Edmund Burke: A Voice of Reason in Tumultuous Times

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Statue of statesman and philosopher Edmund Burke at the entrance to Trinity College in Dublin. Natalia Paklina/Shutterstock

By Gerry Bowler

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Commentary

Conservatism is a school of thought that resists a systematic philosophy. While other political creeds such as socialism, communism, Islamism, or fascism can point to thinkers who have produced works of definitive theory to guide their followers—Karl Marx and “Capital,“ Sayyid Qutb’s ”Milestones,“ and Benito Mussolini and his ”Doctrine of Fascism,“ for example—conservatism mistrusts theory and grand schemes.

It is out of writings on specific issues that conservative ideas emerge. This is certainly true with the career of the man whom some consider “the father of conservatism,” Edmund Burke.

Burke was born on Jan. 12, 1729, into an Irish Protestant family, but after graduating from Dublin’s Trinity College, in 1748 he moved to England where he spent most of his life. He quickly drew attention to himself with his writings on political topics, and soon acquired powerful friends in the Whig faction. Thanks to these supporters, he entered the House of Commons in 1765, becoming a central figure in Parliament for almost 30 years, until his death in 1797.

There was no topic in British public life in the second half of the 18th century on which Burke did not take a stand. He opposed the government’s uncompromising approach to the complaints of the American colonies, arguing that they be free from external taxation. The colonists were, he said, of English stock and thus naturally resistant to being pushed around. Reconciliation, not force, was in his view the way forward. The government did not heed his advice, however, and the American War of Independence was the result.

Burke was an ardent opponent of the slave trade and urged a gradual abolition of the trade in human beings. He spoke out as well against the oppression and exploitation of the East India Company. Though the company’s holdings in India brought enormous wealth to its British shareholders, Burke argued that this was accomplished at the expense of the native population who had a right to expect honest government. In this, he was a forerunner of those who wished British imperialism to act as a trust for those it ruled over.

Since the reign of Elizabeth I in the 16th century, British Catholics had been under political and religious restrictions. In Burke's day, Catholics were banned from university (and thus from the legal and medical professions); they could not serve as officers in the armed forces, nor could they vote or hold political office. They had much less secure right to property than Protestants and the open practice of their religion was subject to penalties. Burke opposed these measures so forcibly that he was under threat of violence from Protestant mobs; his house had to be guarded by troops against arsonist rioters.

Painting of Edmund Burke by Sir Joshua Reynolds, circa 1769. Public Domain

Burke was a supporter of free trade at a time when his constituents in Bristol were prosperous merchants afraid of commercial competition. These men demanded that Burke, as their Member of Parliament, echo their stand. In his famous "Speech to the Electors of Bristol" Burke made this statement about the nature of representative democracy:

"Parliament is not a *congress* of ambassadors from different and hostile interests; which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but parliament is a *deliberative* assembly of *one* nation, with *one* interest, that of the whole; ... You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not a member of Bristol, but he is a member of *parliament*."

Much of Burke's enduring fame comes from his stand against the French Revolution, a stance taken even before the excesses of the Reign of Terror. Though delighted with the first reforming steps of 1789, he quickly turned against those who would remake all of society. In his "Reflections on the Revolution in France," he stated, "I cannot

conceive how any man can have brought himself to that pitch of presumption, to consider his country as nothing but carte blanche, upon which he may scribble whatever he pleases."

Reform was often necessary. "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation," he said, but revolution—an overturning of long-established institutions in the name of some abstract principle—was dangerously fatal. Political action should be guided by an awareness of unchangeable human nature as expressed in local customs and circumstances rather than sweeping generalizations about rights.

The opponents of Burke's ideas in the years following his death—the great "isms" of the 19th and 20th century: socialism, feminism, communism, liberalism, etc.—have managed to draw enormous followings, but his thoughts still have their supporters today.

Burke would undoubtedly applaud Michael Oakeshott's definition: "To be conservative … is to prefer the familiar to the unknown, to prefer the tried to the untried, fact to mystery, the actual to the possible, the limited to the unbounded, the near to the distant, the sufficient to the superabundant, the convenient to the perfect, present laughter to utopian bliss."

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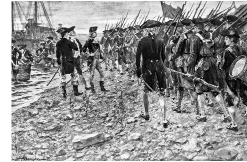

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