

Modern America Through Edmund Burke's Eyes

As those serious about influencing the nation on both sides of the aisle understand, winning in politics first requires winning the culture. Doing so necessitates both a keen eye for recognizing cultural trends and the creative foresight to envision how best to guide a culture back to true principles by which a people can safely navigate the murky waters of politics, economics, and foreign relations with the perspicacious sagacity that yields long-term stability. Editing the *Annual Register*, in essence an editorial publication “reviewing the political and cultural events of Europe during the previous year” for likely seven years or more (Tierney, 57), Edmund Burke cultivated the skill of incisively analyzing the culture around him (Stanlis, 103). While supportive of the American colonists’ war for independence, Burke offered on the other hand foreboding scrutiny in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Published in 1790, the work was uniquely influential, sparking the dissemination of “more than 225 books and pamphlets” written in response (Stanlis, 106). Burke’s grave, conservative critique of contemporary French shenanigans went against the grain and offers helpful insight into the current state of America. Moral degradation, government bureaucracy, and the willful destruction of established social institutions like marriage would all likely stand out in a Burkian analysis of today’s American culture.

Burke's Thought

As Paul Johnson explains in *A History of the American People*, Burke’s driving mission was “the exposure and castigation of the abuse of power” (Johnson, 157). In the words of Russell Kirk, the basis for Burke’s conservative opposition to political tyranny was grounded in his assertion that “there

exist genuine natural rights and a genuine social contract," as opposed to that artificially constructed by the likes of Jean Jacques Rousseau which helped tear apart French society (Kirk, 288). Burke recognized that the American colonists were upholding this contract while the French were not. On the one hand, the Americans were seeking to preserve from the influence of an uninformed, oppressive king a virtuous and lasting way of life buttressed by a developed common law and virtuous social institutions. By doing so, it may be argued that the American Revolution was not a "revolution" at all. On the other hand, the French were choosing to disregard past history and attempting to create something entirely new and absolutely untested. The key to Burke's thinking—a principle which helped distinguish between the two movements and a point worth noting in current American society—was that "The true compact of society... is eternal: it joins the dead, the living, the unborn, and we all participate in this spiritual and social partnership, because it is ordained by God" (Kirk, 289). Thus, in Burke's eyes, the problem with the French Revolution was that its driving ideals were born out of a "spirit of change" that brashly disregarded the dead, ended up destroying the living, and staked the future on unproven, theoretical knowledge (Burke, 13). Still, to assume that Burke thought poorly of *all* change would be to misunderstand him. He argued that "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation" (Burke, 11). The problem with the French spirit of change was that it was a spirit of *total* change. The French pitched the contract with the dead, the living, and yet unborn like a head loosened from its frame by the guillotine.

Critics of Burke might argue that his idea of a culture's development of a body of common law and virtuous *mores*—like those developed in America—is not at all opposed to Hegelian or Darwinian theory of social evolution, resulting in the conclusion that modern American cultural and political shifts would conform to Burkian thinking. On the contrary, Burke's

conception necessitated the retention of that which served to uphold “inherited institutions, beliefs and practices, in which individuals develop good character by cooperating with one another in primary, local associations... aimed at furthering the common good in a manner pleasing to God” (Frohen, 180). Thus, not *all* of society ought ever to change, but only that which *ought* to—in other words, that which fails to uphold moral social associations and institutions. Like the events of the French Revolution, in America today quite the opposite is occurring. Today, the dominant liberal cultural philosophy of progressivism “assumes movement toward some ideal or end that usually includes the perfectibility of human nature and human society” (Federici, 679). Because future societal perfection is *assumed* in accordance with Enlightenment-style thinking, progressives assert that every imperfect institution today requires reform. Historical analysis suggesting that man’s nature has been and will perpetually remain *fallen* is ignored or considered outmoded. Should Burke be given the chance to comment on modern America in light of his French *Reflections*, he likely would address this nation’s moral degradation, government bureaucracy, and the willful destruction of established social institutions necessary for the nation’s cohesion.

Burkian Critiques

As John Adams famously surmised, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.” While it is obvious that television shows drag biblical morality through the mud daily in modern America, the likes of Burke would quickly pick up on the more pernicious trend of relegating morality to the realm of private, subjective feelings and personal beliefs. Major cultural influences of modern America tend not to challenge moral ideas so much as marginalize them, asserting that such ideas stand apart from the “facts” of science or evolutionary principles. As Paul Johnson records, when King George III

called for a fast and special church service following the American issuance of the Declaration of Independence, Burke swore "Till our churches are purified from this abominable service, I shall consider them, not as the temples of the Almighty, but the synagogues of Satan" (Johnson, 157). Just as Burke unashamedly opposed King George when he went off track, Burke would similarly oppose government expansion into every sector of American life. While most Americans tend to view monarchy as a blankly despotic and authoritarian form of government tending towards tyranny, the novel methods employed by the U.S. federal government to appropriate more power would certainly yield significant Burkian disapproval. Even more problematically, the blame could not be fixed so much on any one individual paralleling the British king, but on hundreds of legislators and an amorphous, opaque body of shrouded public employees typing out millions of pages of government policy and regulation. Not unrelated, Burke would also decry the current political attack on marriage, churches, businesses, and other social spheres, noting as Nancy Pearcey does that "Strong, independent social groupings actually help to limit the state because each claims its own sphere of responsibility and jurisdiction, thus preventing the state from controlling every aspect of life" (Pearcey, 141).

Edmund Burke's critique of fresh-baked and untasted French democracy foreshadowed the disintegration of French society that produced so much death. While American culture is more firmly established and remains in many ways still grounded on traditional principles and institutions that hold back growing despotism, Burke would quickly detect similar negative tendencies in need of serious pushback in America today.

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Notes:

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