

Edmund Burke on Manners

It took Edmund Burke a very little time to decide that French Revolutionary philosophy posed a massive threat to civilization and social stability throughout Europe. By the end of his life, eight years after the storming of the Bastille, his fears of Jacobin contagion had led him to ask for a secret grave, removed from his family sepulchre and hidden from those-the English Jacobins-who would plunder the lead from tombs for bullets to assassinate the living. In 1796 he wrote: "...out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre, in a far more terrific guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination, and subdued the fortitude of man." He demanded nothing short of a war of extermination against this "armed doctrine."

It is somewhat surprising, then, to find that this enormous threat brought out Burke's most urgent defense of an aspect of civilization as trivial as "manners." Of course, the very fact that we consider manners "trivial" was all part of the problem from the start, as far as Burke was concerned, and he felt driven to state his case unambiguously in his *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796): "Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend." How can this apparent inversion of common sense be justified?

Manners are clearly not the same as laws. They are generally unwritten (unless we are talking about *ritual*), and they lack the regular, codified sanctions that support institutes and decrees. However, they have a similar function: in our small social communities and informal relationships they lay down expectations of behavior that facilitate the smooth-running and therefore expedite the purpose of these various bodies from the nuclear family to the shopping mall. These very circumstances which make sense of our manners mean that they cannot be constituted and implemented like laws and they

should not; but we commit a serious mistake if we allow the institutionalized power of the latter to diminish our respect for the former. It is the very superficial weakness of manners that actually constitutes their crucial importance in our lives.

There are two further points of definition to note here. First, Burke points out, manners are always with us and, in their nature, they are quickly adaptable to changing circumstances in a way that written laws can never be, however firm or enthusiastic the backing for those laws might be. The very strength of manners lies in the fact that they are unwritten: they work "by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in." Secondly, and consequentially, they are in all respects prior to laws in our consciousness and understanding. They precede the rational in their operation: they inform and prepare us: before there is any possibility of consent or contract to "legitimise" our relationships, they instruct us in and incline us towards our duties and responsibilities. We can see that they are nurtured by, and that they themselves reinforce, those very associations to which we are committed by circumstances that exist before and above any voluntary contract of mutual self-interest. The "origin of all relations, and consequently the first element of all duties" is marriage, and the family, of course, the first of all such associations.

Burke wishes us to understand that pre-contractual associations are not primitive forms of living to be superseded by an enlightened, social man when the time comes. They are the schools of behavior and values without which man will never become properly enlightened, and in the absence of which more "advanced" contractual agreements will flounder. They are supremely more important sources of education than the most liberal courses in citizenship, and it is manners that teach us their value and authority. They have a further,

most important function, too. Manners preserve the vibrancy of local associations by drawing us-almost instinctively- into the uncalculated exercise of responsibilities, by engendering a respect for our surroundings and our neighbors, and by giving us all some practical, local experience in the trusteeship of authority. In so doing, manners inform us of the proper scope of the powers to be granted to the state, and protect our inherited liberties and our possessions from the largely well-meaning but increasingly insistent encroachments of central government.

They can achieve this vital purpose only because they derive their shape from the moral values that underpin society, and that are rooted in our as social beings. "According to their quality," Burke argues, "they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them." These values have been imposed from above, by government education or propaganda, and essential that manners are left free reveal them in the wisdom of succeeding generations, in the form of customs, traditions, religious tenets, and the of ordinary people as they go about their common and daily business. They must not become subject to manipulation by the state, nor must they be confounded with laws, because if this happens they will become unable to fulfill that purpose of restraining the potential abuse of power by our governors. Manners are the prerogative of our own pre-contractual associations, the family and the community, which the state should serve, and which should guard jealously as guarantees our diversity and independence.

"Statesmen," Burke warns, "ought know the different department of things; what belongs to laws, and what manners alone can regulate." If Jacobins of 1789 could not acknowledge the legitimacy of codes of behavior which arose from sources beyond their Enlightenment they were at least sharp enough to recognize the potential that manners and vibrant local associations posed to the realization of their revolutionary, rationalist aims. What these revolutionaries did, then, was to

wage relentless war on manners, preferring to substitute (what they indeed have thought were *new* manners) officially sanctioned codes of behavior by which government might smooth the implementation of law. In this they inverted the proper order of things.

Their assault on manners had method, and some internal logic. It was also artful, in that it played on the vanity of ordinary people to convince them that manners were bonds of affliction, not affection. To our vain side, duty is subservience and licence is liberty, and so vanity "finds its account in reversing the train of our natural feelings. Thousands admire the sentimental writer; the affectionate father is hardly known in his parish."

As a result, traditional patterns of behavior and channels of intelligence, "ridiculed as the fruits of superstition and ignorance" by liberated philosophers, are hastily jettisoned by the population. Eventually the constant flattery of our reason leads us to accept nothing as valid or binding unless this is demonstrable through our own reason (or should that be our *intellectualized will*?). To Burke this was the misapplication of reason, which is a gift from God, given to us to use as a way of interpreting and making sense of our inherited wisdom as a way of reconciling us to an authority "out of ourselves," not of usurping it. "To assert reason is not to revolt against authority," he explained. "Reason and authority do not move in the same parallel. That reason is an *amicus curiae* who speaks *de plato*, not *pro tribunali*. It is a friend who makes a useful suggestion to the court, without questioning its jurisdiction. Whilst he acknowledges its competence, he promotes its efficiency."

If our unaided reason could uncover a common, binding foundation to our wills and actions, then the consequences of this vanity might not be so destructive; but it doesn't. In the true fashion of an aging megastar, the philosophers of reason coat their vanity with the stuff, but they do not

thereby eradicate the selfish insecurity behind it. The rationalist argument is permeated at the roots with unacknowledged instincts and prior judgments, but the concealment is performed with all the art and energy that might go into covering up a crime. In their "reasonable" world the most articulate and ruthless still rise to the top, but on the shoulders of those philosophers and sophists who have paved their way, and who now, taken by surprise by what they have spawned, are contorted by this novel, intellectual expression of self-interest.

Of course, as our natural sympathies and associations are swept away there is one relationship that remains inviolable that between the liberated individual, and the source of his liberation, the central government. If this is a contract, it is hardly one between equal parties! Nevertheless, the trappings of this liberation are likely to be present in force: written constitutions, paper rights, and all the other guarantees that lead us to equate legitimate authority with rationalism on parchment and, by a *trompe l'oeil*, the omnipresent government as the only legitimate source of that authority.

While the fight for influence, when it happens, turns upon this central power, the collapse of our true sources of liberty proceeds almost unnoticed. Burke saw a resistance to that centralism as built into our natures, but it is also a resistance rooted in our local affections: "The strong struggle in every individual found to belong to him and to distinguish him, is one of the securities against injustice and despotism implanted in our nature." This makes the destruction of these affections and instincts all the more urgent, but as it is achieved, so that act of "rage and phrenzy" reveals itself only in the paradoxes that occur when reason is applied divorced from circumstance. Manners come to seem trivial or cumbersome adjuncts that may obstruct our freedom, instead of the strong sources of that freedom: when

we free ourselves from them we actually open ourselves up to a much more comprehensive enslavement. A rational liberty means nothing but licence, because true liberty, which should contain a moral quality, "inheres in some sensible object": it "must be limited to be enjoyed." So the freer we become from our history and our neighbors and our responsibilities, the more enslaved we are to our own passions and to the central power that affects to minister to them.

We cannot fail to see this process sedulously at work in our present day, and Burke's scenarios have a frightening immediacy. This is the plan of the timeless Jacobins as he sees it: "They find dispositions in the mind, of such force and quality, as may fit men, far better than the old morality, for the purposes of such a state as theirs, and may go much further in supporting their power, and destroying their enemies. They have therefore chosen a selfish, flattering, seductive, ostentatious vice, in the place of plain duty. True humility, the basis of the Christian system, is the low, but deep and firm foundation of all real virtue. But this, as very painful in the practice, and little imposing in the appearance, they have totally discarded. Their object is to merge all natural and social sentiment in inordinate vanity, a small degree, and conversant in little things, vanity is of little moment. When full grown, it is the worst of vices, and the occasional mimic of them all makes the whole man false. It leaves nothing sincere or trust-worthy about him. His best qualities are poisoned and perverted by it, and operate exactly the worst."

Today, this process is not succeeding through novelty or terror, but through a relentless intellectual assault by which we are humiliated and embarrassed, but primarily flattered, out of our natural feelings, instincts, and confidence. "All our inherited wisdom is shown up as false and erroneous." We are now unable to believe in the value that anything that isn't enshrined in ink is sealed by a litigious wax. As

government is now our prime educator, its so happy to be considered the prime mover in our social behavior, and our real resources and safeguards, once bound strongly and vitalized by manners, crumble. We are not in danger of sliding into some titanic struggle with centralization and atomization, an age-old tension in civil society; the danger is that we're now sliding out of it.

Is there anything left to be salvaged from this approaching capitulation? If we are to fight this process effectively, if we are to combat this "armed doctrine," we must become aware of where the fight is to be waged. We must garrison the trivial now, or we may find that our strongest resources have been rendered without a fight.

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