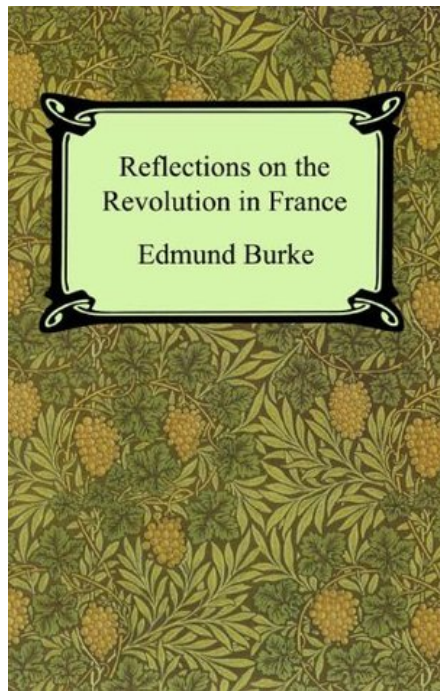




Reflections on the Revolution in France

Edmund Burke

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Reflections on the Revolution in France

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Reflections on the Revolution in France Edmund Burke

Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" is considered by many to be a masterpiece of political analysis. In the book, Burke presents the points with which he disagrees with the members of the National Assembly who were responsible for the French Revolution. Originally written as a letter in response to a young Parisian and later expanded upon and published in book format, "Reflections on the Revolution in France" presents a compelling rationale against the war.

Reflections on the Revolution in France Details

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From Reader Review Reflections on the Revolution in France for online ebook

Tyler says

This is a wonderful experience to read through this. It certainly is nice to get some opposing views of the French Revolution. There are even references made towards the American constitution and government to compare and contrast the somewhat odd mistakes the National Assembly made in their constitution. Truly a masterpiece as well, very well written. In my edition is an additional correspondence sent to a member of the National Assembly who responded to the original letter sent to the man in Paris. This additional correspondence is nice because it gives you a bit of an insight into the mind of Edmund Burke and the grievances he had with Rousseau's political philosophy. I am always cautious because Rousseau, as Burke says, said a lot of good and beneficial things, but I honestly cannot see a Whig empathizing with ANY of Rousseau's philosophy. But particularly I think it was that Rousseau disliked the Catholic convent, but for reasons unlike the Atheistic reasons for which Edmund Burke suggests. Regardless of this somewhat groundless controversy (which I cannot align myself with, due to Rousseau's theories of government being very wise) and a few other principles espoused by Burke that I can't reconcile, I still think this is a wonderfully well written document, particularly for some very philosophical passages regarding the nature of power overall.

Would recommend. 5/5

Bookdragon Sean says

Burke is a moronic, ignorant, drama queen:

"All Circumstances taken together, The French Revolution is the most astonishing that has hitherto happened in the world."

Really Mr. Burke? Was it really that surprising when the French finally decided that they'd had enough of corruption, poverty and starvation?

He was hated by so many writers in his era because of this work. His contemporaries openly wrote against his opinions and satirised his stupidity. The main problem his readers had with him was his mixed condemnation of revolution. On one hand, he considered the French revolution to be an unnatural crime, which is fair enough if that's his opinion, though on the other hand he justified the English reformation and the American war for independence. Both of which were revolutions. The reasons he gives for the latter being morally justifiable are, essentially, the reason why the French had their revolution in the first place: to break the shackles of tyranny.

Such words were mere hypocrisy for writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication for the Rights of Man* and Thomas Paine in *Rights of Man*. They could not understand how a previously liberal thinking man could suddenly adopt an approach of such staunch conservatism. And I have to agree with them. Burke condemns the revolution in perfectly justifiable terms; he foresaw what would happen in its aftermath: something no other writer did so effectively but his opinions conflict with his previous ideas, ones he is arguing for here at the same time as condemning the French.

Burke is no more compatible with contemporary, so-called 'conservatism' than Marx is. They both saw the dangers of unrestrained capitalism. They both saw the dangers of 'utopian' revolutionary planning (although neither conservatives nor Marxist read those bits of Marx, for obvious reasons). Admittedly, Burke was a sycophantic, power-hungry hack; and Marx went from being a lunatic pamphleteer to an impressive but ineffectual research academic. Neither of them are role-models. But at least they were willing and able to think - actually **think** - about politics, rather than just spouting party line drivel.

All that aside, Burke's analysis of the French Revolution's violence is tendentious, sometimes slipping over into yellow journalism rather than convincing critique. He's not always wrong, but he is always hyper-polemical, and that's never very constructive. His praise of English political institutions is far more interesting, as is his defense of landed property, although it's hard to distinguish the philosophical claims (need for stability in society) from the class-based ideology (stability is produced by Whig aristocrats). And his rhetoric with regard to the dangers of democracy (and, therefore, the libertarianism of the contemporary right) needs to be taken on board by anyone who cares that we're about to destroy our economic, social and environmental heritage: "The will of the many and their interest must very often differ, and great will be the difference when they make an evil choice... government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. Men have a right that these wants should be provided for by this wisdom. Among these wants is to be reckoned the want, out of civil society, of a sufficient restraint upon their passions." "The effect of liberty to individuals is that they may do what they please; we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations which may be soon turned into complaints... liberty, when men act in bodies, is power."

The solution for the problems of democracy is not, alas, more democracy, as nice as it would be to think so.

Also, the introduction to this Hackett edition is great, although Pocock doesn't really **show** that Burke wasn't in a rage against a proto-bourgeoisie. He does state it over and over again, but it doesn't seem important enough a point to make, considering that Burke most certainly was in a rage against some people an awful lot like the bourgeoisie of the later nineteenth century.

Natacha Pavlov says

Having been into Revolutionary history as of late, I was happy to stumble upon this conservative account; and this was so at least in part to my dawning realization that most, if not all, of my exposure to its history thus far had been from pro-Revolutionary sources. Overall I found it engrossing, and it remains just as remarkable to know that, given its publication in 1790 (just at the start of the Revolution), it ended up being a work of accurate premonition.

To start off, the introduction was long but helpful in contextualizing events as well as the author's own complex background.

Some of the key points and criticisms that resonated include: the inexperience of the revolutionaries, hasty elections all based on what 'one likes' instead of tradition (aka: 'what's convenient'), dismissal of everything past as necessarily 'bad' and therefore devoid of value, his view of religion as the basis for what's good and guiding to men (a concept largely rejected by key members of the revolution), and the movement's philosophy as altogether cold and unfeeling, and therefore not enough to sustain human nature and men's loyalty, to name a few.

I'll conclude with a statement he made, which perfectly echoes my feelings on Rousseau (and surely applies to so many others): "But eloquence may exist without a proportionable degree of wisdom." (p. 278)

Roy Lotz says

What first attracted me to Edmund Burke was the endorsement of a friend. “Burke is such a good writer,” he told me, “that he momentarily convinced me that monarchy is a great idea.” A writer good enough to do that, I thought, was worth a read; and since I recently read Thomas Paine’s refutation of Burke’s attack on the French Revolution, *The Rights of Man*, it seemed like the perfect time to give Burke a go.

But now, after reading this book, I think it is far more than a dazzling piece of rhetoric. A dazzling piece of rhetoric it surely is; Burke’s writing style is in a league with Gibbon’s for eloquence, elegance, and power. He is a master of the written word, and a pleasure to read.

But, as I said, Burke is far more than a silver-tongued sophist. He is full of perspicacious insights into politics, and wise maxims of government. I feel slightly odd saying such things about a proud monarchist, and a founder of modern conservatism; but I cannot deny being captivated by his way of thinking. So permit me to jot down some of these ideas.

The first, and perhaps most important, tenet of Burke’s political advice is the importance of compromise:

These opposed and conflicting interests, which you considered as so great a blemish in your old and in our present Constitution, interpose a salutary check to all precipitate resolutions. They render deliberation a matter, not of choice, but of necessity; they make all change a subject of *compromise*, which naturally begets moderation; they produce *temperaments*, preventing the sore evil of harsh, crude, unqualified reformations, and rendering all the headlong exertions of arbitrary power, in the few or in the many, forever impracticable.

Politics, as has been rightly said, is the art of compromise. This is a truism; but truisms are likely to be forgot. Take, for example Burke’s contemporary, Thomas Paine. I admire Paine for championing the liberty and rights of the common people, and for his tireless criticism of oppression. But it must be said that Paine is distinguished for his inability to compromise. If Paine had his way, every government the world over would have its own revolution in order to establish a representative democracy. A representative democracy is a very wonderful thing; yet even for such a prize I would be hesitant to advocate revolution in any and all circumstances. One wonders whether Paine’s goals could be equally accomplished through the slower but less bloody process of reform.

This brings me to the second of Burke’s tenets: gradualism. Burke is perhaps more aware than any other political writer I’ve come across (excepting Machiavelli) that a state is a complex organism. It is not animated by abstract principles, but by human wants—which are various, and which often intersect, overlap, and conflict with one another. This complex tapestry of desire makes the art of statecraft—like the art of medicine—one of balancing, adjusting, fine-tuning. To advocate a revolution for all political injustice is like advocating open heart surgery for all maladies.

Instead, the best policy is to begin slowly, cautiously, taking the political problem piecemeal, prescribing no cures too severe, and no reforms too immoderate. A good politician strives to keep what is good in a system, and to replace what is bad. A man’s heart might not be the most efficient organ that could be contrived for the purpose of pumping blood; but it does not follow that all hearts should be replaced by mechanical pumps. The trauma of the change might very well outweigh whatever gains in the abstract function of the organ.

This brings me to another of Burke's points: politics is an attempt to solve a practical problem, not to realize an abstract system. In Burke's words: "The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught *a priori*." This is not to say that all reflections on the nature of justice, of right, or of ethics ought to be discarded. This is just to say that such philosophical arguments should be regarded as means and not ends.

If you show me a politician bent on realizing an abstract system, I will show you a bad politician. Many, if not most, political decisions are between a greater and a lesser evil. The options are restrained by the exigencies of the moment; and if these quotidian problems are regarded as mere trifles by a politician, then that politician would be neglecting his duty. For better or for worse, we are not in the position to imagine the world anew; the world is not a blank page to be written on. There are no countries populated by abstract people seeking abstract justice; our world is the world of real people, with real habits and hostilities, people with their own customs, cultures, and conventions, their own provincial prejudices and preferences.

This leads naturally to another Burkean principle: the importance of concrete, specific circumstances. In his words: "Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principal its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind." This is why much philosophical speculation regarding ethics strikes me as limited—every situation is unique. One cannot abstract from a situation only the essential form; to do so would abstract away all of the pertinent information. If one were to unthinkingly apply the same criteria to every action in one's life, the result would be absurd—perhaps abhorrent; the criteria must vary with the circumstances, the principle with the particulars.

Burke's argument, as a whole, is an argument against radicalism. A radical is somebody who has more allegiance to a principle than to people, to a system than to a citizen. A radical is a doctor who would prescribe the same cure in all cases, the same government for all peoples in all times. A radical is somebody who cannot brook a delay in their plans—who believes every second their ideas aren't put into practice is a second misspent. A radical is somebody who is averse to compromise, because they are sure they are right and good, while their opponents are wrong and wicked.

There are radicals on both the right and the left. There are those who would abolish all taxes and regulations, and those who would abolish all property; who would convert everyone to their religion, or would ban the worship of any religion; who would kill a man for an idea, and would starve a countryside for a scheme. Burke reminds us that our knowledge, our aims, our wisdom, is limited; deciding the right policy is not a matter of a simple theoretical criteria, but of the application of years of accumulated experience, and the balancing of multiple perspectives and desires. Government is not a product of sublime reason or abstract logic. Instead, "Government is a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human *wants*."

As a little postscript, I'd just like to point out that, whatever your politics, you must admit that Burke was right about the French Revolution. It did not end well. But the most striking of his insights into the political situation in France is a straightforward prediction of Napoleon:

"In the weakness of one kind of authority, and in the fluctuation of all, the officers of an army will remain for some time mutinous and full of faction, until some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself. Armies will obey him on his personal account. There is no other way of securing military obedience in this state of things. But the moment in which that event shall happen, the person who really commands the army is your master—the master (that is little) of your king, the master of your Assembly, the master of your whole republic."

Patrice says

OK, he's a genius. He repeats himself and sometimes I had a hard time staying awake while reading this, but then he'll throw out a few one liners that astound. I finally got tired of writing "Obama" in the margins. I wonder if Obama has read this? Has anyone who loves Obama read this? Every word applies to the US today. Benevolence turns to weakness and then oppression. A strong country must have a strong economy. Following ideology in the face of reality leads to destruction. Taking the advice of those who wish to plunder is foolish. Plundering is not "justice". So many common sense truths.

But then he'll throw in some support for the class system and my thoroughly American heart and mind rebels. There were times when I wondered if he was truly in the employ of the British king, as I think I heard somewhere.

But bottom line what he says made sense, then as well as today. And, unfortunately, many prefer to fly in the face of common sense.

Bill Kerwin says

In this classic work, Burke--the father of modern conservatism--criticizes the architects of the French Revolution and the new revolutionary government for their unyielding radicalism and wanton destruction of society's institutions. In Burke's view, the traditions of a society should be respected and its institutions altered gradually; a tradition should be eliminated or an institution replaced only if there is a reasonable assurance that the society as a whole will benefit.

Some of this is pretty heavy-going (particularly the details about the composition of the Directory and the Cantons), but it is wise and well-written. Contemporary conservatism would benefit greatly from drinking deeply at the well of Burke.

Edward says

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Burke's Prefatory Note

--Reflections on the Revolution in France

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Curriculum Vitae of Edmund Burke

Elie F says

Human flourishing is embedded in historical traditions, and any total revolution that intends to strip away this necessary embedment is dangerous. Actually, if we strip away historical traditions, Burke believed that there is nothing solid beneath. What is left is sheer violence and beastly force. Progression might not be as desirable as it sounds. Great insight, and highly relevant today!

D.N. says

"...the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever."

The seminal text of contemporary Anglo-American conservatism and a continuing inspiration to classical liberals everywhere. Burke channeled his outrage over the French Revolution into a broadside against the horrors of the barbarous and destructive revolutionaries and the tyranny of their democratic majorities. He instead revered the 1689 Bill of Rights and the tradition of English constitutionalism embodied by the Magna Carta, Coke and Blackstone as "the fixed form of a constitution whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience and an increasing public strength and national prosperity." Essential to any reading of the Western tradition.

Adam says

Well, I'm really not interested in writing much about this here because I've spent a torturous stop-and-start month writing about it as part of my surely valuable and important and not at all worthless academic work and reading much associated material. I mostly wanted to offer something in place of the profoundly embarrassing nonsense I'd written here as an uneducated skimmer four or five years ago, in which I dismissed Edmund Burke (on politics and on the Revolution in France) as akin to contemporary "conservative" TV loons raving and ranting. That view, which is not too uncommon still among those of us who refused to take Burke seriously (which it is sometimes hard to do--take him seriously--when he's at his speechifying raving best/worst), is best described by that wonderful word "twaddle." Indeed, twaddle is mostly what you'll find in discussions about Burke, regardless of which circles discuss him, whether "left Burkean" or that bizarre species of neoliberal we now call "conservative" or old school British Tories who ignore that Burke was a Whig and miss the point by some margin or charmingly furious leftists insisting that there's somehow a direct line between Burke and Hitler.

The book is a genuine classic. Burke was prophetic in more respects than are generally acknowledged (re: the shitshow the Revolution would become and so on) and though not a systematic political thinker was far more sophisticated and intelligent and perceptive than most of his peers and philosophical contemporaries.

Much less disputable than those claims, of course, is the claim that Burke was a true master of rhetoric. But that claim has become so common as to constitute a sort of easy dismissal of the substance of Burke's work. I don't wish to go into it in detail, but it surely says something that even the often ignored bits towards the end on political economy contain some remarkable insights. Hey, guess who figured out well before Marx or any campus agitators that the French Revolution constituted the birth of bourgeois civil society? Guess who figured out that the "enlightened" atomistic individualism of liberal ideology was not the only philosophical conclusion available to intelligent minds and that beneath the "unassailable logic" of abstract natural rights

and universalist humanism lay the potential for something real dark and fucking unpleasant? Burke also deserves notice for being a Gael sensitive to the colonial violence done by the English to Ireland and to the ability of colonizing peoples to institutionalize difference, to think subhuman a subjugated population while enjoying a flourishing civilization dependent on that subjugation. Burke ended up taking an admirable if not entirely sufficient stance on the colonial violence in India and elsewhere and anticipating many of the points later made by 20th and 21st-century anti-colonial voices, often with respect to exactly those ostensibly cuddly abstractions Burke saw through and often with respect to issues of community and kinship and feeling and sentiment and belonging and the importance of political and social institutions, etc.

My taking a liking to this book does not mean that I am now going to go around calling myself a "Burkean" or that I am going to go around campaigning for the aristocracy to gain renewed powers. Then again, neither would Burke himself. Still, my temperament is more aligned with the Wollstonecraft of the *Letters Written During a Short Residence*. One may acknowledge that "the tyranny of wealth is far more galling and debasing than that of rank" while refraining from excruciating passages of praise for Marie fucking Antoinette and rants about the death of chivalry.

sologdin says

A turgid, incoherent, mean-spirited confusion of barely readable proto-teabaggery and ancient dogmatic douchebaggery. Written in the form of a letter to a Frenchman, without captions or other markers of manifest internal organization. Best part of this volume is the academic's lengthy introduction. Text is top tier anti-semitism, with frequent references to "Old Jewry" and Jews in general when he needs a negative example.

He opens by implying that he is unable to congratulate France on its new post-revolutionary liberty: "[A]m I seriously to felicitate a madman, who has escaped from the protecting restraint and wholesome darkness of his cell, on his restoration to the enjoyment of light and liberty? Am I to congratulate an highwayman and murderer, who has broke prison, upon the recovery of his natural rights?" (90). The association of the ancien regime with prison is significant.

Dismisses as either nonsense or "a most unfounded, dangerous, illegal, and unconstitutional position" the thesis that "if his majesty does not owe his crown to the choice of the people, then he is no lawful king" (97). Rather, the good people of England "look upon the legal hereditary succession of their [!] crown as among their rights, not as among their wrongs; as a benefit, not as a grievance; as a security for liberty, not as a badge of servitude" (111).

Even though he has distaste for revolutions, Burke's at pains to preserve the British revolution of 1688--and so suggests that it was "made to preserve our antient indisputable laws and liberties, and that antient constitution of government" (117), which strikes me as a fairly self-serving and silly statement. But, on the contrary, the "very idea of the fabrication of a new government is enough to fill us with disgust and horror" (id.). Instead, "we wished at the period of the [Glorious] Revolution, and do now wish, to derive all we possess as an inheritance from our forefathers" (id.). This is the famous inheritance thesis of civil rights, which he seeks to establish by cherry-picked and misconstrued references to British legal history. The upshot is that "by constitutional policy, working after the pattern of nature [!], we receive, we hold, we transmit our government and our privileges in the same manner in which we enjoy and transmit our property and our lives" (120). Perhaps it's persuasive to know-nothings, but his presentation of the legal history leaves much to be desired, unless it's simply intended as sophistry targeted at the weak-minded. The government-as-property is however key to his understanding, and much of the *Reflections* is a property-owners' jittery subliterate manifesto.

(Comical side note: he attempts to dismiss the French Revolution as the work "not of distinguished magistrates," "not of leading advocates," "not of renowned professors," but "for the greater part, as it must in such a number, of the inferior, unlearned, mechanical, merely instrumental members of the profession" (129-30). I think that means "the ambulance chasers have taken over OH NOS!" So: this is basically an early version of the limbic complaint that "the trial lawyers are ruining America!!!1")

Next worthy of comment is the famous defense of property inequality: "Nothing is a due and adequate representation of a state, that does not represent its ability, as well as its property. But as ability is a vigorous and active principle, and as property is sluggish, inert, and timid, it can never be safe from the invasions of ability, unless it be, out of proportion, predominant in the representation. It must be represented too in great masses of accumulation, or it is not rightly protected. The characteristic essence of property, formed out of the combined principles of its acquisition and conservation, is to be unequal. The great masses therefore which excite envy and tempt rapacity must be put out of possibility of danger" (140). And so on. It's like Ayn Rand complaining that rich people are oppressed--but older and accordingly possessing a higher and greater lineage of stupidity.

Burke shows himself to be anti-evidence by declaring "our representation has been found perfectly adequate to all purposes for which a representation of the people can be desired or devised. I defy the enemies of our constitution to shew the contrary" (146). Nevermind the problems in Ireland that were otherwise dear to Burke; this formulation appears to ignore the very recent war for independence that the British lost to the United States.

After complaining so much about innovative rights in France, he gives us an inventory of those "real rights of men," which he likes: the right to live by the rule of law, the right to justice, right to fruits of industry and to making industry fruitful, the right to acquisitions of their parents, to the improvement of offspring, to instruction in life and consolation in death--"whatever each man can separately do, without trespassing upon others, he has a right to do for himself," leaving *trespass* undefined (149). He declaims that "in this partnership, all men have equal rights, but not to equal things. He that has but five shillings in the partnership has as good a right to it as he that has five hundred pounds has to his larger proportion. But he has not a right to an equal dividend of the product of the joint stock; and as to the share of power, authority, and direction which each individual ought to have in management of the state, that I must deny to be amongst the direct original rights of man in civil society" (150). So, there's the philistine libertarian idea that rich votes are better than poor votes because the government is a joint stock corporation, &c.

Burke generally has nothing pleasant to say about atheists, but he is very similar to Marx in statements such as "religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and all comfort" (186) and "They must labour to obtain what by labour can be obtained; and when they find, as they commonly do, the success disproportioned to the endeavor, they must be taught their consolation in the final proportions of eternal justice. Of this consolation, whoever deprives them, deadens their industry, and strikes at the root of all acquisition and all conservation. He that does this is a cruel oppressor, the merciless enemy of the poor and wretched; at the same time that by his wicked speculations he exposes the fruits of successful industry, and the accumulations of fortune, to the plunder of the negligent, the disappointed, and the unprosperous" (372). This is an amazing piece of proto-fascist crap--it is the contrary of marxism's "opiate of the people" argument insofar as it recognizes the role of religious lies in placating the impoverished, keeping them at work, and thereby allowing them to be exploited by the wealthy--but Burke recommends this as the proper state of affairs, and designates as oppressors those who would correct the lies with truths and liberate the minds of the impoverished, who might thereafter disposses the wealthy of their ill-gotten gains. It's nasty sophistry, and exposes well Burke's true interests.

Like our own daily Fox News screechings, Burke whines, in the face of disagreement with his superstitious bullshit, that the "literary cabal had some years ago formed something like a regular plan for the destruction of the Christian religion" (211). We are told that this is a "new religious persecution," carried out by

"atheistic levellers" (246), after a lengthy description of alleged taxations and confiscation of ecclesiastical properties in France. (He has the good taste to discuss Henry VIII's Dissolution Acts, at least.) They are ultimately "philosophical fanatics" (256) and the "spirit of atheistical fanaticism" (262)--but people who believe that government is properly founded on a single person who is appointed by a guy born of a virgin and resurrected and so on--that's just reasonable common sense.

He also sounds like a marxist in diagnosing class warfare: "In the state of real, though not always perceived warfare between noble ancient landed interest, and the new monied interest, the greatest because the most applicable strength was in the hands of the latter" (211).

That aside, he appears to be a proponent of social contract theory: "Subordinate contracts for objects of mere occasional interest may be dissolved at pleasure [!] - but the state ought not be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in the trade of pepper and coffee," but rather it is "a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue, and in all perfection. As the ends of the partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born. Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primaeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by inviolable oath [&c.] [&c.]" (195-96). Goodness, what a load of shit.

Whatever else he thinks, he is a proponent of brainwashing: "Church and state are ideas inseparable in [English] minds. Our education is so formed as to confirm and fix this impression. Our education is in a manner wholly in the hands of ecclesiastics, and in all stages from infancy to manhood" (198). So, yeah, right?

He denies "that the nobility had any considerable share in the oppression of the people, in cases in which real oppression existed" (244). Later, of course, he has no problem admitting that "they worked from dawn to dark in the innumerable servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations, to which by the social economy so many wretches are inevitably doomed" (271). Apparently that's not oppression, or, even if it is, it's not the fault of the aristocracy. Of course, he later suggests that "if the people are happy, united, wealthy, and powerful, we presume the rest," i.e., regarding good governance (285). Hard to reconcile these statements, it seems--unless we just ignore the working class.

Also famous is the tolerance argument: "Are the decorations of temples an expenditure less worthy a wise man than ribbons, and laces, and national cockades, and petits maisons, and petit soupers, and all the innumerable fopperies and follies in which opulence sports away the burthen of its superfluity? We tolerate even these; not from love of them, but for fear of worse. We tolerate them, because property and liberty, to a degree, require that toleration" (273). Yeah, so that's the rightwing origin of the modern "tolerance" argument. Leftists shouldn't touch it. Like much of the prior discussions of property, it essentially asks for special dispensation for rich persons. Typical. (Needless to add that the "temple decorations" are fopperies and follies equivalent to the other luxury goods that he does not like.)

The *Reflections* otherwise have much local description of events in France and the revolutionary constitution (Burke doesn't like any of it). The revolution treats "France exactly like a country of conquest. Acting as conquerors, they have imitated a policy of the harshest of that harsh race" (297-98). So, a *locus classicus* for the rightwing notion that certain ideas are "unamerican" or "anti-american" or somehow evil & foreign, or whatever.

It is also an ancient source for the objection to paper currency (306 ff.). It also makes objection to the centrality of Paris in the new constitution (314 ff.), which reminds one of the "Washington DC is corrupt and evil" jeremiads that we get all of the time in the US from the rightwing.

Overall, super-religious, simultaneously adherent to authority, especially executive authority, but distrustful of "mob rule" in the assembly, and also very jealous of property, anti-taxation, ignorant to real abuses, ready to cry about imagined abuses, desirous of special rights for rich persons and dismissive of equal rights for poor persons, and so on. It's a catalogue of rightwing policy objectives, an inventory of loss. That any non-aristocrat would like this stuff indicates the power of ruling class ideology over the mind.

Nothing really redeemable overall--some folks like his writing, but it strikes me as aesthetically consistent with the period.

Required reading for serious persons.

Hadrian says

Ur-text of modern conservatism. Well, he has a good writing style. I'll give him that.

For all of his self-righteous condemnations, which are so often repeated by conservatives and reactionaries today, I note how so very few of them tend to notice his conspiratorial wailing about international finance and the Jews.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

My copy of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* comes with a splendid introductory essay by Conor Cruise O'Brien, onetime academic, politician, journalist and writer. I understand that he also wrote a biography of Burke which his Wikipedia page describes as 'unorthodox', though I think he may have used that term himself to describe his interpretation. I've not read it so I can't say if it is or not. What I can say, and say with assurance, is that his essay brings out aspects of Burke's life and work that I might otherwise have missed, particularly in relation to Catholicism and Ireland, and the bearing this had on his perception of the upheavals in France.

Burke belonged politically to the English Whigs and - at least by outward association - to the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland; he could never have advanced his political career as far as he did if he had not. But O'Brien identifies a tension between what he calls the 'outer Whig' and the 'inner Jacobite', between a Protestant gloss and a Catholic tradition. It was this friction that helped drive the irony in Burke's critique. Here his first target was not the Parisian revolutionaries but the London rationalists, those who identified the Revolution as the triumph of Reason over Superstition and Tradition.

O'Brien's point here is quite subtle, as subtle as Burke's intellect. Protestant he may have been but the Irish Catholic tradition was there, part of his makeup and part of his background;

...if Burke as a Whig cherished, at least in theory, the Glorious Revolution, Burke as an Irishman, with close emotional bonds to the conquered, detested the Protestant ascendancy which that Revolution had riveted on the people of his country.

There are things here that could not be said openly, were not said openly, at least not until towards the end of his life. But there were things that could be said indirectly, if you like, things that could be said in the context of a critique of the French Revolution.

The crucial point of departure here is that events in France were welcomed by the likes of Dr Richard Price, a leading Protestant dissenter. In November 1789 he delivered a sermon entitled *Discourse on the love of our country* in which he compared the political transformations in France with the Glorious Revolution of 1688, a common theme in the early days.

But if the Glorious Revolution, the Whig touchstone, meant one thing in England it meant quite another in Ireland: it meant hostility to Catholicism; it meant the oppressive Penal Laws. It was the identification of the first event with the second, the English with the French, O'Brien maintains, that wakened the "slumbering Jacobite" in the elderly Whig. The creative tension here goes that one step further; for while in relation to England and France the Jacobite perspective was clearly counter-revolutionary, the opposite was true in the context of Ireland.

The *Reflections* begins, then, as a rebuttal to Price, begins as a way of getting the English establishment to see that their interests were bound up with Catholicism in Europe; that there Catholicism was the bastion of order, of property and of tradition. It's a wonderful exercise in intellectual gymnastics, for Burke is getting people to see that it is the militant anti-Catholic Protestantism of the dissenters that is the natural ally of Jacobinism.

So, while preparing the most effective counter-revolutionary polemic ever penned Burke was also planting the seeds of sympathy for Catholicism in the minds of the English, the very antithesis of the message on the Glorious Revolution. Growing hostility towards the *Jacobins* was, with wonderful irony, accompanied with increasing sympathy towards the *Jacobites*. That is to say, it was in part thanks to Burke that English policy towards Ireland began to change, evidenced by the Catholic Relief Act of 1793 followed two years later by the foundation of Maynooth Seminary with state support.

In a letter written five years after the publication of the *Reflections* Burke made plain that his whole politics centred on anti-Jacobinism. He was particularly incensed by the hostility towards religion on which that movement was based. For him the practice of Catholicism "forms as things stand, the most effective barrier, against Jacobinism". He further argues that in Ireland in particular "the Roman Catholic religion should be upheld in high respect and veneration."

It's an impressive argument, one which deepens, if such a thing is possible, the profound respect I already have for Burke as a thinker. My politics, my conservatism, begin with Burke and end with Burke, begin and end with words he wrote in a letter of March 1790, the most devastating critique of bloodlessly bloody ideology ever written. The emphasis here is in the original;

"I have no great opinion of that sublime abstract, metaphysic revisionary, contingent humanity, which in *cold blood* can subject the *present time* and those whom we *daily see and converse with* to immediate calamities in favour of the *future and uncertain* benefit of persons who *only exist in idea*."

Here is the key to the horror of much of modern history, from Robespierre to Pol Pot and beyond.
