
14. D. MOYNIHAN, COPING (1973).
15. J. WILSON, THINKING ABOUT CRIME (1975).
16. E. BANFIELD, THE UNHEAVENLY CITY (1970).
17. Hacker, *On Original Sin and Conservatives*, N.Y. Times, Feb. 25, 1973, § 6 (magazine), at 12.
18. Hart, *Burke and Radical Freedom*, 29 REVIEW OF POLITICS 221 (1967).
19. A. BICKEL, THE MORALITY OF CONSENT (1975). *See also* Bickel, *Reconsideration: Edmund Burke*, NEW REPUBLIC, March 17, 1973, at 30, *reprinted in* EDMUND BURKE 164 (I. Kramnick ed. 1974).
20. P. 48.
21. O'Brien, *supra* note 6.
22. C. O'BRIEN, THE SUSPECTING GLANCE (1972).

tionist . . . . Your imagination would have taken fire . . . ."[23] How is Burke's ambivalence to be explained? That is the question that preoccupies O'Brien as it haunts Isaac Kramnick. But whereas O'Brien's interpretation gives priority to social and historical factors, Kramnick calls up spirits from the vasty deep and, with the aid of Freud, offers a confident diagnosis of Burke's psychic history.

For O'Brien the key to Burke's ambivalence lay in the fact that he was

> [p]artially liberating—in a permissible way—a suppressed revolutionary part of his own personality. These writings—which appear at first sight to be an integral defence of the established order—constitute in one of their aspects . . . a heavy blow against the established order in the country of Burke's birth, and against the dominant system of ideas in England itself.[24]

Burke was an Irishman who had attached himself to a ruling group in England whose ideology, based on defense of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, was also the ideology of the English ascendancy in Ireland. As a Whig, Burke was compelled to welcome the legacy of 1688; yet as an Irishman he could not but oppose it, since he could "hardly overrate the malignity of the principles of Protestant ascendency as they affect Ireland."[25] "The word Protestant is the charm that locks up in the dungeon of servitude three millions of your people."[26]

If the Catholics in Ireland were not drawn into closer cooperation with His Majesty's Government, Burke thought, then revolution in Ireland would follow—as it had in France. (There was in fact an attempted outbreak in Ireland in 1798, the year after Burke's death.) But a further point of importance for Burke was the value of bringing the influence of the Catholic Church into play in the battle of ideas against Jacobinism. Thus the attack on the privileges and property of the Church spearheaded by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and supported by *bien pensant* liberals in England was subversive of the very society that the Whigs were eager to defend. Indeed, in his first published work, *A Vindication of Natural Society*,[27] Burke had attempted to show, through the subtle indirection of his irony, that the

23. M. WOLLSTONECRAFT, A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MEN 109 (1790), *quoted in* O'Brien, *supra* note 6, at 20.

24. O'Brien, *supra* note 6, at 34-35.

25. E. BURKE, *Second Letter to Sir Hercules Langrishe*, in 6 THE WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE 379 (1894).

26. E. BURKE, *Letter to Richard Burke, Esq.*, in *id.* at 397.

27. E. BURKE, *A Vindication of Natural Society*, in 1 THE WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE 1 (1894).

rationalist critique of revealed religion itself contained radical political implications.

Burke's anti-Jacobinism, therefore, "cannot be separated from his sense of identification with Catholics, that is to say from his Irish origins."[28] His Irish origins gave Burke an understanding of, and even a kind of sympathy with, the aims of the Jacobin revolutionaries. Unlike the conventional reactionary, Burke had "reason to know how a revolutionary might feel; for him the forces of revolution and counter-revolution exist[ed] not only in the world at large but also within himself."[29]

III

O'Brien's conclusion is Kramnick's starting point. His book is shot through with brilliant insights, but in the last resort it is wilful and perverse. Kramnick argues that Burke's ambivalence was deeply rooted in personality traits,[30] such as "variations on oedipal themes,"[31] "diabolism,"[32] "anality,"[33] and "scatology."[34] Burke's "political and social thought is in many ways a public coming to terms with 'the obscure vexations and contests in the most private life.' "[35] These unsuccessful attempts to exorcise something that lay within himself, Kramnick concludes, gave rise to "the rage of Edmund Burke." For he was, as Blake said of Milton, of the devil's party without knowing it.

Kramnick's edifice, unfortunately, is constructed on shaky foundations. It rests almost entirely on the little that we know about Burke's childhood and adolescence and on conjecture about the "missing years" of his life between 1750 and 1756. For example, Kramnick infers that the absence of Burke's father from the domestic hearth and his unrelenting harshness toward the young Edmund induced an ambivalent attitude toward paternal and therefore political authority. He concludes from this that the rebellious son, the "bourgeois Burke," would seek to repudiate his father's authority, while the dutiful son, the "aristocratic Burke," would find himself "worshipping the father, or longing for a father to worship."[36] The tension between the two

28. O'Brien, *supra* note 6, at 39.
29. *Id.* at 76.
30. P. xii.
31. P. 195.
32. P. 184.
33. *Id.*
34. P. 187.
35. P. 10.
36. Pp. 63-64.

images of authority found its outlet in a preoccupation with the scatological and the sexual in his writings, as in his attacks on Warren Hastings and his well-known description of Jacobin "ruffians and assassins" driving Marie Antoinette from her room "almost naked"[37] (an account shown by a reliable eyewitness, Madame de la Tour du Pin, to be entirely fictitious[38]).

Such psychoanalytic conclusions necessarily rely on inadequate data. The information that comes down to the biographer appears by historical chance; it is necessarily insufficient for the analyst. Nor could Kramnick submit Burke to the careful questioning and checking of evidence that a living subject undergoes with a psychoanalyst over many months. In his last essay, Freud wrote of the need to conduct a search for a "picture of the patient's forgotten years that shall be alike trustworthy and in all essential respects complete."[39] This possibility is denied to the psychohistorian analyzing a dead figure from a different culture.

Kramnick offers no grounds capable of persuading a rational person to accept his thesis, and this results, in large part, from his disregard of the requirements of scientific method. Although he offers a number of confirming instances of oedipal conflict leading to ambivalent attitudes toward authority, Kramnick does not consider any contrary instances. Disraeli, for example, enjoyed a far happier relationship with his father than with his mother, and yet he became a conservative with much the same ambivalent attitudes toward authority as Burke's. Hitler seems to have suffered during his adolescence a dramatic conflict with his father, who was, according to Bullock, "hard, unsympathetic and short-tempered."[40] Why did this not turn him into something resembling an ambivalent conservative?

The truth is that the concepts used by Kramnick are too porous and ill-defined to bear the weight of establishing meaningful causal connections. In the words of Jacques Barzun, "the vocabulary defeats its own ends. The reason is not that the words are unfamiliar, but that they are disparate and used without strictness."[41] These explanatory concepts, moreover, are regarded with considerable suspicion even by

37. E. BURKE, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in 3 THE WORKS OF EDMUND BURKE 231, 325 (1894).

38. *See* MEMOIRS OF MADAME DE LA TOUR DU PIN 131, 135 (F. Harcourt ed. 1969).

39. S. FREUD, *Constructions in Analysis*, in 23 COMPLETE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKS OF SIGMUND FREUD 258 (J. Strachey ed. 1964), *quoted in* J. BARZUN, CLIO AND THE DOCTORS 46 n.* (1974).

40. A. BULLOCK, HITLER: A STUDY IN TYRANNY 25 (1962).

41. J. BARZUN, *supra* note 39, at 17. I am indebted to Barzun's book for some of the arguments I have used against Kramnick.

professional psychologists, and to define and elucidate them rigorously is a matter of no little difficulty.

Kramnick, like other practitioners of psychohistory, adopts a peculiar mode of argument, which is, at bottom, profoundly ahistorical. He argues from the supposed general truths of psychoanalysis to particular conclusions about a particular individual: "the soldier writes about Napolean as military commander; the doctor as an obese pyknic with Malta fever."[42] Kramnick offers an explanatory framework that purports to connect mental events in Burke's youth and private life with events in the public world of speech and writing.

What he does not show, however, is that such connections were actually operative in the case of Burke. From a generalization about the origins of oedipal difficulties, together with facts about Burke's life, the psychohistorian cannot deduce that the generalization explains anything about *Burke*. For Burke, *ex hypothesi*, was an unusual individual, and to believe that he can be reduced to type is to assume what has to be proved.

One of the difficulties of psychohistory is that it relies on a limited number of personality types to explain human behavior. Yet we are, after all, even less similar in our writings or our thoughts than we are in our basic instincts and drives, in our unconscious make-up. That is why psychoanalysis has made so little headway in explaining the psyche of the artist. Even if Kramnick summarizes the ways in which Burke resembles other men, he does not explain what made Burke so unique a thinker. For if there are a limited number of Freudian personality types, there was only one Edmund Burke.

Kramnick seems at one point uneasily aware that he lacks the data, and that psychoanalysis lacks the rigor, to offer a proper explanation of Burke. "There is no solid evidence that can be produced here which would positively sustain the interpretation of Burke's sexual and psychic life offered in this book."[43] But as he proceeds, Kramnick gradually throws caution to the wind. For example, he tells us that "[r]epression of dangerous sexual passion becomes a *conscious* life strategy for Burke,"[44] and that "[g]uilt over his own apparent oedipal conquest and the subsequent reactive identification with his mother led Burke to doubt his own sexual identity and to repress sexuality in general."[45] Thus Kramnick's interpretation of Burke becomes not tentative but knowing.

42. *Id.* at 34.
43. P. 87.
44. P. 139 (emphasis added).
45. P. 140.

IV

Kramnick is, with some justice, critical of those who have used Burke in their own political interests. But those he criticizes have at least shown more respect for Burke, whom they treat as a living force rather than a subject for psychiatric dissection. Kramnick's book, for all its insights, is an example of what Sir Karl Popper, over thirty years ago, called

> a widespread and dangerous fashion of our time. I mean the fashion of not taking arguments seriously, and at their face value, at least tentatively, but of seeing in them nothing but a way in which deeper irrational motives and tendencies express themselves. It is . . . the attitude of looking at once for the unconscious motives and determinants in the social habitat of the thinker, instead of first examining the validity of the argument itself.[46]

Collingwood wrote that "[t]he autobiography of a man whose business is thinking should be the story of his thought."[47] Perhaps, then, the time has come to construct an intellectual biography of Burke. There is, admittedly, some difficulty in constructing a coherent corpus of thought from his writings. For Burke does not argue systematically from premises to conclusion, but uses the weapons of example and rhetoric to establish the principles of a morality of politics. The attempt to reconstruct his thought is nevertheless worth making, for Burke alone among the classical political theorists is genuinely contemporary in that he foresaw so much of the politics of the twentieth century. He possessed a remarkable insight into the fragility of a liberal society and the forces that sought to envelop it in blood and fire. Burke is uniquely the political philosopher of our age, an age in which original sin is no longer counterbalanced by the possibility of grace.

46. 2 K. POPPER, THE OPEN SOCIETY AND ITS ENEMIES 238 (1945).
47. R. COLLINGWOOD, *Preface* to AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1939).