What is Conservatism?
History, Ideology and Party*

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Abstract

Is there a political philosophy of conservatism? A history of the phenomenon written along sceptical lines casts doubt on the existence of a transhistorical doctrine, or even an enduring conservative outlook. The main typologies of conservatism uniformly trace its origins to opposition to the French Revolution. Accordingly, Edmund Burke is standardly singled out as the 'father' of this style of politics. Yet Burke was de facto an opposition Whig who devoted his career to assorted programmes of reform. In restoring Burke to his original milieu, the argument presented here takes issue with twentieth-century accounts of conservative ideology developed by such figures as Karl Mannheim, Klaus Epstein and Samuel Huntington. It argues that the idea of a conservative tradition is best seen as a belated construction, and that the notion of a univocal philosophy of conservatism is basically misconceived.

Keywords: Conservatism, Edmund Burke, Karl Mannheim, French Revolution, enlightenment, party, ideology, scepticism.

I: Scepticism and Political Theory

In the rousing final paragraph of his 'Introduction' to *Jealousy of Trade*, Istvan Hont wrote that 'History is the tool of skeptics' (Hont, 2005: p. 156). The phrase has often been quoted, but what does it mean? Hont's purpose in the passage was to set out an agenda for the history of political thought. He was arguing that it made no sense to revive forgotten ideological alternatives that might 'miraculously' answer current problems in political theory. The past, he seemed to be saying, has no such purchase on the present.

One of Hont's targets here was Quentin Skinner, specifically the recommendation that the neo-Roman ideal of liberty was worth excavating as a corrective to reigning liberal dogma. Yet there is something troubling about Hont's paragraph. On the one hand, he seems to be claiming that returning to past ideas in the hope of instructing the present is a redundant exercise. Yet, on the other hand, such a return is ultimately what he wants to propose. This proposal was made even clearer in

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a later study by Hont, where the combined insights of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith were presented as holding the keys to understanding our current predicaments (Hont, 2015: p. 24). In fact, Hont was prepared to go further still: recourse to eighteenth-century political economy promises to provide more than simple analytical clarification, he contended. The 'best' thinkers who wrote on commercial society in the period are said to have provided reliable assessments of where we are on the basis of their remarkable clairvoyance: 'The commercial future that many eighteenth-century observers imagined as plausible has become our historical present' (Hont, 2005: p. 156). Past analysis of a possible future turns out to offer the most compelling guide to contemporary political judgement.

Hont's recipe mixes virtuosity with perplexing difficulties. Some of the virtuosity derives from Reinhart Koselleck, specifically his concern with 'futures past' – namely, his interest in the changing ways in which past thinkers imagined the future (Koselleck, 1989). For Koselleck, these projections were usually pathological in nature, yet for Hont they often contained the seeds of accurate prediction. This led to the suggestion that bygone political theory offered the best chance of illuminating our current situation, even though, as Hont also saw, past philosophy could be a prisoner of its age. This conundrum encapsulates the problems sometimes associated with the 'Cambridge School' in the history of political thought, which Hont wanted to exemplify and disavow at the same time (Bourke, 2018: pp. 467 ff.). He was committed both to philosophy and its historicisation, leaving his work suspended between the present and the past.

Faced with this puzzle, I propose to use Hont's injunction in favour of scepticism against his scheme for reviving long-departed thinkers. Specifically, I want to embrace his call for scepticism by applying it to the idea of conservativism, whilst rejecting his resort to 'usable' philosophy from the past. History is indeed an instrument of scepticism, and scepticism is a valuable resource for political theory. But we need to begin by asking what the sceptical impulse is, and how it should be employed when reflecting upon politics. Hont does not help us here: 'scepticism' was a favourite term of his, yet nowhere did he define it. Sometimes he used it in its most familiar sense, denoting a posture of epistemological doubt (Hont, 2005: p. 167). More often he associated it with a strand of 'utilitarian' ethics, rooted in a neo-Augustinian critique of natural sociability (Ibid.: p. 47). Yet this usage denotes a philosophical commitment, not a mode of historical inquiry, and so it can have little relevance to history as a 'tool'

of scepticism. To understand how scepticism in this sense might be used, we had better turn to Hont's original inspiration, David Hume.

In the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, Hume showed how pyrrhonian doubt destroyed every remnant of conviction, leading to a melancholy state of disorientation, only then to be mitigated by immersion in the 'affairs of life' (Hume, 2000: p. 175). The extremes of scepticism might in this way be 'corrected by common sense and reflection' (Hume, 1999: p. 207). Yet this did not exhaust the role of philosophical criticism. While our natural habits of mind restrained the tendency of scepticism to derange, the critical attitude of the sceptic would nonetheless find additional beneficial outlets. An openness to doubt would humble intellectual pride, confine the imagination within its proper sphere, and challenge the obstinacy of ruling dogmas. The most affecting dogmatic beliefs stemmed from religion, morals and politics. In connection with the last two categories, the philosophical spirit inculcated impartiality as an antidote to self-righteous inclinations of the mind. The objective here was to foster sceptical detachment from apparently self-evident intuitions and values, and encourage reflection on the wider situation in which these norms were embedded.

Proceeding on this basis, philosophy should abjure the kind of moral exhortation that was as much a feature of eighteenth-century ethics as it is of modern political theory. For Hume, at least, the activity of preaching general ethical maxims was likely to be as ineffective as it was usually hypocritical. Yet this did not leave the philosopher with no practical purchase on affairs. While *reasoning* people out of their preferences would not succeed, it was possible to encourage a broader assessment of the circumstances that supported existing attachments: 'Here… a philosopher may step in, and suggest particular views, and considerations, and circumstances, which otherwise would have escaped us…' (Hume, 1985a: p. 172). In relation to politics, the 'considerations' and 'circumstances' that Hume had in mind were attendant historical conditions. Grasping the character and tendency of a situation meant viewing it in relation to its historical development. Thus, when it came to establishing a science of government, the roles of the philosopher and historian began to merge: the analysis and evaluation of practical options involved connecting decisions with their probable results based on an appreciation of wider historical context. From this perspective, the idea that Hume's career lurched from philosophy to history on account of some supposed 'failure' to undergird his 'system' could not be wider of the mark (*pace* S. R. Letwin, 1965: p. 3). The kind of philosophical history that Hume came to practice

between the 1740s and the 1760s was a natural outgrowth of his original approach. Consequently history, for the reasons just outlined, was indeed a tool of scepticism. Yet the question remained how history could be written on sceptical principles.

It was the goal of philosophical history as conceived by Hume to deliver that result. Its purpose was to analyse the consequences of actions, not endorse the pretentions of a partisan set of actors – like the Puritans against the Catholics, or the Whigs against the Tories. In striving to approach the subject-matter of politics with this attitude of sceptical impartiality, it became obvious that a chosen political system rarely secured its objectives, not least because it had to pursue its purposes in the midst of obstruction from competing designs. Outcomes were therefore usually unintended. For the same reason, current arrangements were rarely traceable to pristine origins. According to Hume, these insights could be gleaned from the facts of history. For instance, they could be learned from the observation that modern liberty was not the product of a deliberate campaign for freedom, or from the discovery that the rights of the eighteenth-century British parliament were not to be found in embryo in the gothic past (Hume, 1983: VI, p. 64; I, p. 163). History was discontinuous, unavailing and ironic. This conclusion is surely an instructive one for political theory. Political principles are embodied in traditions and slogans that need to be disambiguated, evaluated, and contextualised. This article pursues that objective with reference to conservatism.

The study of conservatism is bound to be analytical and historical at once. To understand the character of any social phenomenon, it is necessary to identify what it actually is as well as to explain the course of its descent. Both these activities are of course linked, since the nature of any political artefact is bound up with the process of its formation. As indicated, my aim is to examine conservatism sceptically, exactly as one might interrogate any set of commitments by probing their claims to doctrinal integrity and historical continuity. Historians have recently questioned the identity of liberalism (Bell, 2016) and highlighted divergences within the Marxist tradition (Stedman Jones, 2016). Conservatism can hardly be exempted from such scrutiny. Critical reconstruction in fact promises practical dividends by challenging counter-productive assumptions. The sceptical analysis of programmatic attachments helps to secure one prize in particular: the chance to evaluate policy on its own terms, freed from the pressure of ideological allegiance and party-political affiliation.

In the pages that follow, I take issue with three particular claims. First I question the usefulness of thinking of conservatism as a habit, an instinct or a disposition. Next I query the viability of viewing it as a theory equipped with a stable 'core' of abstract values. And, finally, I challenge the claim that there has existed a unified tradition that has transmitted conservative principles down the generations intact.

II: Paradoxes of Conservatism

Writing in Perugia in 1930, Robert Michels commented on how 'the Bolsheviks of today are as conservative as the czarists of yesterday' (Michels, 1945: III, p. 230). His aim here was in part to unsettle expectations: if even the extremes of radicalism could be dubbed 'conservative', did conservatism possess any meaning as an ideology? Given Michels' odyssey from social democracy to syndicalism to fascism, perhaps it is not so strange that political identity could appear, to such a protean character, to encompass the full spectrum of available positions: having passed through such a range of affiliations, any conviction might seem to imply another. Equally, it may be that in the context in which he was writing, Michels had a specific point to make about the legacy of Lenin: having shaken the Russian polity to its foundations, the party of Lenin was now committed to sustaining a regime by force.

Yet however we interpret the motives behind the statement, it is difficult to escape a key implication of Michels' remark: namely, that conservatism is a positional rather than a doctrinal ideology, capable of endless 'modification' (Michels, 1968: p. 44). This argument has been variously presented in the past in terms of a distinction between procedural and substantive conservatism, or between an attitude as opposed to a philosophical system. It might be claimed that the procedural approach in the end amounts to a doctrine: namely, the proposition that conservatism is a procedure for preserving values against radical change (Hampsher-Monk, 1987: p, 28). This seems close to what Michels was prepared to argue: that conservatism should not be understood as an attempt to shore up an ideal but instead as a commitment to securing entrenched arrangements. Its defining characteristic lay less in what was being conserved than in the very act of conservation itself. This means that conservative politics cannot be defined in terms of policy, or even with reference to specific ideological principles. One conserves relative to opposing positions that seek to bring about unwelcome change. It is of course right that in seeking to maintain a position, conservatives must explicitly advocate a policy. Yet, on this reading, their conservatism

resides less in the content of their preferences than in their determination to rally to the defence of an establishment. From this perspective, by 1930, Bolshevism was an avowedly conservative commitment.

This conclusion, for all its apparent air of paradox, can scarcely be entirely surprising. The guardians of the German Democratic Republic, whatever their roots in revolutionary socialism, were a bastion of dogged traditionalism by 1989. Similarly, perhaps no one would accuse Lenin of conservatism 1902 – the year in which his pamphlet *What is to be Done?* was originally published. Back then there was a state to subvert, and indeed a world to be won. But by 1920 the Bolshevik leader was urging that Soviet power be bolstered by monopolising the authority of the state (Lenin, 1960–1970: XXXI, pp. 23 ff.). Viewed from the perspective of internal Russian developments, Lenin's message can be encapsulated by the Machiavellian injunction that rulers should endeavour *mantenere lo stato* ('to preserve the state') (Machiavelli, 1988: chapt. 18). It is a striking fact, though hardly an unforeseeable one, that Marxism-Leninism should culminate in militant conservatism. Addressing a large audience in the Great Hall of the Ludwig Maximilians University in Munich in January 1919, Michels' one-time teacher, Max Weber, posed the rhetorical question of what distinguished the political methods of Bolshevism from any new aspirant to political power. Indeed, he went on to imply that while Leninism had to draw on the available means to conquer politics, it would also be forced to preserve itself with the instruments available. Once in the ascendant, in other words, revolutionaries would strive to perpetuate their position (Weber, 1994: p. 78). It followed, from Weber's perspective, that doctrinal detail did not determine the character of conservative politics.

However, we still need to ask how useful it is to reduce the understanding of conservatism to the merest impulse to preserve. This description is so nebulous that Noël O'Sullivan was driven to dismiss it as literally 'absurd' (O'Sullivan, 1972: p. 9). J. G. A. Pocock has argued that a general history of conservative doctrine could never be written since 'too many minds have been trying to "conserve" too many things for too many reasons' (Pocock, 1987: p. xlix). There is an additional problem with the idea that conservatism simply conserves: as a definition, it captures everything and nothing. Just about every political programme is disposed to preserve something. Even anarchism aims to maintain its preferred values, if not the state as a vehicle to secure them. Moreover, if conservatism is defined in terms of the impulse to preserve, then

conservative movements dedicated to radical change are excluded. However, self-designating conservatives have often been revolutionary in temper.

This last point can readily be illustrated by reference to the Swiss-born publicist, Armin Mohler. When Mohler came to reflect in 1950 on the character of the German Right, he aligned one strain of conservatism with 'radical' tendencies that had long maintained an opposition to mainstream traditionalism. He termed this radical element the 'German Movement' (*deutsche Bewegung*), and sought to capture its essential features in the period following the First World War by resort to the oxymoronic phrase *'konservative Revolution*'. According to Mohler, previous adherents of this revolutionary worldview included Oswald Spengler, Ernst Jünger, Carl Schmitt and Thomas Mann. However, he went on, in 1933 in Germany vital strands within the movement were supplanted by the political success of National Socialism, leaving the historian to reconstruct what radical conservatism had hitherto been (Mohler, 1989: p. 3). Mohler traced the uses of the phrase *konservative Revolution* via Hermann Rauschning and Hugo von Hofmannsthal back to 1848, yet he claimed that the actual sources of the movement stretched back to the backlash against the French Revolution in 1789 (Ibid., pp. 9–11). The channelling of these conservative currents into the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiter Partei* in the 1930s seemed to Mohler to be a drastic constriction of the original project. With this narrowing of purpose came political fragmentation, leaving dissenters from the new orthodoxy to play the role of 'Trotskyists' as they were gradually excluded from the citadels of power (Ibid., p. 4). There is a sense in which Mohler saw these Trotskyists of the Right as seeking to conserve a tradition of reaction extending back to the end of the eighteenth century. Yet his emphasis was on the radical impetus behind them. Even if this brand of politics could be connected to a tradition, its most notable aspect for Mohler was its revolutionary spirit. Here was a type of conservatism that was not conservative in mood.

Michael Freeden has written that conservatism has basic 'morphological' features. What he means is that the ideology can be identified in terms of its principles, or what Freeden calls its 'core concept'. This ultimately comprises a dedication to 'gradual and organic change' (Freeden, 1996: pp. 333–6). The claim here is that conservatism is not merely a disposition. It is certainly not reducible to a desire to conserve. Instead, it involves an intellectual commitment to the prudent management of change. Yet patently this criterion applies to reforming liberalism and socialism. In

each case an effort is made to ensure that political change is made safe. This might require it to be gradual, or even organic, in nature – if 'organic' implies the pursuit of change by capitalising on embedded institutions and values.

This brings us to an impasse. An attempt to specify a political allegiance is frustrated as the object of analysis eludes our grasp. Conservatism, effectively, melts into air. It has not been possible to identify a conservative doctrine on the model of a definite 'school' of thought. The history of philosophy was written for centuries in terms of rival camps – such as peripatetics, academics, cynics and pythagoreans. This organising principle lasted from Diogenes Laërtius in the third century to Jakob Brucker in the eighteenth, and beyond. Its success was partly a product of its fidelity to the fact that thinkers were keen to position themselves in relation to predecessors, advertising their place within an apostolic succession. Religious history could similarly be studied in terms of doctrines, even though the rival sects appeared to one another to be propagating heresies. Accordingly, Calvinism was constituted by determinate precepts connected to a way of life. However, by comparison, there is no generic category of conservatism that points to either a philosophy or an ethos. Likewise, the disposition to conserve is shared across a range of ideologies, while groups of self-identifying conservatives have been committed to sudden – even violent – change. By extension, conservatism is not a theory of gradual change embracing incremental adaptation. For instance, a leading architect of 'piecemeal' reform like Karl Popper might equally be characterised as a socialist or a liberal (Popper, 1976: p. 36; Gray, 1976). So, our search to discover a philosophy of conservatism has momentarily faltered, dissolving under pressure of sceptical scrutiny.

This outcome might alarm academic politicians eager to brand any attitude, affiliation or orientation. Yet surely it is less disturbing to the philosophical historian happy to look beyond partisan descriptions to evaluate political actions and their consequences. When it comes to ideologies and doctrines, the sceptic is bound to be suspicious of 'reified abstractions' (Dunn, 1968: p. 85). It is relevant here to distinguish between kinds of abstraction. Judaism is a collective noun that originally depicted an ethical and religious code (2 Maccabees, ii, 21), whereas Hobbism was coined to accuse a philosophical outlook (Diderot, 1765). Fanaticism and enthusiasm were likewise born in polemic, more specifically during the religious strife following the Reformation. Abstract nouns for political systems typically stem from a later date, many of them from the period between 1789 and 1848 – like individualism, egalitarianism,

democratism and utilitarianism (Höpfl, 1983: p. 7). Abstract categories and personifications are features of our language which sometimes operate as convenient means of summary description, as in the statement that the allies defeated Fascism in 1945. Personified doctrines might be deployed as shorthand placeholders awaiting elucidation – in this case clarification on who the Fascists were, what they stood for, and what they did. A problem only arises when abstractions of the kind are allowed to take on a quasi-autonomous life of their own. Accordingly, most historians have come to accept that the history of political thought should strive to offer an account of an activity, not a narrative of disembodied essences. This insight has in theory informed the study of political ideas since the historical turn associated with Peter Laslett, Duncan Forbes, J. G. A. Pocock, Quentin Skinner and John Dunn. Part of Skinner's critique of previous attempts to study 'unit' ideas, or to construct a morphology of concepts which retained their structure over time, was his assault on what he termed the 'mythology of doctrines': 'the doctrine to be investigated so readily becomes hypostatized into an entity', he complained (Skinner, 1969, p. 10).

Yet nearly sixty years on, political philosophers are still trading in epic categories like liberalism, and historians continue to think in terms like the clash of ideologies, while both find it hard to avoid resorting to moralised concepts like 'progress' and 'reaction'. One reason for this is that the political thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remained comparatively immune from rigorously historicist procedure. For example, as recently as 2014, Edmund Fawcett could publish a volume on the history of liberalism as if there existed a unifying concept of the phenomenon (Fawcett, 2014). It is also the case that the role and number of slogans in public life has changed in accordance with shifts in intellectual culture, not least the rise of the journalist, the intellectual, and the agitator. The mesmerising power of doctrines can also be explained by the pervasive tendency in our culture to politicise theories – familiar to us as a rhetorical exercise in branding opponents by recourse to unwieldy notions like capitalism, nationalism, imperialism and globalism. These terms might be employed to pick out a set of practices or a system of ideas, but they commonly appear in history as an independent 'force' (Höpfl, 1983: p. 16). It has proved very difficult for philosophers and historians to escape their socialisation into the resulting demonology. Because abstractions are clinical ways of signalling disapproval, they have enjoyed a double attraction: as concise modes of encapsulation, as when 'capitalism' envelops the planet; and as an apparently dispassionate means of

condemnation, as when ‘imperialism’ subjugates a population (Bourke, 2012: pp. 23–42). Yet precise analysis requires us to show who does what to whom.

The power of ideologies to entrance has equally been a function of the lure of invented traditions. We have become accustomed to casting a critical eye on spurious invocations of national heritage (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Yet we also need to investigate intellectual legends, especially where these explicitly demand allegiance: as with cosmopolitanism, feminism, socialism and conservatism. Loyalties of all kinds are supported by the idea of lineage, with the result that movements based around values are disposed to lay claim to a pedigree, or re-imagine a serviceable line of descent. While this is often the case with schemes of value and systems of thought, it is equally true of political parties. Whiggism provides what is probably the most famous example, pointing to a set of principles as well as a party in parliament. Historians have previously applied themselves to unmasking questionable intellectual traditions. This has involved recovering the divergent use of principles dubiously connected by a common name. The shifting valence of ‘rights’ provides an obvious example (Tuck, 1979; Moyn, 2010). However, the rise of party complicates the job of the historian of ideas, since the process conferred institutional solidity upon intellectual fashion. Might it therefore be argued that Liberal parties are durable in a way that liberal principles are not, or that the Conservative Party has substance in a way that conservatism does not? Actually, as will become clear, the process of institutional development has generated its own dynamics of continuity and discontinuity, but not an identity of either policy or allegiance over time. Beneath the corporate fixture, adjustment and modification has been the only constant.

The changing complexion of ideologies in the modern era is a product of both normative shifts and developments in practical organisation. The study of these two phenomena is usually divided between sub-disciplines – intellectual and political history. The one deals with variation in the world of opinion, the other at least in part with the evolution of political parties. In their different ways, both approaches in the past have tended to hypostatise their subject: intellectual historians, as we have seen, via the mythology of doctrines; and political historians by assuming that the soul of the party remains stable however much it might alter its outward identity. It is of course right that a party can have a continuous corporate existence, yet the relevant body is rarely exactly ‘the same’ at every stage of its evolution (Mair, 2004). In fact, it has been

a common complaint since the days of Bolingbroke that one party has 'stolen the clothes' of another (Skinner, 1974).

However, in adopting a rival's policies, it would be just as true to say that their very substance has been taken over, since the message of a party is integral to its identity. Leaderships change, constituencies change, policies change, and rhetoric changes. This dynamic has been ably illustrated in the case of Christian democracy in the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Austria and Italy: the original interests which such parties were intended to promote are entirely distinct from the actual purposes which they came to serve (Kalyvas, 1996). Furthermore, while the origins of parties are very different from their subsequent goals, these goals are further subjected to revision over time. At the end of such processes of transformation, there is little that endures throughout the course of development. For this reason, the corporate existence which the political historian traces in following the fortunes of a party often dissolves upon closer inspection into a series of perpetual variations. It is partly on account of these shifts and mutations that doctrine is sometimes taken as supplying continuity. Two optical illusions work to confirm each other: ideology provides the semblance of a continuous institutional reality, while institutional existence creates an impression of a stable ideological core. Yet behind the drapery, we have been led to conclude, perpetual transformation proceeds.

III: The Burke Myth

Where, then, does this leave us? There is no doubt that there have been a near infinite number of uses of the noun conservatism, and any number of ways in which the adjective has been applied. A considerable proportion of these have been employed in the arena of politics, affecting our understanding of doctrines, movements and parties, above all in the wake of the proliferation of ideologies since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Yet we have so far failed to reduce this plethora of interpretations to a single concept answering the question, what is conservatism? We have been unable to pin what it denotes onto a specified attitude or way of life, or a unique theory, or a set of axioms, or a range of policies, or a determinate party whose identity has been constant over time. Public figures and academics have endeavoured to fix what it stands for, yet none of these bids has secured a comprehensive definition. Assorted struggles to isolate the 'spirit' of conservatism – as with the ambition to lay claim to the 'heart' of liberalism, or the 'essence' of socialism – are best seen as interventions designed to

set an ideological agenda. They are, as Nietzsche put it, moves to exercise the 'seigneurial privilege of giving names' (Nietzsche, 1994: p. 13). The conservatism of Oakeshott and Huntington, like the liberalism of Hayek and Rawls, reflect an effort to fabricate an ideal, to stake out territory – to label in order to legitimise a particular system of values. Doubtless the activity of labelling is inspired by the effort to understand, but one of its effects is to exclude alternative meanings, to monopolise validity by baptising anew. But if conservatism is not equivalent to a mood or a practice, or a collection of tenets, or an enterprise, might we not discover a conservative tradition – an original fount from whence the diversity of later usage has sprung?

Many commentators accept that conservatism is not a static theory since its precepts have developed through the ages, although they nonetheless believe it should be recognised as a heritage that has been modified in the process of evolving over time. By common consent this tradition was inaugurated by Edmund Burke.

Iain Hampsher-Monk has stated that Burke elaborated a 'view of human nature and society on which conservatives have drawn and to which they have appealed ever since' (Hampsher-Monk, 1992: p. 261). Yet it is well known that Burke's ideas had little traction in party-political debate between the Napoleonic Wars and Catholic Emancipation (Sack, 1987). More recently, Emily Jones has shown how, in the British context, Burke was not adopted into the pantheon of conservatism until the middle of the 1880s, at a time when the British Conservative Party was negotiating the Home Rule crisis (Jones, 2017). It follows that Burke has not been invoked as a conservative icon 'ever since' he published the works that have been used to define his position. However, it is equally clear that Burke did become a touchstone of modern conservatism for some, even if others have co-opted him for assorted rival causes. The history of Burke's canonisation can be broken down into various stages, and in various locales: in Germany, France, the United States and Britain (Fitzpatrick and Jones, 2017). One pivotal moment was his resurrection by 'new conservatives' in America, that was well underway by the start of the Cold War (Crick, 1955; Maciag, 2013). A reaction followed that sought to combine liberalism with conservatism, exemplified by Huntington's essay of 1957 proposing that a conservative programme was necessary for the survival of the tradition of liberal politics in America (Huntington, 1957).

In some ways, Huntington's thesis was a re-working of the Humean argument that authority was a precondition of genuine liberty (Hume, 1985b). In its contemporary American setting, however, the aim was to expose the politics of Russell Kirk as an

exercise in reactionary nostalgia (Kirk, 1953). As Huntington saw it, men like Kirk hankered after ideals that were scarcely American in content. Above all, his values stood no chance of meeting the reigning ideals of liberal culture. Yet from Huntington's perspective this inability to accommodate liberalism led not to conservatism, but to out-and-out reaction. It seemed to follow that the goal for 1950s America should not be to retrieve redundant values but to preserve the prevailing liberal accord. In opposition to Louis Hartz' *The Liberal Tradition in America*, Huntington thought that America could no longer count on that consensus. Instead, it would have to be sustained by conservative principles. For these, Huntington turned to Burke as 'the conservative archetype' (Ibid., p. 456). Burkeanism seemed to Huntington to be sufficiently adaptive to accommodate major changes in historical circumstance. In this he was following Leo Strauss's recent depiction of Burke as a renegade from natural law jurisprudence (Strauss, 1953: pp. 318–19). On this reading, Burke offered the means to legitimise existing institutions without prescribing for them any particular content.

Yet it soon transpired that this 'flexible' Burke was the bearer of a rigid message. Huntington compressed this into six essential maxims: first, that a divine sanction 'infused' legitimate order; second, that prescription is the ultimate title to rule; third, that prejudice trumps reason; fourth, that the community is 'superior' to the individual; fifth, that men are socially if not morally unequal; and finally, that attempts to alleviate existing evils 'usually result in even greater ones' (Huntington, 1957: p. 456). In advancing these propositions, the argument went, Burke was laying the foundations for a future conservative philosophy. Publicists and statesmen who recycled this basic creed could be placed within a Burkean tradition. Yet the problem is that these principles were not espoused by Burke. He did accept that legitimacy was consolidated by custom, and that authority was supported by an impression of antiquity (Burke, 2001: p. 171). Yet he also believed that precedent was subordinate to justice, which was based on natural right and not convention. Although rarely noticed, this was powerfully illustrated towards the end of the Hastings impeachment, when Burke championed judicial progress against the weight of tradition (Burke, 1794: VII, p. 142). A summary response to Huntington delivers the following result: Burke thought that prescription could confer a title to rule, not that it justified any particular use of power; he claimed that the state was an instrument of a divine teleology, not that the divinity authorised particular forms of government; he believed that dissolving the state to secure liberty was hazardous, not that reform in the ordinary sense was counter-

productive (Bourke, 2015: pp. 219 ff., 664 ff., 724–5, 830 ff.). Huntington regarded Burke as quintessentially conservative because his credo seemed to prioritise preservation come what may, and to privilege tradition over rights. Yet Burke was never absolutely devoted to immemorial custom, the rituals of tradition or the authority of habit. Each of these played a role in a larger framework of values dedicated to securing the rights of man (Ibid.: pp. 220, 438, 502–3, 595, 629). His record betrays a consistent critic of established institutions, a reformer open to piecemeal as well as radical reconstruction (Bromwich, 2014). Indeed, it was in this light that many contemporaries and subsequent followers viewed him.

For instance, contemporaries in Germany marvelled at Burke's ability to combine philosophical insight with practical experience. This, argued the Hanoverian official Ernst Brandes, led him to prefer the instruments of reform to the methods of violent revolution (Brandes, 1791: pp. 1903–4). Yet this was not presented as exemplifying some kind of traditionalism. In fact, August Wilhelm Rehberg, Brandes's contemporary, drew the opposite conclusion. For him, Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* had illustrated the virtues of mixed government, thereby acting as an inspiration for German commentators to promote social and political reforms in their own territories. This, he argued emphatically, was the opposite of providing shelter for outmoded forms of life, which would merely entail the perpetuation of abuse ('Verewigung des Misbrauche') (Rehberg, 1791: p. 566). Similarly, for Burke's translator, Friedrich Gentz, the *Reflections* was less a denial of the primacy of rights than a tirade against their crass misapplication (Green, 2014). The idea that Burke was an apostate who abandoned the cause of freedom was not popularised in the German context before the writings of Adam Müller (Müller, 1936: p. 18). It was against this picture that Heinrich von Sybel, the student of Savigny and Ranke, sought to recover Burke's integrity. To achieve this, he was obliged to take issue with the earlier views of Friedrich Schlosser, Friedrich Dahlmann and Johann Droysen (Schlosser, 1843–4; Dahlmann, 1835; Droysen, 1846).

Von Sybel developed the most sophisticated account of Burke's politics in nineteenth-century Germany, substantially based on the availability of recently published correspondence (von Sybel, 1847). He sought above all to correct the Foxite story, which had found its way into the German literature, that base motives had driven Burke into apostasy over France. Writing on the eve of 1848, when he still hoped that the Prussian state would deliver liberal reforms in Germany, von Sybel believed that

the French Revolution had attempted to inflict an unsustainable conception of popular sovereignty on modern politics. The 'call of freedom' (*Freiheitsruf*) of 1789 had soon been diverted into tragedy, he reflected in his *Geschichte der Revolutionszeit*, further wondering whether all utopian hope carried within itself the seeds of its corruption (von Sybel, 1853–1879: II, p. 3). Von Sybel believed that Burke had been the leading interpreter of the Revolution's failings, which von Sybel himself explained in terms of a commitment to an ideal of self-government that militated against moderate constitutional rule (von Sybel, 1847: pp. 17–18). Burke's predictions, he went on, seemed as valid in 1846 as they had been in 1790 (Ibid.: p. 20). Yet Burke's account implied no inherent dispositional conservatism: instead, as von Sybel saw it, it implied the availability of a more progressive future.

The key point here is that competing visions of the future collided in 1789, each of them claiming in their different ways to be committed to the advancement of society. There was no objective 'movement of progress' opposed by a 'movement of reaction'. On the contrary, there existed antagonistic programmes that might be viewed as 'conservative' or 'progressive' depending on one's vantage. These were forming into rival camps which the historiography has retrospectively packaged into conservatism, radicalism and liberalism. While Burke rejected all programmes on offer based on the destruction of royalty in France, he was also hostile to prominent attempts to inflate the role of an enlightened monarch as championed, for example, by Antoine de Rivarol (Rivarol, 1791). Burke was in favour of reforming France by means of the available instruments, pitting him against stalwart supporters of the constitution of the old regime. The vehemence with which Burke articulated his dismay at French developments made him a problematic ally for advocates of a renovated polity in the aftermath of 1789. Nonetheless his influence remains apparent from Germaine de Staël to Alexis de Tocqueville. In her *Considérations sur les principaux évènements de la Révolution française*, begun in 1813, de Staël took issue with aristocratic attempts to co-opt Burke as a partisan of unaccountable government and reminded her readers that on 'every page' the British Whig had reproached the French for failing to establish a mixed system of government after Louis XVI had embarked upon restructuring his regime (de Staël, 2008: p. 306). This means that, by the Restoration, Burke's writings were being sympathetically received by the opponents of one strand of conservative policy in France.

That process continued into the 1850s. Alexis de Tocqueville anxiously distanced himself from Burke's writings on French affairs. Nonetheless, his dependence on Burke's analysis is a conspicuous if understated feature of *L'Ancien régime et la Revolution*. Immediately after reading Charles de Rémusat's lengthy two-part essay on Burke's career in 1853, Tocqueville began weighing up his own understanding of the Revolution against the views presented across the range of Burke's interventions on the subject (Rémusat, 1753). As he proceeded, much like von Sybel and Rémusat before him, he could draw upon new evidence recently made available by the 1844 edition of Burke's correspondence (Bourke and Fitzwilliam, 1844). He surveyed this material with a particular end in view. He wanted to contrast his own sense of the deep-laid causes of the Revolutionary turmoil with what he saw as 'accidental proximate influences', allegedly foregrounded by Burke (Gannett, 2003: pp. 57–65). In this context, he fastened on to what he took to be Burke's celebration of the merits of the nobility in France as constituting a serious divergence from his own indictment of aristocratic manners (de Tocqueville, 1988: I, pp. 156–7). Yet Burke had in fact been preoccupied with the divisions among the orders in France, noting in particular the antipathy between wealth and titles (Burke, 2001: p. 274). This might lead us to the conclusion that Burke developed the first 'liberal' critique of *ancien régime* France or, more plausibly, it might persuade us that the standard divisions between liberals and conservatives only obscures the complex diversity of post-Revolutionary politics.

During the immediate aftermath of 1789, most publicists across the spectrum of political preferences were committed to the conservation of some kind of liberty. In the face of this shared objective, the historian is charged with distinguishing the range of attitudes that this goal embraced without pre-judging positions in the light of later developments. From the perspective of party-political commentary, there is something intrinsically disorientating about this exercise in recovery, since it refuses to award points to preferred doctrines in the past. Burke had no conception of disseminating conservative dogma, still less of being a Conservative in the tradition of Robert Peel. He saw himself as a partisan of a progressive strand of Whiggism. Under conditions of complete world historical knowledge, which would place us in a position to inspect the totality of experience like the angel of history at the end of time, we might want to insist that Burke was reactionary after all. It might then be known for certain that his vision of progress was definitively counterproductive, a forward-looking plan that could only

drag things backwards. In the meantime, as historians without access to the contours of the future, we are best advised to reconstruct his thought in the spirit of neutrality. That includes being prepared to grasp his vision of history from his own vantage-point (Sato, 2018).

From that angle, Thomas Paine and Richard Price were retrograde agitators, threatening to return politics to the turmoil of the preceding age. Needless to say, their own accounts of themselves were altogether different, and stand equally in need of dispassionate interpretation. Reassembling these past perspectives on possible forms of future politics does not involve discovering linear pathways into a world to come. Instead, it involves examining intellectual relics that were subsequently taken up, adapted and transformed. This process then gave rise to unforeseen developments rather than producing unadulterated traditions. Every action bred some reaction; each reaction then generated its own response; one vision of progress competed for hegemony against another; a range of conservative impulses strove to entrench opposing ideals. Historical sceptics are best employed applying their intelligence to this process instead of parading their partisanship for a particular player in the game.

IV: In the Shadow of the French Revolution

The idea that this drama of progress and reaction can be arranged into stark moral alternatives is an illusion that has been partly created by the philosophy of history. The commitment to a doctrine of historical progress, variously developed by figures like Condorcet, Kant and Hegel, combined with the notion that the French Revolution was a staging post on the way to a benign future. The result was a vision of world historical progress acclaiming developments after 1789 as advancing towards the fulfilment of higher moral and political ideals. By extension, it is usually claimed that before this date social values were mired in retrogression: superstitious, hierarchical, oppressive and iniquitous. It is interesting that more refined accounts are not much more sophisticated. For the most part, they also take their lead from the self-image of the Revolution as having introduced a world-historical schism into politics. After all, it was the French Revolution that originated the idea of an *ancien régime*. The term has subsequently been generalised as a means of depicting what is called ‘old’ Europe

(Gerhard, 1981). In turn, the notion that the overthrow of old Europe with its various *anciens régimes* has unambiguously served the cause of modern secular improvement has resulted in the censure of critics of the Revolution as impediments along the road to a beneficent future. According to this picture, conservatism had its origins in a movement of opposition hostile to the progressive potential of 1789. It follows that Edmund Burke, as a leading adversary of the Revolution, is cast as the begetter of this conservative ideology.

As far as this understanding goes, the tradition of conservatism did not just begin with Edmund Burke; its origins lay more specifically in his opposition to 1789. This perspective has germinated a massive literature spanning the twentieth century (Rachfahl, 1923: I, pp. 1021 ff.; von Klemperer, 1966–1972: III, pp. 848 ff.; Rossiter, 1968–1979: III, pp. 290 ff.; Vierhaus, 1973: I, pp. 481 ff.; Bénéton, 1996: p. 115 ff.). 'In Burke', wrote Lord Hugh Cecil in 1912, 'Conservatism found its first and perhaps its greatest teacher' (Cecil, 1912: p. 40). Since it was well known that Burke had been a publicist within the Rockingham Whig party and, after Rockingham's death, the ally of Charles James Fox and the Duke of Portland, Cecil was obliged to explain Burke's apparent shift from Whiggism to conservatism. According to Cecil, the *Reflections,* which was published in November 1790, heralded a move that came to fruition six months later. On 6 May 1791, debating the Quebec Bill on the floor of the House of Commons, Burke clashed with his associate Charles James Fox over the meaning of the Revolution in France (Ibid., p. 43). As the Portland Whigs divided, conservatism was allegedly born. Accordingly, conservative ideology is seen to have emerged as an antidote to the 'ideas of 1789'. For Cecil, this change was more an adjustment than a fundamental reorientation since the Whiggism of Burke had all along been conservative in character. This was a verdict which would soon become a commonplace. In this vein, F. J. C. Hearnshaw was happy to describe Burke in his 1933 account of the history of conservatism in England as an 'old whig', and Whiggism in turn as a conservative ideology in the eighteenth century (Hearnshaw, 1933: p. 165).

There was a time when the writings of Plato were presented as exemplifying totalitarian politics and when the work of Hobbes was interpreted as epitomising absolutism (Popper, 1945: I, passim; Kavka, 1986: pp. xii, 4). Similarly, in the 1950s, Locke was still seen as a principal source for liberal ideology, and Rousseau as a pivotal figure in the creation of modern democratic thought (Hartz, 1955: passim; Schumpeter, 1942, pt. iv, chapt. 21). By now, each of these unlikely constructions has been

dismantled by scholarship, lingering on in only the most outmoded historical writing. However, work on the 1790s has remained trapped in a received paradigm that organises thinkers into progressive and reactionary camps (Claeys, 2007; Philp, 2014). Within this mould, Kant is construed as a patron of modern liberalism, while Burke is defined as his rigid antithesis (Dworkin, 1977: p. 5). When their contemporaries are then lined up in battle formation, as they usually are, Price and Constant are strangely aligned with Kant, while de Maistre and de Bonald are confusingly identified with Burke. Properly historical reconstruction, devoted to investigating the principles actually espoused by the individuals, naturally tends to undermine the structural integrity of these camps.

Irrespective of the character of Burke's actual politics – and despite the intricacy of his relations with contemporary thinkers – histories, anthologies and polemics since the 1950s have tended to repeat the basic thesis that he should be viewed as in effect an 'arch-antagonist' of the rights of man, and consequently the progenitor of modern conservatism. In Clinton Rossiter, Peter Viereck, Hans Barth, Noël O'Sullivan and Corey Robin alike, we are treated to the idea that 'deliberate' conservatism had its roots as a self-conscious movement in the reaction to 1789 (Rossiter, 1955: p. 16; Viereck, 1956: p. 10; Barth, 1958: p. 6; Greiffenhagen, 1971: p. 43; O'Sullivan, 1976: p. 9; Robin, 2011: pp. 3, 19, 42). In each case, Burke is awarded a starring role in the drama of opposition. Most recently, Iain Hampsher-Monk has claimed that liberalism, radicalism and conservatism were all 'conceptually' present in Burke's writings, and that in effect he inaugurated the modern conservative idiom by opposing schemes for largescale secular transformation promoted by the Revolution (Hampsher-Monk, 2015: pp. 89–90). However, the fact is that Burke was himself committed to worldly progress, presented in the *Reflections* as a prospect of secular improvement enveloping the sciences, the arts and morality (Burke, 2001: p. 261). It is true that European political thought was strongly marked by the French Revolution. From that point on, visions of progress often took their bearings from expectations formed in the light of 1789. It is also true that Burke opposed a particular picture of the future, pleading instead for what he believed was a positive alternative. We might scoff at this alternative from the perspective of the twenty-first century, but that hardly implies that Burkean progress inaugurated conservatism as a response to late eighteenth-century European developments. Moreover, while Europe was strongly affected by the events of 1789,

the Revolution did not constitute such a definitive break with precedent that the opponents of its original goals became spoilers on the path to progress.

The idea of a revolutionary highroad to the future is problematic from a number of angles. First there is the absence of incremental amelioration – and also, for that matter, of necessary deterioration. For example, it is hard to credit the belief that the events of 1793–4 were a direct continuation of 1789: despite the arguments of François Furet, a reconstructed monarchy at the start of the Revolution did not 'imply' the establishment of a purifying republic in the years that followed (Furet, 1988). Similarly, it is hard to see how the Thermidorean reaction, the Directory, Bonaparte, the Restoration and the July Revolution all equally formed part of a coherent process of betterment. The idea that they illustrate a 'logic' of decline is no less unconvincing. What each of these episodes points to is not merely the fact that there was no unilinear development after the storming of the Bastille. They also underline the fact that – like any other process – the Revolution could not escape the history that some of its architects sought to purge. For that reason, it seems odd to conclude that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, for instance, inaugurated a template for the future. Many of its principles were rooted in the past and none of them pointed directly to the future (Rials, 1988). My point here is rather general, but it amounts to recalling that the Revolution was not a completely radical disjunction; that its course made plain its inability to surmount what had come before; and that its values were multifarious, incongruous and contradictory. Since principles clashed, and were modified in the process, there can have been no unbroken trajectory stretching forwards, no unmediated movement of ideas. If the Revolution did in fact spell progress, it can only have been at the expense of its original ideals.

I have been arguing that it is very difficult to sustain the argument that the French Revolution represented a decisive break dividing liberal idealism from feudal despotism. By implication, histories that depend on it for normative orientation risk imposing on the course of events a distorting interpretative grid. But if moralised narratives of the Revolution are poorly equipped to guide historical judgement in plotting French developments, they are surely still more problematic as a means of construing European politics as a whole. The complex processes, beginning in 1791, of war, insurgency, collusion and reaction that embraced Britain, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy and the Holy Roman Empire cannot be captured by the polar positions of 'support for' and 'opposition to' 1789. The rest of the world outside Europe presents a more

complicated story still. American history cannot be seen as a reaction to 1789 – still less can Chinese, Indian, Iranian or Korean. It would of course be odd to claim that India in 1947 or China after 1966 had 'no relation' to the events of late-eighteenth-century France; nonetheless, a mediated connection should not be mistaken for a consummation (Hui, 2008). Consequently, if our prevailing conception of conservatism as a reaction against the forward thrusting dynamics of 1789 is so simplifying as to be fundamentally misconceived, the expectation that one might somehow categorise world politics along a 'spectrum' from left to right is bound to fail (*pace* Anderson, 2005).

Many of the historical and theoretical perspectives that I have been exploring in connection with the idea of conservatism were brought together into a single focus in 1927. In that year, Karl Mannheim published his two-part study of 'Das konservative Denken' in the pages of the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*. The article had its origins in his 1925 *Habilitation*, and would later be revised for publication in English. His argument should be seen as part of a larger ambition, shared by his contemporary Max Scheler, that aimed to understand historically assorted 'styles' of thought (Scheler, 1926: VIII, pp. 9 ff.). Mannheim believed that the term conservative had its political origin in the defence of the French clerical and political Restoration, taking its rise from the title of François-René Chateaubriand's journal bearing that name (Mannheim, 1953: p. 98). In fact, the idea of a programme 'conservatrice', designed to preserve the heritage of 1789, was announced at the very start of the Revolution. Already by 1794 a Parisian journal devoted to 'true democratic principles', *Le Conservateur,* had appeared in print (Vierhaus, 1972–1997: III, p. 537). The goal of the periodical, more precisely, was to preserve 'des vérités qui peuvent fortifier le régime social de la République démocratique française' (Ruault, 1794). In 1830, the word was appropriated for the first time to depict an established party, in this case the Tory party of Great Britain and Ireland (Croker, 1830: p. 276). By 1841, the need for a 'konservative Partei' was being proclaimed in Germany (Huber, 1841). From the late 1860s that call was steadily met by a succession of aspirants to the title in Prussia (Vierhaus, 1972–1997: pp. 562–3). Yet Mannheim's goal was not to trace the fortunes of a phrase. Instead, his chief purpose was to examine how political values became bound up with the vicissitudes of social groups, generating in the process specific patterns of thought. Conservative thought presented a particular historical example.

The conservative mind-set that interested Mannheim was not conventional 'traditionalism.' This, as he noted, had already been investigated by Weber. In

Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft it was glossed as a 'general psychological' inhibition against 'change in customary modes of action' (Weber, 1978: I, p. 37). By comparison, actual conservatism represented for Mannheim less a typical form of behaviour, or even a general anthropological impulse, than a specific *Weltanschauung* that might draw on a basic instinct but which, unlike traditionalism, was a conscious and reflective historical 'counter-movement' (Mannheim, 1953: p. 99). The French Revolution, he thought, had a 'catalysing' effect on its emergence. In its wake, French and European politics grew more polarised, ultimately spawning liberalism and socialism along with conservatism (Ibid.: pp. 77, 79). The first seeds of this new 'Denkweise' (mentality) had allegedly emerged in the thought of Justus Möser, secretary to the Osnabrück *Ritterschaft* in Westphalia. But, Mannheim went on, conservatism really blossomed with the emergence of Romanticism. This, he claimed, was an especially German phenomenon rooted in a form of social 'backwardness' that encouraged a revolt against the natural law principles of enlightened 'bourgeois' culture. The main intellectual stimulus to this apparently anti-enlightenment worldview came, Mannheim observed, from the writings of Burke. He went further: Burke was in fact 'the initiator of modern anti-revolutionary conservatism' (Ibid.: pp. 82, 134).

The basic outline of Mannheim's argument survived beyond mid-century, informing the overarching thesis of Klaus Epstein's *The Genesis of German Conservatism*, still the most authoritative scholarly work in the field. Epstein, who fled Germany for the Netherlands and then the United States in the early 1930s, advanced his case by adapting the main conclusions of two predecessors. The first was Mannheim himself, the second the Central European historian, Fritz Valjavec, a prominent practitioner of *Ostforschung* under the Third Reich whose 1951 work, *Die Entstehung der politischen Strömungen in Deutschland,* traced the emergence of conservatism in the German speaking lands to opposition to the progress of enlightenment in the 1780s. Valjavec's innovation was to trace political conservatism to pre-Revolutionary Germany, thereby retreating from the depiction of the 1790s as the only relevant watershed. But, on closer inspection, the claim is less of a departure from mainstream scholarship than it seems. In place of the idea that the Revolution marked a break, Valjavec substituted a derivative teleology that presented the conflicts of the decades before the Revolution as a kind of dress rehearsal for the struggles that erupted after 1789. In a schematic account of late-eighteenth-century intellectual currents that has in our own time found renewed expression in the work of Jonathan Israel (Israel, 2011),

political contention was explained by pitting the establishment against two 'movements' – a movement for moderate reform on the one hand, and one for radical reconstruction on the other (Valjavec, 1951: p. 11; Valjavec, 1954: pp. 260–1). Like Valjavec, Epstein began his story with opposition to the enlightenment. But he also followed Mannheim in interpreting the Revolution as an intensification of the polarities that started to surface in the preceding decades. For all three commentators, then, the period around 1789 could be divided into opposing 'parties' – a 'party of movement' on one side, as Epstein phrased it, and a party devoted to the *status quo* on the other (Epstein, 1966: p. 10).

I suggest that it is not possible to identify anything so coherent as a 'party of movement' in Germany, France or Britain singly, let alone in Europe as a whole. Equally, there existed nothing so determinate as a consolidated 'establishment' against which currents of dissent might have been directed. Were the French monarchy and the *parlements* the same establishment? Did British juries and the House of Lords make up a single field of force? The different states of Europe varied in the extent of their integration, but they usually exhibited some division amongst their powers. This fact might usefully be kept in view when commentators elide the structure of eighteenth-century European polities by virtue of their dependence on the generic concept of an establishment. In defiance of due sensitivity to detail, Epstein presented the conservatism that he found in Burke as a defence of a generic regime against the process of enlightenment. Indeed, he described Burke's *Reflections* as containing 'almost all the elements of the general Conservative case.' Because of this, he concluded, Burke could count as the 'ideal type' of conservatism altogether (Ibid., p. 13). I shall pass over the obvious fact that there existed no such thing as a single political order in pre-Napoleonic Europe that a unified enlightenment could array itself against. In the process, I shall leave to one side the fact that even Osnabrück, with the fortunes of which Möser was principally concerned, was a mixed regime in which distinct forces of government confronted one another. Let me turn, then, to the relevant example, the apparent establishment which Burke is alleged to have spent his life defending.

V: Burke in Context

Politics in eighteenth-century Britain operated in the shadow of the Glorious Revolution, and the major insurrectionary upheavals that had preceded it in the 1640s and 1650s. The conflicts of the middle of the seventeenth century were both political

and ecclesiastical in nature. The settlement arrived at in 1688–91, and consolidated over the course of the following two decades, necessarily took the form of a constitution in church and state (Clark, 2000). This constitution, as a compromise, was subject to divergent, even antagonistic interpretations (Dickinson, 1977). Coming into parliament in 1766, just over half a decade after the accession of George III, Burke became a partisan of the Rockinghamites in the Commons, and consequently an advocate of a particular analysis of how the future of the constitution might best be secured. In pursuing that venture, virtually the whole of his career was spent on the opposition benches (Lock, 2012). That entailed dissenting from the governments of the Earl of Chatham, the Duke of Grafton, Lord North, and William Pitt the Younger. It meant challenging policy at home, but also various aspects of the administration of the Empire, above all in Ireland, in the American colonies, and on the India sub-continent (O'Brien, 1992).

Being out of government did not always involve supporting anti-government measures. For instance, Burke consistently committed himself to the defence of religious toleration, though he sided with the ministry in 1772 against a petition to exempt the clergy of the Church of England from the obligatory profession of the doctrine of the trinity (Burke, 1772). In the early 1780s he collaborated with the Yorkshire Association in an effort to reduce the powers at the disposal of the crown, and then in government in 1782, while occupying the position of paymaster general of the armed forces, he drafted an extensive 'Establishment Bill' whose purpose was to reduce the fund of patronage available to the court, and thus the ability of the crown to co-opt members of parliament (Burke, 1782: XXIII, cols., 121–7). Yet in the same period he took a stand against plans for the thoroughgoing reform of the representation of the state. In this connection, he publicised his aversion to shorter parliaments, binding mandates on members of parliament, and the idea of 'personal' representation (Burke, 1808–1813). Ideologically partisan historians might choose to construe these stances as wanton hostility to healthy reforms that smilingly looked to the future. The problem with such partisanship is not simply its refusal to attend, for example, to what might be considered the good reasons for objecting to annual parliaments in eighteenth-century Britain, not least amongst which was the plausible conjecture that more frequent parliaments would spell tighter executive control on legislation. But partiality in this case also assumes that the future ought to belong to positions whose credibility should at least be debated. For instance, the wisdom of binding mandates was dubious

in the eighteenth-century commons; it became a controversial matter during the course of the French Revolution; and the viability of the measure remains contentious today. Yet, bizarrely, for historians of the so-called 'unreformed' constitution, advocates of issuing instructions to members of parliament were somehow 'radical' – by which is meant not only given to fundamental reform but also wedded to a self-evidently progressive programme (Veitch, 1913).

For modern historians, it was Burke's antipathy in the 1780s to the introduction of what at the time was termed 'more equal' representation into the House of Commons that is liable to look like a pointlessly conservative commitment (Cannon, 1973: p. 84). How could anyone be opposed to 'equal' representation? Yet we need to ask two questions before jumping to conclusions. First, why did those advocates in the 1770s and 1780s who argued for a transformation in the principles of representation under the eighteenth-century British constitution not address the representative status of the House of Lords? For that matter, why did they not attack the monarchy as an unrepresentative feudal relic? Perhaps their plans were less consonant with contemporary practice than they at first blush seem. Second, we are faced with a more complicated question still: is democratic representation, the viability of which Burke apparently had the bad manners to dispute, really based on delivering 'personal' representation? Are modern representative bodies truly a miniature encapsulation of the entrenched opposition of individual wills that comprise the societies of the modern world? (Pitkin, 1967; Runciman and Vieira, 2008). Burke had reasons to believe that such an arrangement could never be possible (Bourke, 2015: pp. 589–91). We can dismiss his arguments as retrograde conjecture without examining their contents, or we can engage with the more demanding business of recovering his meaning. It is surely the job of the philosophical historian to pursue the latter course.

Surveying Burke's pronouncements across the span of his career in politics, it becomes clear that he was sceptical about the monarchies of France and Spain, as well as a critic of the aristocracies of the Holy Roman Empire. He was also a prominent critic of adverse constitutional developments under the reign of George III. Nowhere was his opposition more conspicuous than in his engagement with the administration of imperial provinces and dependencies (Whelan, 1996). This embraced an avowed distaste for a range of subordinate jurisdictions under the Empire, including arrangements under the so-called 'Junto' in Ireland, the exercise of power by the East India Company in South Asia, and the constitutional set-up of the Massachusetts

government (Pitts, 2005). Still more acerbically, Burke challenged the disposition of imperial authority itself, above all as this was applied to the American colonies and in India. In fact, in both cases, Burke was led to defend the right of armed insurrection against despotic rule in defiance of mainstream opinion in the mother country (Bourke, 2015: pp. 498 ff.). Moreover, Burke's posture was not merely one of outraged indictment. Instead he developed elaborate proposals for reform. Regarding India, the measures he recommended amounted to a reconstruction of the terms on which the activities of the East India Company were called to account. In the American case, his preference was for re-establishing the *status quo ante* that had obtained before George Grenville's attempt to raise a revenue in the colonies. However, intriguingly, in 1791, after the ratification of the US constitution and during the midst of the French Revolution, he also publicly defended the principles of the new American regime (Burke, 1791: IV, p. 349).

This brings us to the crux of the controversy about Edmund Burke: why did he defend violent insurgency in the colonies in 1775 yet react with such horror at events in Paris in 1789? Faced with this question, we might usefully invert it: why would anyone assume that the course of protest in the mid-1770s on the other side of the Atlantic had anything in common with developments during the French Revolution? The American historian R. R. Palmer encouraged generations of *dix-huitèmistes* to regard the period between 1760 and 1800 as an 'age' of democratic revolution, thereby explicitly conflating the American and French experiences (Palmer, 1959–1964). Yet it is worth recalling that the American stance between the Stamp Act and the Declaration of Independence was geared towards restoring an historic understanding, while the rebels in France from July 1789 were devoted to regime-change. Burke wavered in his response to French events in the summer and early autumn of that year, yet by November his hostility was resolute and uncompromising. He adopted this position for four clear reasons: first, he believed that the most successful figures in the vanguard of the Revolution were radically opposed to all prescriptive means of securing the authority of government; second, and relatedly, he contended that the anti-clerical attack on the corporate wealth of the Gallican Church compromised the institution of property *per se*; third, and again relatedly, he thought that the antipathy of prominent legislators to the Christian religion would undermine the viability of social life; and finally, he saw attempts to consolidate the power of the National Assembly as a subversion of the principle of mixed government (Bourke, 2015: pp. 676–739). It goes

without saying that this catalogue of objections was being made against an insurgency that bears not the slightest resemblance to developments in the American colonies between 1775 and 1776, the period during which Burke believed the provinces could fairly resist (*pace* Clark, 2005).

For many commentators through the nineteenth century Burke's justification of American resistance earned him a place among the angels of history. Since then, his alarmed reaction to developments in France has led to his being characterised as unleashing the forces of darkness. This Manichaean reception is all the more remarkable when one stops to consider what Burke was actually defending in the case of France. He certainly endorsed the role of privilege in commercial societies, but so too did Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès and even Thomas Paine – albeit they both had a different sense of legitimate advantage (Bourke, 2016: pp. 231–4). Equally, there can be no doubt that Burke was anxious to safeguard the social role of religion, like virtually every other commentator in eighteenth-century Europe, though it is true that, unlike some contemporaries, he believed in the doctrines he presumed to commend. Furthermore, as with a great many figures who discussed the topic during his lifetime, Burke certainly upheld the principles of property and a system of ranks. He also believed that the fundamental principles of a polity – like the conditions of legitimacy and the structure of the constitution – should be protected from periodic change on the basis of popular whim. As he saw it, this was not an arrangement directed against the people but a prophylactic against perpetual conflict in a state (Conniff, 1977). Somehow Burke's espousal of these familiar eighteenth-century precepts manages to induce squeamishness among faint-hearted modern readers, who seem uncomfortable with the idea that different values might apply elsewhere.

Yet we may also wonder whether Burke's views were in fact so thoroughly different from our own. His primary objective in attacking the 'ideas of 1789' was not to promote some particular species of property, authority and religion, but to secure Europe against the permanent obliteration of each. We might today debate the merits of various manifestations of these institutions, but few remain committed to destroying them on principle. It is true that between 1911 and 1918 – between the United Kingdom Parliament Act and the Weimar Constitution – the idea of government by estates shuffled off the European stage. A key ingredient of the world that Burke had fought to save was no longer practical politics. Yet instead of despairing at the thought that historic norms of the kind could ever have been cherished, we would be better off trying

to understand how for Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Hegel, and Burke alike, the idea of conforming the mode of government to an established system of ranks could have seemed like a recipe for peace and prosperity. If we are to use history as a tool of scepticism, hoping in turn to develop a more credible political theory, this would be a promising place to start.

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