



Edmund Burke and Modern Conservatism

Crash Course for Leftists

Why I'm Doing This

- Have been studying Burke and the conservative tradition for the past year for part of a theological essay I'm writing (if you want a link, ask me)
- My own experiences with conservatism
- Also just a very relevant topic
 - A good deal of leftist theory is written specifically as rebuttals to liberalism, less solid defenses against intelligent conservative arguments (or even awareness of said arguments)
 - Most political innovation in our era is being done on the right rather than the left

"If conservatives wish to know what they defend, Burke is their touchstone; and if radicals wish to test the temper of their opposition, they should turn to Burke."

- Russell Kirk

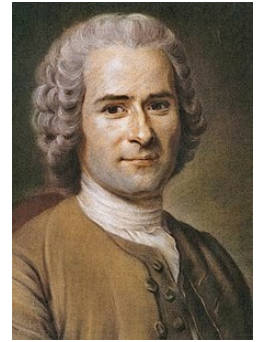


The sycophant—who in the pay of the English oligarchy played the romantic laudator temporis acti against the French Revolution just as, in the pay of the North American colonies at the beginning of the American troubles, he had played the liberal against the English oligarchy—was an out-and-out vulgar bourgeois.

- Karl Marx, Capital (Volume I)



What is Liberalism?

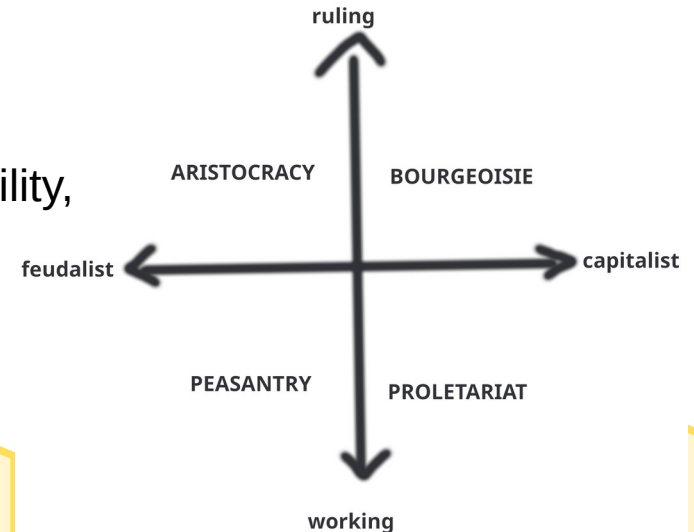


- Arose out of the Enlightenment
 - Belief in the ability of “abstract reason” to objectively understand the world
 - Emphases on universality, “state of nature”, individual rights, social progress, etc.
- Modern liberals can have varying views on the size of government, but the underlying philosophy is the same
 - Understands society in “mechanical terms”, as a social contract between rational actors
 - Views social change in terms of “innovation”, whether by market forces or government policy
 - A strong optimism regarding human reason and its ability to fully understand societies and how they work
- Key words: choice, privacy, equality, justice, democracy, freedom, progress, reason, universality, institutions, policy
- **Note:** ideologies are intellectual models, they’re not historical forces



What is Conservatism?

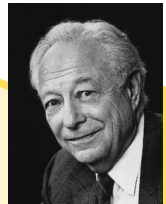
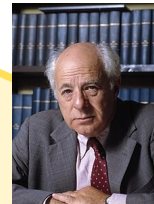
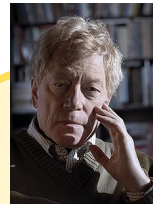
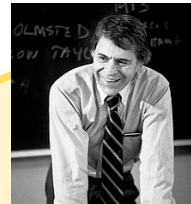
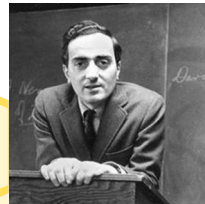
- Technically not an ideology, but a **disposition**
 - Arguably pre-exists in the logic of closed communities, intellectual conservatism arose as a response to liberalism
- Best defined by its emphasis on a cautious approach to change
- Considered an aristocratic/peasant ideology during Burke's time, in contrast to liberalism being a bourgeois ideology
 - The decline of the aristocracy/peasantry has complicated this
- **Key words:** order, harmony, tradition, mystery, community, religion, caution, culture, practicality, particularity, responsibility, humility



Some Other Terms



- In historical terms, we're dealing with the period of post-1968, post-1991
- Neoliberalism
 - General liberal “consensus” that emerged out of the post-Cold War era
 - Emphasizes free trade, free migration, and efficient markets while de-emphasizing social issues
 - Contrast with classical liberals; classical liberals see markets as an “expression of freedom” as opposed to a “vehicle for freedom”
 - The neoliberal sees efficiency as free, the classical liberal sees freedom as efficient
- Neoconservatism
 - Came about in response to the New Left and the cultural changes with it
 - **Fun fact:** a surprisingly large amount of neoconservatives are disillusioned ex-Marxists
 - Three defining characteristics: skepticism of bureaucracy, defense of traditional family values, and a belief in “peace through strength”



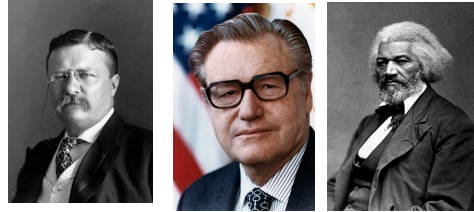
Who is Edmund Burke?

- Active as an English politician around the time of the French Revolution
 - Took a “middle position” between the reactionary monarchists (like de Maistre) and the radical liberals (like the Jacobins)
 - He writes as a politician (lots of rhetorical flair, discussing contemporary issues, theory is more of a thread scattered across his writings)
- Claimed by a very wide array of groups (including some liberals)
 - Believed in republican government but also stressed the need of a responsible aristocracy to guide it
 - Had some positions modern historians might call “progressive”
 - Was anti-slavery and anti-imperialism for “conservative” reasons



The Conservative Spectrum (in Politician Terms)

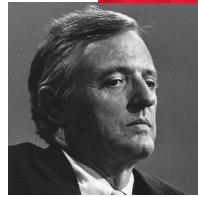
- Progressive Conservatism



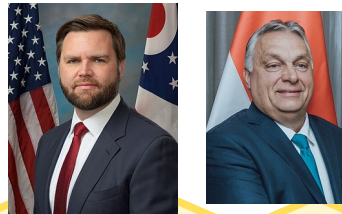
- Liberal Conservatism



- Neoconservatism



- National Conservatism



Main thing to note:

Just like leftists, there's a lot of ideological diversity and varying theories, but there's also an underlying common *disposition*.

The French Revolution

- Two main causes commonly agreed on by historians
 - Material: the gradual weakening of the feudal system and the rise of the bourgeoisie
 - Ideological: the Enlightenment -- and its challenges to tradition, religion, and authority
- Incredibly bloody, especially during the Reign of Terror
 - Brute-force approach deemed necessary to re-orient daily life to be more “rational”
 - De-christianization, atheism/deism, Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, reforms to the calendar, etc
 - Faced resistance by the peasantry, which in turn was met with violent suppression
 - Historiographical debates over the War in the Vendée continue to this day
- Burke was absolutely horrified by the Revolution, and his writings on the subject are at the center of his legacy
 - Honed in on the ideological causes and implications of the war



*When to these establishments of Regicide, of Jacobinism, and of Atheism, you add the correspondent system of manners, no doubt can be left on the mind of a thinking man, concerning their determined hostility to the human race. **Manners are of more importance than laws. In a great measure the laws depend upon them. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or sooth, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breath in. They give their whole form and colour to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.** Of this the new French Legislators were aware; therefore, with the same method, and under the same authority, they settled a system of manners, the most licentious, prostitute, and abandoned, and at the same time the most coarse, rude, savage, and ferocious. Nothing in the Revolution, no, not to a phrase or a gesture, not to the fashion of a hat or a shoe, was left to accident. All was the result of design; all was matter of institution. No mechanical means could be devised in favour of this incredible system of wickedness and vice, that has not been employed.*

The noblest passions, the love of glory, the love of country, were debauched into means of it's preservation and it's propagation. All sorts of shews and exhibitions calculated to inflame and vitiate the imagination, and pervert the moral sense, have been contrived. They have sometimes brought forth five or six hundred drunken women, calling at the bar of the Assembly for the blood of their own children, as being royalists or constitutionals. Sometimes they have got a body of wretches, calling themselves fathers, to demand the murder of their sons; boasting that Rome had but one Brutus, but that they could shew five hundred.

- Edmund Burke, Letters on a Regicide Peace I



The American Revolution

- Burke was significantly more sympathetic towards the American Revolution
- The American Revolution was much less of a populist class-struggle as much as the replacement of one group of elites with another
- The existing rhythm of daily life was preserved, if anything the struggle was against a foreign power imposing foreign taxes
 - Americans also continued to see themselves as “Englishmen” which led to a surprisingly cordial US-UK relationship
- As a consequence, American democracy had very different foundations than French
 - Persists in differences between American and European culture/politics to this day
 - Founding fathers wanted to maintain the aristocracy (and to a large part monarchy)
 - History overstates the unpopularity of King George III, in a lot of ways American revolutionaries saw their real enemy as Parliament (who had power in levying the taxes)
 - Federalist Papers show the presidency envisioned as a sort of “elected kingship”



Burke's Concept of Democracy

- Amenable towards a representative/republican system of government, but believed it needed comprehensive checks to avoid 'mob rule'
- Stressed the need for a carefully-selected elite to guide political change in a responsible fashion
- Rejected the principle of 'democracy' because he felt 'will of the people' to be an overly abstract concept
 - Instead saw the goal as to prevent tyranny and prevent power from centralizing, stressed the principle of 'balance'



Case Study: American Government

- “Democracy” remained a dirty word in American politics until around the late 19th century, we were/are a “republic”
 - Associated with “mob rule”
- The most defining characteristic of the Constitution is the separation of powers
 - Countless other countries have constitutional “rights”, including Revolutionary France and the USSR
 - Federalism granted an incredible amount of political power to local communities and states as opposed to federal authorities
 - Reflects a much more cynical rather than aspirational approach to statecraft
- The system was very much deliberately designed with “elite checks” on the popular will
 - Electoral College, the appointment of Senators, restriction of voting to land-owners
 - Most of these were halfway eroded or done away with entirely by Progressive-era reformers
- The sheer availability of cheap land gives way to resolving political disputes via “entrepreneurial” means rather than full-scale revolutionary struggle (as in Europe)
 - The early colonies acted as miniature “political laboratories” in which each state acted as testing grounds for all sorts of ideas



Burke and Religion

- Burke was a Christian, but his writings reflect a disinterest in discussing the ‘truth’ of Christianity
 - He was far more interested in the ‘moral benefits’ of a Christian society and the social utility of religion
 - As a result, Burke shows an uncharacteristic respect for other religions such as Hinduism and Islam, praising the ways in which they have contributed to the richness of their respective societies, going as far as to promote religious toleration*
- He wasn’t a moral or religious relativist, however
 - He still believed in a universal Natural Law, and believed there would be times where one would have to take a moral stand
- Burke understood ‘divine order’ as a sort of extension of the social order
 - However, he also believed the complexity and mystery of our origins and tradition reflected a limitation in our capacity to understand the Divine



By the time Fox introduced his bills, Burke had become an expert on British activities in India. And, the more he had studied the situation the more passionate he had become about the need for reform. This passion is demonstrated by the fact that he had actually purchased stock in the East India Company in order to become eligible to participate in its deliberations; he was, however, unsuccessful in changing policy at that level.[8] In delving into the Indian question Burke did not just study British activities in India, but India itself, including its culture and religions. Whelan observes that "Burke was one of the first major European thinkers . . . to have made a serious effort to understand a non-Western civilization and to incorporate his findings into his general political thought." [9] India, Burke maintained, consists of "a people for ages civilized and cultivated,—cultivated by all the arts of polished life, whilst we were yet in the woods." [10] Although Burke's interest in Indian culture is atypical for an eighteenth-century Briton, it is highly consistent with his concern for the moral imagination, with his appreciation of the cultural elements which help shape it, and, more broadly, with his attention to historical particularity. Although Burke respected the uniqueness of Indian culture, he saw Britain and India as, in some ways, equivalents. In speaking on the legislation, he stated that "this bill, and those connected with it, are intended to form the *Magna Charta* of Hindostan." This may seem to be a grandiose claim, but several paragraphs earlier Burke mentioned that the "*Magna Charta* is a charter to restrain power," and this is what Fox's legislation would do.[11] Unfortunately, various vested interests opposed the legislation and it failed.



Abstract vs. Practical Reason

- Burke criticized Enlightenment philosophy for its reliance on **abstract reason**
 - He held as beings within *history*, humanity cannot 'step outside' of its context and objectively dissect it, but it can engage with and inherit it
- Burke saw 'human nature' as observable from 'man at his highest' as opposed to 'man at his basest'
 - Very strong link between his aesthetic philosophy and political philosophy
- Instead, Burke was a proponent of 'practical reason'
 - Less concerned with knowledge as a means to 'Truth' and more so as a guide for judgement and fulfilling useful ends
 - Saw expedience as a virtue, condemning 'unprofitable rights' and 'profitable wrongs'
 - Burke essentially saw tradition as an accumulation of this sort of unspoken, complex, time-tested knowledge on what has been proven to *work* as a way to arrange society
 - In simpler terms, Burke's political project was to steelman a case for 'common sense' as a valid political epistemology
- Burke's political aims are cynical: 'the highest aim of any ruler can only be to keep things from coming to the worst'
 - Believed 'perfect good' was a foolish aim, but 'imperfect goods' were worth settling for



Burke's Doctrine of Change

- Burke's starting point was not constructing an 'ideal society' and working to it, but taking the existing society and figuring out what to make of it
 - There are times where reform is necessary, but it has to be carefully guided in a way that's agreeable to the people rather than imposed on them
- Not opposed to change but insistent upon *defining the terms on which change occurs*
- Burke believed that radical changes were inevitably bound to be met by reflexive resistance by the populace
 - In his mind change could only be maintained either by reform or by brute force
- Burke's notion of reform has to do with ideas as much as mechanisms
 - Liberals propose political 'innovations' all the time which are incredibly sweeping and disruptive but also *technically* reformist
 - Hence why conservatives are so scared of the "march through the institutions"



Case Study: Civil Rights

- America's approach to handling racial tensions is genuinely exceptional within the world
 - Compared to other Western countries on immigration, compared to other post-colonial states on desegregation
 - In large part, due to a lot of informal, unspoken factors of integration
- Following the failure of Reconstruction, civil rights became a multi-generational project to win the war 'culturally'
 - Respectability politics, religion, community-building, accumulation of wealth, integration, etc.
- Elites played an outsized role in the process
 - Support among people versus Congress for 1964 CRA, 1965 Immigration Act, etc.
 - Change came in a way that the public could accustom themselves
- The controversy over this approach



Organicism

- Liberals hold to a 'mechanistic' view of society, that society exists as a rational equilibrium of competing interests
 - Hence the analogy of the social contract and the neoliberal preoccupation with 'institutions'
- Conservatives (including Burke) by contrast promote a view of society as like an 'organism', whose members need to be brought into harmony
 - Far more complex and 'living' view than the liberal one, more particularistic but less individualistic
 - Increased emphasis on 'informal' aspects of society such as culture, religion, family structure, etc. as opposed to 'formal' ones (such as laws)
- Example: U.S. liberal vs. conservative views on education



For Burke, customs and social bonds are at least as important, and perhaps more important, than laws in constraining behavior. In this case, however, there is no common social structure and, consequently, “no retributory superstitions” to prompt the English to behave charitably toward the Indians. Moreover, previous conquerors settled in India and raised up children there. The ties between the generations—the first generation of conquerors striving to do right by their children, and then their children striving to do right by their ancestors—kicked in. These ties shaped the conquerors’ understanding of their world and of their moral responsibilities. What passes for government in India, however, is basically a loosely organized group of young-men-on-the-make, who come there with an aim to make their fortunes as quickly as possible, by whatever means available, and then to return to England. Consequently their relationship to India and its people is purely transactional, and purely exploitative. With neither ancestors nor posterity there, they fail to place their actions within a meaningful moral context which extends beyond their own immediate self-interest.



The Marxist Critique of Liberalism

- At the core, that liberalism's idealism is delusional and at odds with the reality of human life and history – capitalism only makes it real by mowing over all that is living, complex, and authentic
 - Or TL;DR: capitalism reduces people to numbers
- What the Marxist and conservative traditions share is a deep-seated *historicism*
 - Marx was also critical of appealing to abstract universal ideals such as “justice” and “equality”
 - In this regard, other strains of “leftism” could be considered to be a ‘radicalized’ form of liberalism*
 - Marx was also critical of a “pre-social” human nature, and any social science which tried to place itself “above history”
 - Marx also takes a critical attitude towards ‘progress’ and the ways in which traditional forms of social organization and relation are bulldozed by development
 - Even Communism as a ‘final stage of history’ is conceived of as in a sense, a return to the beginning
 - Marx's attitude towards political change was a foundationally *realist* one, and the subsequent Marxist movements would come to be associated with **realpolitik** (which leads to the great irony of the Cold War)



Proudhon creates his ideal of eternal justice from the juridical relations that correspond to the production of commodities. He thereby proves, to the consolation of every good petite-bourgeois, that the production of commodities is a form as eternal as justice. Then he turns around and seeks to reform the actual production of commodities, as well as the corresponding legal system, in accordance with this ideal. What would one think of a chemist who, instead of studying the actual laws that govern molecular interactions, claimed to regulate such interactions by means of eternal ideas such as naturalité and affinité, etc.?

- Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy



Main Points of Contention Between Marx and Burke

- Burke was markedly more pessimistic about the power of abstract reason than Marx*
 - The Hegelian framework rests on a notion of history progressing towards “total self-understanding”
 - posits abstract reason as something which can work retrospectively
 - Burke stressed age-old political questions whereas Marx focuses on the problems particular to our era
 - Marxists are still ‘social engineers’, looking to overhaul the structure of daily life and architect political systems from *a priori*, abstract models
- Marx was a materialist, whereas Burke is ideologically focused
- Marx believes in social conflict theory, and that these social orders are not just undesirable but inherently *unsustainable*
 - For Marx, class struggle is an inevitability, for Burke it’s a choice



Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language...

...The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot take its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped away all superstition about the past. The former revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to smother their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead in order to arrive at its own content.

- Karl Marx, The German Ideology



The Modern Right

- The complete and abject failure of neoliberalism has led to a 'crisis of faith' in Western democracy
 - Migration crises, social impact of the internet, displacement of jobs caused by globalization
- The left has failed to provide a remotely compelling alternative
 - Completely indistinguishable from the larger 'progressive' activist blob in practice
- Renewal of interest in national conservatism and 'post-liberal' right-wing politics
 - Emphasis on this idea that the various social upheavals aren't inherent to capitalism (but instead bad ideologies or bad policies), or can be mitigated/steered to the national interest by the state
 - In Europe, the far-right has shown itself willing to champion traditionally 'left-wing' causes like anti-imperialism and environmentalism with 'pro-family', 'anti-immigration' politics
 - Common thread of 'preservation'



My Personal Takeaways

- Just like how the neoliberal consensus has made us forget how far left liberalism can go without being socialism, it also makes us forget how far right conservatism can go without being outright reactionary
- Leftists tend to get overly trapped in internal discourses
 - A lot of the challenges conservatism makes are ‘basic’ but get dismissed based on presentation rather than substance
 - Marxism needs to be able to defend its own core assumptions on external grounds
 - Are the things leftists claim about communities, human nature, history, society, economics, *actually* true?

