Chapter 1 of EDMUND BURKE: NOTES AND THOUGHTS by Gerard Charles Wilson, a collection of articles and talks from the last twenty years.

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The Life, Thought, and Times of Edmund Burke

A Commentary

THERE ARE MANY ways to approach Edmund Burke's extensive and varied speeches and writings. One could say, however, that the conduct of government and the preservation of the society from which that government emerges are central to his thought. These ideas—government and society—entail the concept of nation. Burke's concept of nation or country will be a focus of this presentation and those that follow.

Burke was not a systematic political philosopher like Thomas Hobbes or John Locke. His political ideas arose from the concrete issues he dealt with as a politician. One cannot understand those ideas apart from the concrete circumstances. In this presentation, I propose to survey the life and times of Edmund Burke to isolate those ideas. To aid this task, I will follow and comment on Jesse Norman's account of Burke's life and times in the first part of his well-reviewed book, *Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet* (2013). The American edition is *Edmund Burke: The Visionary Who Invented Modern Politics*.

Norman's book is an engaging—even gripping—introduction to Burke's life and political philosophy, particularly for the non-academic. I agree with some claims, challenge others, and have learned new things, but he omitted one crucial area of discussion. I will come to that. With his high academic, business and political background (MP for Hereford and South Herefordshire), he could hardly be more qualified to write a book about one of the outstanding political figures, not only of 18th-century British politics but also one whose influence in political philosophy and politics has reached worldwide in the more than two hundred years since his death. Burke, he says, 'is the first great theorist of political parties and representative government, and the first great modern theorist of totalitarian thought. More widely, he offers a compelling critique of what has become known as liberal individualism, and the idea that human well-being is just a matter of satisfying individual wants (p. 7).[1]

This view of Burke signals Norman's focus on what he sees as Burke's outstanding achievement. He agrees with Conor Cruise O'Brien's claim in *The Great Melody* that the key to understanding Burke's political action in the major issues he dealt with (Irish oppression, the Throne's abuse of power, the American Revolution, Warren Hastings' India rule, and the French Revolution) was 'his detestation of injustice and the abuse of power.' This interpretation, aiming at 'a deeper coherence', seeks to remove the accusation of inconsistency and contradiction that has been levelled at Burke ever since he opened his mouth in the House of Commons in 1766.

[1] I have read Norman's book in the Kindle edition. My references are therefore to Kindle pages.

It is indisputable that Burke detested the abuse of authority, but this interpretation falls one step short of fully understanding Burke's moral and intellectual motivations. Again, I will come back to this. For now, I want to outline the purpose of Norman's project. Says Norman:

> This book is not a work of primary research, though it incorporates some important recent discoveries. Rather, it is a personal interpretation of Burke's life and thought, which draws heavily on my own background in philosophy and experience as a working politician. It seeks not merely to present Edmund Burke as a man, and to trace his life against the astonishingly rich tapestry of eighteenth-century society, but to make the case for him as a statesman and thinker. It is short and inevitably selective, and this risks underplaying both conflict and development in Burke's ideas; but its argument is for a deeper coherence. (KL 104-107)

To clarify, Norman provides an apt quotation from Harold Laski on Burke and the statesman's art. Laski was one of the most important political theorists in Britain in the first half of the 20th century,

> '[Burke], says Laski, "brought to the political philosophy of his generation a sense of its direction, a lofty vigour of purpose, and a full knowledge of its complexity, such as no other statesman has ever possessed. His flashes of insight are things that go, as few men have ever gone, into the hidden deeps of political complexity … He wrote what constitutes the supreme analysis of the statesman's art." The purpose of this book is to explain how he came to write it, why it is, and why he and it matter today. (p. 11).

Even if Norman does not aspire to break new scholarly ground, he does something perhaps equally important. He explicates Burke's political thought by constantly referring to the social and political circumstances of the Western World in the 21st century. He does this by a sustained, linked analysis of Burke's writings and speeches and by showing how modern academics in the social sciences confirm Burke's thoughts on the nature of the human person and society.

Despite my praise for *Edmund Burke: Philosopher, Politician, Prophet,* the work suffers a serious deficiency. Towards the end of Part Two on Burke's thought, Norman shows a surprising lapse from his stated purposes. He dismisses a school of thought about Burke's philosophical presuppositions—a framework of thinking, it is claimed, that one must presuppose to reconcile the whole gamut of Burke's thought. This lack harks back to a fiercely fought debate that flared in the 1950s. The debate was whether a principle of utility in the style of David Hume (not Jeremy Bentham) governed Burke's political thinking or whether a Thomistic-style natural law was the foundation on which his political thinking rested. The proponents of the natural law interpretation saw Burke's natural law in the context of classical realist epistemology and metaphysics, presupposed in a unique form. In his summary dismissal of the natural law view, Norman does not take the trouble to reproduce the terms of the debate correctly.

The most important book, in my view, of the classical realist position, Francis Canavan's *The Political Reasoning of Edmund Burke*, fails to make it to the 'Select Bibliography.' If Norman had kept to his purpose, he would have stated his disagreement and left it to the reader to take up in his own time. Once one goes further and dismisses a particular view, especially one with a great deal of critical literature, one must mount a defence. He evades that obligation.

He seems to agree with Conor Cruise O'Brien—at least on the issue of natural law—who had no time for the claim that a particular philosophy stood behind Burke's thinking. A

philosophy, O'Brien appears to think, is found in a systematic work like John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government*. It is fanciful to think that anything like a systematic philosophy appears in Burke's speeches and writings. One can be tolerant of O'Brien's opinion because he is a historian, not a philosopher. His biography of Burke, *The Great Melody*, is essentially the work of a historian and should be judged as such. As such, it is a formidable achievement, taking a slant on the influence of Burke's Irishness and Catholic ancestry that I find convincing.

To support his analysis, Norm refers to the work of the highly regarded historian J.G.A. Pocock. In one of Pocock's books, *Virtue, Commerce and History*, which has several essays on Edmund Burke and to which Norman refers, we find the following passage:

> It is one thing to be dealing with Thomas Hobbes, who claimed from the outset of his publications to be embarked upon a philosophical enterprise of a particular kind, and another to be dealing with Edmund Burke, who delivered speeches and wrote pamphlets on a wide variety of occasions in the course of an active political life. The claim that the latter's works are informed by conceptual and philosophical unity requires a different sort of justification from the same claim with respect to the former. Not all the great intelligences who have engaged in political discourse have engaged, directly or indirectly, in systematic political theorising (p. 158).

It is curious that Norman follows Pocock's approach to explicating and understanding Burke, but forgets about it when it comes to the natural law/classical realism interpretation.

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The first part of Norman's book covers Burke's life and times, and the second focuses on his thought. This division is handy. As I have said, because Burke's political thought arises from his speeches and writings on the concrete issues of the time, you cannot read Burke successfully without adequate knowledge of the social and political circumstances in which he performed as a politician. Nor can you understand Burke's analysis and assessment without knowing his role in them and what experiences and influences he brought. In Part One, then, Norman builds a picture of the historical circumstances and Burke's reaction to them. He begins with Chapter 1, 'An Irishman Abroad, 1730–1759.'

Norman does not diverge significantly from an account of Burke's Irish background found in most biographies. Burke was born in Dublin in 1730 to a Catholic mother and a Protestant father. He stayed with his mother's Catholic family (the Nagles) in the Black Water Valley, County Cork, at various times. Norman makes the vital point that in a land whose Protestant minority grievously oppressed the Catholic majority, 'Edmund grew up as the product of a marriage mixed not merely by religion but by trajectory and class.' He does not make as much of the inner conflict this caused in Burke as O'Brien does. The Quaker Shackleton family's crucial influence in shaping Burke's moral and political outlook is rightly acknowledged.

Burke attended Trinity College, Dublin, from which he graduated in 1748. He did not enjoy his time at Trinity College, and his results were average. Although Norman outlines the curriculum, including metaphysics and ethics, he says nothing about the orientation of the study of these subjects. In Appendix A of *The Political Reason of Edmund Burke*, Francis Canavan discusses the texts Burke almost certainly read for metaphysics and ethics. Some followed a particular Aristotelian orientation, one presenting a clear Scholastic Aristotelianism in dealing with metaphysical problems (pp. 198/199). An author Burke studied in his fourth year was

Samuel Pufendorf, a major influence on the development of a Protestant natural law paradigm, which is an integral part of the 'Scottish Enlightenment', as opposed to the 'French Enlightenment'. (See Knud Haakonssen's work) This opens up a world of research that Norman legitimately excludes from his purpose. Nevertheless, in debunking the natural law interpretation, he should at least acknowledge the scholarship. He does not.

In May 1750, Burke left for London to enrol in the Middle Temple. He lodged with his close friend Will Burke, who may have been a distant relation. There, while staying in Bath because of ill health, he met Irish Catholic medical doctor Christopher Nugent and fell in love with his daughter, Jane, whom he married in 1755. It would be a happy and faithful marriage. Burke's voracious reading and compulsive scribbling on a variety of subjects, together with his distaste for the study of law, overcame him, and he gave it up to concentrate on his writing.

In 1756, he produced his first serious writing anonymously, *A Vindication of Natural Society, or A View of the Miseries and Evils arising to Mankind from Every Species of Artificial Society, in a Letter to Lord ******** by a late Noble Writer.* Following in 1757 was *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Here, Norman begins his explication of Burke's speeches and writings. He has passed over a collection of sundry essays, comments, character sketches, and poems, compiled from the Burke papers belonging to Earl Fitzwilliam, edited by H.V.F. Somerset under the title *A Note-Book of Edmund Burke*, and published in 1957.

It is odd that he should do so because he devotes much time to drawing out Burke's ideas on the nature of reason, and it is precisely in the *Notebook* that Burke explores with impressive clarity—and audacity—what it means to reason as a human person and what reason is as a part of human nature. In essay No.19, we find the following passage:

> A man who considers his nature rightly will be diffident of any reasonings that carry him out of the ordinary roads of Life; Custom is to be regarded with great deference, especially if it be universal Custom; even popular notions are not always to be laughed at. *There is some general principle operating to produce customs, that is a more sure guide than our theories*. They are followed indeed often on odd motives, but that does not make them less reasonable or useful. A man is never in greater danger of being wholly wrong than when he advances far in the road of refinement; nor have I ever that diffidence and suspicion of my reasonings as when they seem most curious, exact, and conclusive (p. 90). [*my emphasis*]

Burke put these thoughts to paper before 1756, when he was in his early twenties. They demonstrate that Burke had long been contemplating what reasoning in the human person entails. Over the next forty years, Burke pursued the theme that a mathematical (abstract) manner of reasoning is only part of how a person makes judgments in concrete circumstances, and that treating reason as a linear mathematical process will disconnect the person from his life's experience and lead him into error.

This quotation would have been a helpful preface to Norman's comments on *A Vindication* because *A Vindication* is essentially a satire of what Burke called 'refining reason.' The target is Lord Bolingbroke, whose works had recently appeared. Burke's imitation of Bolingbroke's style was so 'pitch-perfect', writes Norman, that many people were convinced Bolingbroke was the author. Indeed, Burke found it necessary to elucidate his satirical purpose in a following edition.

> The Design [of *A Vindication*] was, to shew that, without the Exertion of any considerable Forces, the same Engines which were employed for the Destruction of Religion, might be

> employed with equal Success for the Subversion of Government; and that specious Arguments might be used against those Things which they, who doubt of every thing else, will never permit to be questioned …

Although Norman appears to put it the other way round, Bolingbroke's arguments for natural religion as opposed to Revelation could be used against the current political structure, which few people would accept. The satire warns of the danger of misusing reason. Norman says correctly that *A Vindication* displays Burke's 'distrust of abstract thought, [his] celebration of human history and civilisation, [and] belief in established institutions (p. 31).' The *Enquiry*, which follows *A Vindication*, is Burke's only systematic philosophical work. It is a work of aesthetics and somewhat outside the scope of his broader work. Norman gives an engaging summary of the aesthetic background against which Burke wrote (which I cannot go into here) and then draws out the elements that fit into his thinking about human nature and human reasoning. The following passage is an excellent example of Norman's clear explication of what is crucial to understanding Burke's moral and political reasoning.

> But what is perhaps still more striking is that even at this very early stage, the *Enquiry* again lays out in embryo an array of themes always later to be identified with Burke. Humans have a distinctive nature, which is not purely subjective but governed by certain general laws; indeed, they are social animals heavily driven by instinct and emotion. The testimony of ordinary people is often of greater value than that of experts. Human passions are guided by empathy and imagination. Human well-being is grounded in a social order whose values are given by divine providence. *Human reason is limited in scope, and insufficient as a basis for public morality*. There may also be a hint here that, in the words of the American thinker Leo Strauss, 'good order or the rational is the result of forces which do not lend themselves to good order or the rational'. *People cannot reason themselves into a good society, for a good society is rooted not merely in reason but in the sentiments and the emotions* … (p. 35). [*my emphasis*]

Although I think Norman does not pay enough attention to the supervisory role Burke gives to the intellect, he is undoubtedly on the right track. Anybody who wants to understand Burke's thinking on moral and political issues must be on this track. Particularly striking here is the quotation from Leo Strauss. I don't think I would have understood its meaning had I not spent years thinking about Burke's writings and speeches. The overarching point is that, for Burke, you cannot speak sensibly about knowing and reasoning without situating those human faculties within human nature, as human nature exists and is at work in concrete circumstances.

From 1756 to 1759, Burke wrote furiously, leaving many pieces unfinished. One that he did finish was *An Account of the European Settlements in America* (1757), which he wrote 'in collaboration with his friend Will Burke' (p. 36). The work deals with British colonies and the importance of organising and maintaining them effectively. Again, Norman emphasises Burke's major theme that people have a common nature but express their nature differently, depending on their circumstances: 'peoples differ crucially in their history, character and manners; what institutions and culture they develop make a huge difference to their well-being and success; the Christian religion is generally a civilising force.' But Norman has yet to make the connection between reason, as Burke understood it, and the importance of culture, traditions, manners, etc. He ends this section—an Irishman abroad—with Burke's 'first tentative steps' into politics.

Wealthy William Gerard Hamilton, who is on the staff of Lord Halifax at the Board of Trade, offers Burke a position as his secretary.

I have skipped over much social and political background in this first section, which Norman describes engagingly. His description of London is particularly vivid. He brings alive its intellectual, literary and artistic vibrancy amid its filth, drunkenness, overcrowding, and human degradation. My concern is picking up the main threads of his explication, which he carries through to the book's second part.

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Chapter 2, 'In and Out of Power, 1759-1774,' begins with Burke's entry into British politics. When Lord Halifax was sent to Dublin (1761) as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, William Hamilton accompanied him, now promoted to Chief Secretary. Burke went with Hamilton. They were very different characters with different aspirations and eventually fell out, particularly over Hamilton's attitudes and actions in Ireland. They parted company in 1765, 'amid some rancour.' Despite the unpleasantness and the possible thwarting of political ambitions, the stars were aligning for Burke.

Norman does not mention the incomplete *Tracts, Relative to the Laws against Popery in Ireland,* that Burke began during this Irish period, probably in 1762. Nowhere else did Burke deal more explicitly with the nature of law and classical natural law than in the *Tracts*. F. P. Lock, whose two-volume work on Burke was an essential influence on Norman, commented that in the *Tracts*, 'Burke' s use of natural law arguments supplies some of the strongest evidence for the "natural-law interpretation" of his thought' (p. 194). I should add that Lock goes on to claim that Burke's invocation of natural law was merely a rhetorical tactic in the circumstances, as was his use of 'utilitarian arguments.' I take vigorous issue with this claim about the *Tracts* and the school of thought that Burke 'employs whatever arguments he can find with more regard to their probable rhetorical effectiveness than to their philosophical coherence or logical consistency.'

I will insist that a proper reading can reconcile Burke's appeals to natural law and utility. I will go further: the outstanding feature of Burke's thought is its astounding consistency over the years, from the beginning of his sketches contained in the *Notebook*. I don't have the space here to deal with the extensive issue of natural law vs. utility. I do that elsewhere. It seems that Norman is in sympathy with Lock, at least on the subject of natural law. In 1765, following Burke's departure from Hamilton, the Marquess of Rockingham, leader of a large Whig faction in the House, employed Burke as his secretary. After the fall of the Bute ministry in 1763 and a period of instability, George III directed Rockingham to form a ministry. The new administration took office on 15 July 1765. Burke's employment by Rockingham and Rockingham's ascension to power, writes Norman, 'catapulted [Burke] from near-obscurity into the very cockpit of power.' A second stroke of good fortune followed.

Wendover was a pocket Borough in the gift of Lord Verney, a close connection of Will Burke. Will generously stood aside to let Edmund stand, who, after the customary allowance of alcohol to the constituents, could take his seat in the House (p. 58). Burke first appeared in the House in 1766. On Christmas Eve that year (1765), Burke wrote to an Irish friend, 'Yesterday I was elected for Wendover, got very drunk, and this day have an heavy cold.'

Burke found himself directly in the thick of the political action because the Rockingham Whig administration had to engage with the fraught issue of taxing the American colonies to raise revenue. The issue was whether the British government had the right to do so. The previous administration had enacted the Stamp Act in 1764, which caused 'uproar, resistance and the first

signs of rebellion' in the American colonies. The Rockingham Whigs moved to repeal the act, but because of their inexperience, incompetence, and Rockingham's refusal to compromise, the King dismissed them in July 1766. Burke, says Norman, came to the defence of the Rockingham administration in writing. 'The result was *A Short Account of a Late Short Administration* (1766) … [which] gave a glimpse of a new conception of the very idea of a political party (p. 65).'

The idea of a political party, and what it entails, is a foremost theme in Norman's explications of Burke's political thinking. He pays tribute to Rockingham, who provided the context within which Burke 'assumed a crucial role … moving [the Rockingham Whigs] away from factional politics and shaping them organizationally and intellectually into the prototype of the modern political party.' Rockingham had 'set a pattern among his political set, combining moral principle with a consistent adherence to a set of core policies, and political patronage and financial support (p. 66).'

Two pamphlets in the same vein followed, which Norman describes as 'Burke's transition to political maturity': *Observations on a Late Publication Entitled 'The Present State of the Nation* (1769) and *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770). In his comments on the *Observations*, Norman continues to develop his theme about party. The *Observations* showed that the Rockinghamites, as a political party, 'had the capacity to articulate policy based on fundamental political principle …'

It is curious that Norman quotes one of the most important passages from the *Observations* as a conclusion to his comments without sketching the crucial arguments that precede it, arguments that are continually rehearsed in the writings and speeches on the American problem. The following from the *Observations* is just one of the many ways Burke expressed those arguments—arguments that are more about the nature of political reasoning than Burke's ideas on political party.

> It is easy to parade with a high talk of Parliamentary rights, of the universality of legislative powers, and of uniform taxation. Men of sense, when new projects come before them, always think a discourse proving the mere right or mere power of acting in the manner proposed, to be no more than a very unpleasant way of misspending time. They must see the object to be of proper magnitude to engage them; they must see the means of compassing it to be next to certain; the mischiefs not to counterbalance the profit; they will examine how a proposed imposition or regulation agrees with the opinion of those who are likely to be affected by it; they will not despise the consideration even of their habitudes and prejudices. They wish to know how it accords or disagrees with the true spirit of prior establishments, whether of government or of finance; because they well know, that in the complicated economy of great kingdoms, and immense revenues, which in a length of time, and by a variety of accidents have coalesced into a sort of body, an attempt towards a compulsory equality in all circumstances, and an exact practical definition of the supreme rights in every case, is the most dangerous and chimerical of all enterprises.

Burke set up an opposition between mere abstract reflection on a political problem, without regard to concrete circumstances, and dealing with a particular political problem in its concrete circumstances. The abstract or theoretical approach to political issues usually means invoking one theory or another about government or society. In this case, Burke talks about theoretical Parliamentary rights and the universality of legislative powers. He argues that this kind of reasoning about political issues is entirely inadequate and, at best, likely to get the parties nowhere and, at worst, exacerbate the problem—as happened in the conflict between the British

government and the American colonies. No political problem can be resolved without considering the particular people, their expression of human nature, and all aspects of their circumstances. After reasoning in this manner about how to deal with the Americans over taxation, Burke reaches the conclusion Norman quoted. In fact, Norman does not give the full quotation to fill out the argument. The full passage is (I have put the lines he quoted in italics):

> Whether all this can be reconciled in legal speculation, is a matter of no consequence. It is reconciled in policy: and *politics ought to be adjusted, not to human reasonings, but to human nature; of which the reason is but a part, and by no means the greatest part …*

Norman omits the sentence, 'whether all this can be reconciled in legal speculation, is a matter of no consequence. It is reconciled in policy.' I consider this passage critical for understanding the full range of Burke's thought. 'Reason' in this context refers to a linear mathematical progression, what Burke often calls (misleadingly) 'metaphysics' or describes as 'metaphysical.' For Burke, human reason in full operation is broader and combines 'natural feeling,' which differs from bare emotion and from reasoning understood in its mathematical, speculative mode.

In his explication of the *Thoughts of the Present Discontents*, which he calls 'a classic of political thought,' Norman continues to develop Burke's seminal ideas on the function and importance of party. In this, he says, Burke 'has nothing less than a complete re-engineering of party politics in mind.' To set up what he aims to achieve, Burke introduced a conspiracy theory, claiming the existence of a 'Double Cabinet: a parallel administration designed to control the workings of government from the inside.'

Whether the Double Cabinet actually existed—Norman claims research has disproven it—it functions as a rhetorical device in Burke's attempt to reduce the influence of alien forces within the British political system. He means the influence of the throne through bought-off placemen. Burke's great achievement, then, is articulating an effective, enduring party over an ephemeral, self-serving, corrupt faction. It is Burke's bequest to Western government. Norman summarises:

> In a mixed constitution, then, all sources of power are constrained: MPs hold the government to account, but they must themselves be held accountable by the people if the constitution is to work its magic. But Burke, in a brilliant move, argues that this balance, in turn, rests on a crucial distinction. For faction is not party. Factions are groupings of the moment that exist to take power and exercise it. Those forming Burke's 'considerable body of men' are not a faction. No, they are a political party; that is, they are 'united, for promoting by their joint endeavours the national interest, upon some political principle in which they are all agreed.' The test comes when such a group is evicted from office. Founded on self-interest, factions will tend to disperse. Parties, however, will sustain themselves and their membership—on principle and shared values, on mutual commitments and on personal loyalties and friendship—until the opportunity to exercise power returns. (p. 81).

Having stressed the importance of Burke's ideas on political party, Norman returns to the American problem. In 1770, he writes, George III found a compliant and trusted first minister in the Tory Lord North. The North Administration began to wind back the progress the Rockinghamites (guided by Burke) had achieved in resolving the dispute over taxing the American colonies. With the enactment of the Tea Act in 1773, which meant taxing the importation of British tea, the dispute was, in one fell swoop, brought back to the beginning.

The Americans were united in their outrage, which resulted in the famed 'Boston Tea Party'—the dumping of 342 cases of tea into Boston harbour. The indignation of the English—not only those in the House—was immeasurable. Invoking the supreme authority of the British Parliament, the House called for harsh measures to deal with the recalcitrant American colonists. For Burke, however, the British government was dealing with American British who enjoyed the same constitutional privileges as the British in Britain. The House must not forget this. To seek measures tantamount to enslavement to bring the Americans to heel was to undermine the British Constitution, to which the British government appealed for authority. It was a contradictory, self-defeating policy.

Burke lit the oil lamp, trimmed his quill, and continued directly from the line of argument in the *Observations*, producing two speeches considered masterpieces of political discourse: *American Taxation* (1774) and *Conciliation with the Colonies* (1775). These speeches not only exhibited Burke's genial insight into political matters but also fully displayed his mastery of the English language. One of Burke's best-known biographers, Philip Magnus, said of the style of these two speeches:

> 'His words, at white heat, seem to leap the gulf which normally separates prose from poetry, with the result that the political and imperial grammar which he outlined remains enshrined in some of the finest pages of our literature.'

Norman spends time guiding the reader through the flow of the argument in these two speeches, emphasising Burke's exhortation to forget abstract arguments and concentrate on actual circumstances and human nature as expressed in those circumstances. Burke put it clearly enough in the *Speech on Conciliation*:

> '…we must govern America according to that nature and to those circumstances, and not according to our own imaginations, not according to abstract ideas of right, by no means according to mere general theories of government …'

There is a focus on Burke's 'conception of empire based on shared identity and institutions—especially the rule of law …' It is a clear and fruitful explication—as far as it goes. What he again leaves out are the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions behind claims about human nature, the nature of the world in which humans exist, and how humans reason their way through concrete circumstances to secure knowledge they can trust about those circumstances. It is indisputable that Burke is here lecturing his colleagues in the House fundamentally about modes of political reasoning.

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The American problem takes Norman into the next section, Chapter 3: 'Ireland, America and King Mob, 1774-1780'. He pauses before completing his explication of the above speeches to return to the subject closest to his heart: the nature of parliamentary politics, and Burke's dominant role in articulating how the parliamentary system should work and the role parties and politicians should play in it. In 1774, Burke had to give up his seat in the borough Lord Verney had generously gifted him. Lord Verney was in grave financial trouble. For a while, it looked like Burke's parliamentary career had ended. But to demonstrate the stars had not finished aligning, the powerful merchants of Bristol came to the rescue with an unexpected invitation to take up one of their two seats—seats independent of aristocratic influence.

Securing such a seat meant a significant advance in Burke's political career, and he showed his gratitude by lecturing those powerful independent merchants on his role as an independent representative of the House of Commons. Norman rightly sees Burke's explanation of the representative's role in this address as the crucial flipside to the system of principled party politics Burke articulated over time. The oft-quoted passages from *Address to the Electors of Bristol* (1774) are known as much for their eloquence as for their influential ideas. First, as their representative in the House, he cannot, *in principle,* be constrained by instructions given by persons at a distance and unfamiliar with the issues. There is a higher law before which he must bow:

> Certainly, Gentlemen, it ought to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents … It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures … to theirs; and above all, ever and in all cases to prefer their own interest to his own…
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> But his unbiased opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you; to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the Law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgement; and he betrays instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

Second, as much as Burke wants to remain in sympathy with the will of his constituents when he goes to represent them in the House, reason and judgment direct him, not will. He is not the ambassador of their collective wills.

> Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests … Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason 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.

Norman sets Burke's election to one of the seats of Bristol against an instructive description of the electoral system of that time, highlighting many differences, some amusing, with the present system in Britain. As I have already noted, the vibrant social and political context Norman provides is one of the most appealing features of his book.

Around this time, a most unusual friendship between Burke and the much younger Charles James Fox began to develop. Apart from Burke himself, Fox was 'by far the most interesting figure to emerge at Westminster in the 1770s.' Fox, a direct descendant of Charles II and son of a wealthy Tory who spoilt him rotten, 'was dissolute, unprincipled and a notorious gambler,' the direct opposite of Burke. Their strange, unexpected collaboration would prove influential in the years to come.

With his introduction of Fox into the political scene, Norman returns to rounding off his explication of the American writings, pausing briefly on the crucial *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* (1777) to note that Burke restates much of the argument in the previous speeches 'in somewhat more radical language.' It would have served his purpose to linger a little longer on the 1777 *Letter* because Burke, in a more contemplative mood after the apparent loss of the American colonies, breaks ground not yet discussed. First, consider this stunningly compact

summary of all the mistakes Burke lays at the feet of the North Administration and those whose counter-effective method of dealing with the Americans was to bring down the British heel.

> It is melancholy, as well as ridiculous, to observe the kind of reasoning with which the public has been amused, in order to divert our minds from the common sense of our American policy. There are people who have split and anatomised the doctrine of free government, as if it were an abstract question concerning metaphysical liberty and necessity, and not a matter of *moral prudence and natural feeling*. They have disputed whether liberty be a positive or a negative idea; whether it does not consist in being governed by laws, without considering what are the laws, or who are the makers; whether man has any rights by Nature; and whether all property he enjoys be not the alms of the government, and his life itself their favour and their indulgence.
>
> Others corrupting religion as these have perverted philosophy, contend that Christians are redeemed into captivity, and the blood of the Saviour of mankind has been shed to make them the slaves of a few proud and insolent sinners. These shocking extremes provoking to extremes of another kind, speculations are let loose as destructive to all authority as the former are to all freedom; *and every government is called tyranny and usurpation which is not formed on their fancies*. In this manner the stirrers-up of this contention, not satisfied with distracting our dependencies and filling them with blood and slaughter, are corrupting our understanding; they are endeavouring to tear up, along with practical liberty, all the foundations of human society, all equity and justice, religion, and order. [*my emphasis*]

There are unmistakable references here to Hobbes and Locke and the more radical of their followers, whose contract theories I analyse in my chapter: 'What it Means to be a People.' The warning that abstract theorising about political and social matters will not only prove ineffective and impolitic but will risk tipping a society into a destructive radicalism will appear again and again in Burke's writings and speeches, especially during the French crisis, where the target is those radical theorists like Richard Price, Joseph Priestley, and Thomas Paine. There is only one approach to policy: considering the prevailing circumstances and the nature of the people, and applying 'moral prudence and natural feeling.' A complete grasp of Burke's political reasoning requires understanding moral prudence and natural feeling, and how they relate to the function of prejudice, opinion, and manners.

It was precisely Burke's comments on manners in the *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* that Norman skips over that (together with 'opinion' and Burke's specific idea of prejudice) were integral elements in Burke's political philosophy. In the *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* Burke broaches the function of manners. The emphases are Burke's:

> Nor is it the worst effect of this unnatural contention [with the Americans], that our *laws* are corrupted. Whilst *manners* remain entire, they will correct the vices of law, and soften it at length to their own temper. But we have to lament that in most of the late proceedings we see very few traces of that generosity, humanity, and dignity of mind, which formerly characterised this nation. War suspends the rules of moral obligation, and what is long suspended is in danger of being totally abrogated. Civil wars strike deepest of all into the manners of the people. They vitiate their politics; they corrupt their morals; they pervert even the natural taste and relish of equity and justice. By teaching us to consider our fellow-citizens in an hostile light, the whole body of our nation becomes gradually less dear to us.

Twenty years later, in the *First Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796), Burke continues to explain the importance and function of manners in civil society.

> Manners are more important than laws. Upon them, in a great measure, the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or sooth, corrupt or purify, exalt or debase, barbarise or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe 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 …

In the first place, we deal with political problems in our particular society by applying prudence combined with natural feeling, which incorporates the operation of the natural law. This combination rests on Christian Aristotelian (Thomistic) metaphysics. On the other hand, manners, prejudice, and opinion are what Francis Canavan calls 'a "second nature" which complements simple nature in serving as a foundation and the formative principle of a culture and civilisation.'

They work, as Burke says, as 'a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in,' providing an unconscious layer of social cohesion that is necessary for the function of society. If a nation shatters this layer, whether through conflict or by introducing incompatible elements, it risks ruination. A lot more can be said about the action of Burke's ideas of prejudice, opinion, and manners. That's for another time. Norman should have at least flagged their mention in the *Letter* for later discussion.

Norman returns to the Irish problem and Britain's oppressive penal laws. He now brings in the early *Tracts on the Popery Laws*, which, he writes, 'contained a vigorous denunciation of the laws as imprudent, ineffective, unjust and oppressive' but again refrains from mentioning the clear natural law content. He attributes Burke's motivations to his 'profound hatred of injustice and the abuse of power.' He does not take the cue of 'injustice' to examine, for example, Burke's distinction between positive or human law and the eternal laws of God, God's 'original justice,' in the *Tracts*.

> In reality, there are two, and only two, foundations of law; and they are both of them conditions without which nothing can give it any force; I mean equity and utility. With respect to the former, it grows out of the great rule of equality, which is grounded upon our common nature, and which Philo, with propriety and beauty, calls the Mother of Justice. All human laws are, properly speaking, only declaratory; they may alter the mode and application, but have no power over the substance of original justice.

Nor does he say anything about Burke's possible inner conflict as an Irish member of the House of Commons overseeing the governance and, thus, the welfare of Ireland. He seems to see none of the Catholic conflict in Burke that Conor Cruise O'Brien sees arising from Burke's Catholic background on his mother's side and his action in defence of his Catholic countrymen. Burke, he claimed, 'argued that all the major religions were the products of custom, tradition and "long prescriptive usage."' Burke, he says further, 'took pains not to appear specifically pro-Catholic.' Yes, but why exactly? Norman appears to want to sidestep the question of Burke's faith and his involvement in the explosive 'Catholic' question. He is satisfied merely to relate that when pressure on the North Administration in 1778 brought some easing of restrictions on Irish trade, Burke was 'deeply involved,' as he was 'when Sir George Savile and Lord Richard Cavendish,

both Rockingham Whigs, moved the repeal of some of the Penal Laws restricting Catholic ownership of property.'

Burke may have taken some satisfaction in these limited results, which freed up Irish trade and improved fundamental civil rights, but his constituents in Bristol were not at all entertained. Burke's efforts to explain the economic advantages of free trade fell on deaf (and ignorant) ears. His failure to justify the brazen neglect of his constituency and his political actions, which they saw as disadvantageous, brought unbearable tension to the relationship. Burke evidently saw the writing on the Bristol wall and, anticipating rejection by the constituents he rarely visited, withdrew from the seat before the next election in 1784.

Around this time, Burke turned his mind to 'economical reform.' On 11 February 1780, he rose and presented for more than three hours, *A Plan for the Better Security of the Independence of Parliament, and the Economical Reformation of the Civil and Other Establishments.* The purpose of his bill, says Norman, was 'not merely to curb spending and waste and corruption in government, but to restrain the expense and influence of the royal household itself,' a fundamental part of the Rockinghamites' party platform.

Burke set out 'seven fundamental rules' governing his proposals. Norman spends some time discussing these rules and their intended outcomes. He ends by saying that 'they retain their value as maxims of good government today.' The speech itself, he says, was 'one of the finest speeches ever made in the Commons' and 'evinces the classic Burkean idea that to be effective reform should be early, cool in spirit and proportionate, governing with the temper of the people.' This aligns with his judgment that Burke's influence on government in the Western World, particularly the parliamentary system, was crucial. I take issue with nothing here. Far from it, I now have a clearer insight into the importance of Burke's thinking about a political party for the development of our modern parliamentary system.

Two matters Norman deals with towards the end of this section are the little-known *Sketch of a Negro Code*, written around 1780, and the Gordon Riots. In the first, Burke does not issue a flat demand that the abhorrent slave trade be eliminated forthwith. Instead, he typically reviews the circumstances of the trade and how it relates to the prevailing social and economic structures of which it is a part, to suggest how the treatment of slaves can be regulated and improved, all with a view to its ultimate abolition. In this, says Norman, Burke anticipated William Wilberforce's campaign, which did not start until seven years later, when Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson founded the Abolition Society.

The Gordon Riots exploded when the fiery Lord George Gordon began haranguing the population about the partial repeal of some of the punitive penal laws against Catholics. Exploiting the stubborn hatred of Catholics among a good part of the Protestant population, Gordon built up a following of anti-Catholic extremists. On 2 June 1780, 50,000 of those succumbing to his anti-Catholic harangues assembled in St George's Fields in South London. Gordon took his place at the head of the seething crowd and headed towards Parliament to present a petition to repeal the relief laws. But he had done too good a job.

Fighting broke out, which quickly descended into violence and chaos. Burke was himself threatened, but, securing his wife and son away from their home, faced down those who confronted him. The violence lasted a week before the army was sent in. Many were killed before the disturbances were quelled. The perceived ringleaders were executed, but Gordon himself escaped the courts. As an aside, Charles Dickens's neglected novel *Barnaby Rudge* is set during the Gordon Riots. It is informative to read how that great novelist dealt with that historical event. Norman writes in conclusion: 'Burke was proud to have faced down the rioters.

But nothing was to prove more striking to this philosopher of the social order than to see the rapid and near-total collapse of society at first hand …' The experience would be a vivid memory a decade later when France began to fall apart.

***

Norman passes now into his fourth section, Chapter 4, 'India, Economical Reform, and the King's Madness, 1780-1789.' Lord North, who headed the present administration, decided to take advantage of the Gordon Riots and called an election in September 1780. Burke's position was now 'highly precarious,' which Norman summarises:

> [Burke] had spent six years leading an unsuccessful and unpopular parliamentary opposition to the war in America, fighting to restrain the influence and expenditure of the crown and latterly struggling to lift the twin burdens of taxation from Irish trade and of penal law from Catholics and dissenters (p. 120).

To add to his troubles, he imprudently neglected the chance to build a base among his Bristol constituents. His withdrawal from the seat cast doubt on whether he could continue his political career. In the end, Rockingham came to his aid, granting him the seat of Malton from which the new incumbent had been ejected. Burke now became embroiled in an issue that would occupy much of his time over the next sixteen years. That issue was British rule in India, which 'raised profound questions about Britain's conduct abroad, indeed about the nature of empire itself' (p. 122).

Britain acquired rule over India through a private company, 'founded by Royal Charter of Elizabeth I in the year 1600.' That company was the East India Company. Norman traces the rise of this company, aided by military force, which grew to generate unimaginable profits. The great figure in this rise was Robert Clive, whose shrewd, ruthless actions laid the foundations for the 'Raj,' British hegemony over the Indian territories. Clive's successes were to establish a massive trough into which unconscionable British snouts—very often belonging to young snotnoses—were thrust at the expense of the Indian population. Norman remarks with some poignancy that 'India was being conquered, and not by Britain but by a private British company.'

The company's powerful men tried to ward off government intervention, but the call to curb the out-of-control abuse and exploitation became irresistible. At first, Burke sided with the company, seeing intervention as interference with private property and free trade. As he became more involved in what was happening in India and how the East India Company conducted itself, he underwent a sharp reversal. The issue became, for him, one of callous, unsustainable abuse of authority and the fracturing of all that the notion of a 'people' entailed. No greater moral and political transgression could exist.

At this point, Norman returns to the American war. With the defeat of the British under Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781 and the loss of 8,000 men, time was up for the North Administration. North stepped down in 1782. The King had few agreeable options, the least of which was to give any power to the dissolute Charles Fox, whom he held in utter contempt. He ended up calling on Rockingham to form an administration with Shelburne and Fox as Secretaries of State—a new government without an election. It was a precarious one. Though precarious, the new government represented 'an extraordinary moment.' It's worth quoting Norman in full on a claim whose arguments I find entirely convincing:

> Nevertheless, the new government marked, without doubt, an extraordinary moment not just in Britain's political history but in that of the world. Rockingham and his followers had been out of office since 1766. But they had not then fragmented, as factions had fragmented before them. On the contrary, for sixteen years they had maintained a political grouping, a core of shared policies and a coherent political identity. They had, in other words, created the first outlines of the modern political party. Power had now passed entirely peacefully to this party, large numbers of officeholders had been forced to leave, and the new leadership had arrived with well-understood legislative intent.
>
> The Rockinghamites had returned to office, moreover, despite the King's opposition, and pursued a conception of Cabinet responsibility that has since become the foundation stone of British government. In so doing, they had pushed the country one more step towards a constitutional democracy, and away from a purely personal monarchy. It remains a remarkable and woefully under-recognised achievement; and Edmund Burke was, intellectually and practically, at its centre (p. 132).

Although he was up to it, says Norman, Burke did not make it into the cabinet. Burke's poor reputation at this time might have been a reason. All was not lost, though. He became Paymaster General, which enabled him

> 'to push through his plans to cut waste and patronage, and to reform the Civil List of Crown expenses … The reforms struck an important blow for limited government, for parliamentary accountability, and for further constitutional constraints on the Crown' (p.133).

The Rockingham administration moved to end the American war and enact further relief for Ireland, despite Burke's reservations about granting more power to the Protestant Ascendancy. There would be no change to the oppressive Popery Laws. Then came disaster. In July 1782, Rockingham died. The King called on Shelburne to form a government. Shelburne was unacceptable to Burke, and he resigned, with Fox following. Shelburne could not survive without Burke and Fox's support. The result was an unprincipled alliance between Fox and North—North, detested for so long as the King's flunkey and protector of royal patronage. Rockingham, says Norman, would not have stood for it. The despised North-Fox coalition was not to survive.

During this time, Burke worked in a select committee to report on the actions and circumstances of the East India Company in India. He produced eleven reports which focused on the delinquent behaviour of the Company's men. Burke's main target—what would become an obsession—was Warren Hastings, Governor-General in Calcutta since 1773. The reports laid the groundwork for 'Fox's India Bill,' in whose drafting Burke played a vital role. The *Bill* contained an unsustainable compromise, leaving the way open for Fox and his mates to be accused of the very behaviour the *Bill* was meant to contain: patronage and cronyism.

Burke defended the *Bill* in a brilliant speech (*Speech on Fox's India Bill* 1783), which focused on the effects of the Company's rule on Indian culture and civilisation. It would be to no avail. George III worked furiously behind the scenes, deploying his full arsenal of royal patronage and influence to have the Bill defeated in the Lords. The North-Fox Coalition was thrown out together with the *Bill*. Pitt the Younger's ascendancy had begun. William Pitt was appointed to form a ministry at twenty-four in December 1783. At the election in March 1784, Pitt triumphed, and Fox's party was decimated. Burke kept his seat but for the rest, as Norman writes,

> A compromised but reforming government had been repudiated at the polls. Constitutional precedent had been set aside by the King, and the House of Commons vanquished by the royal prerogative. Patronage held sway. Burke himself was isolated, mocked, humiliated. Twenty years of thought, of argument, of political struggle, lay in total disarray (p. 142).

Pitt's efforts to secure more relief for Ireland failed, but he succeeded in passing his own India Act in 1784 with the objective of ending the abuses. Despite the bill's reforms, Burke was not satisfied. He wanted more, a lot more. He wanted the formal prosecution of Warren Hastings, whom he called 'the scourge of India … a dreadful Colossus … who lorded it over everything that was great and powerful and good in India, and in England' and who represented all those who had exploited their position in India to bleed the population dry and destroy their civilization.

In 1786, he announced his intention to impeach Hastings. He forced Hastings to reply to the first 22 articles of the impeachment. Hastings underestimated the trap Burke was setting and made a bad impression, coming across as arrogant. Pitt swung in behind Burke but shrewdly stayed at arm's length. Hastings' arrest was inevitable, and on 13 February 1788 he was forced to appear before the Lords amid a breathtaking display of British pomp and legal tradition.

The trial dragged on, with most of the population growing bored of it and Burke's obsessive behaviour. It was a low time for Burke. In a display of juvenile contempt, the younger members of the House had long taken to calling him 'dinner bell.' His tedious harangues emptied the House as soon as they began. Burke persevered in the belief that he was not only serving justice, but that achieving justice in the Indian cause was the most important task of his political life. And though he privately admitted he was unlikely to prevail in court, he was confident he would do so in the court of public opinion. He was right. Although Hastings was acquitted of all charges in 1795, British rule in India underwent many changes.

I have skipped over many instructive historical, legal, and parliamentary details in covering Norman's examination of Burke's Indian cause to bring out Norman's central purpose of establishing Burke's prime motivations: justice and the correction of abuse of authority. This is fine. But, once again, he leaves out the unambiguous appeals to natural law that Burke frequently made. Burke appeals to natural law not because of its supposed rhetorical force, but because he directly counters the core of Hastings' defence of his rule in India. Hastings insisted he had no option but to exercise arbitrary power in dealing with what were 'circumstances of extreme treachery, complexity and danger,' a power that could not be 'too despotic' under the terms of the East India Charter. More broadly put, Hastings' defence was that he had to act like a treacherous bastard because the people he dealt with were treacherous bastards.

Norman says that Burke and Hastings had similar views about India in many ways. Hastings, fundamentally respectful of Indian civilisation and taking the trouble to steep himself in it, endeavoured to deal with the Indians as they were. However, as in all of Burke's causes, adjustment to circumstances could not mean ignoring the basic unchangeable principles of justice. In his *Remarks on the Policy of the Allies* 1793, dealing with the growing threat of revolutionary France to Britain and the rest of Europe, Burke, as he so often did, emphasised concrete circumstances against the background of the unchangeable moral law.

> Circumstances perpetually variable, directing a moral prudence and discretion, the general principles of which never change, must alone prescribe a conduct fitting on such occasions.

The unchangeable general principles made the difference, and that was what Burke hammered home. There was no getting away from it. And there is no getting away from the crucial meaning of the appeals to God's eternal laws in the arguments against Hastings' India rule. In the *Speech on Fox's India Bill*, Burke made a sharp distinction between rights that were derived from natural law to become valid positive law and rights that were given by a formal government document to a designated body, rights that could be withdrawn by government decision at any time. In this, Burke countered the claim that Fox's Bill denied the 'chartered rights' of the East India Company.

> The rights of men, that is to say, the natural rights of mankind, are indeed sacred things; and if any public measure is proved mischievously to affect them, the objection should be fatal to that measure, even if no charter at all could be set up against it. If these natural rights are further affirmed and declared by express covenants, if they are clearly defined and secured against chicane, against power, and authority, by written instruments and positive engagements, they are in a still better condition: they partake not only of the sanctity of the object so secured, but of that solemn public faith itself, which secures an object of such importance. Indeed, this formal recognition, by the sovereign power, of an original right in the subject, can never be subverted, but by rooting up the holding radical principles of government, and even of society itself. The charters, which we call by distinction *great*, are public instruments of this nature; I mean the charters of King John and King Henry the Third. The things secured by these instruments may, without any deceitful ambiguity, be fitly called the *Chartered Rights of Men* …
>
> But, Sir, there may be, and there are charters, not only different in nature, but formed on principles the *very reverse* of those of the great charter. Of this kind is the charter of the East India Company. *Magna Charta* is a charter to restrain power and destroy monopoly. The East India Charter is a charter to establish monopoly, and to create power. Political power and commercial monopoly are not the rights of men; and the rights to them derived from charters, it is fallacious and sophistical to call 'the chartered rights of men.'

In the *Speech on Opening the Impeachment* (1788), Burke mocked Hastings' claim that he had arbitrary power and that his rule could not be too despotic in the circumstances.

> Will you ever hear the rights of mankind made subservient to the practice of government? It will be your lordships' duty and joy—it will be your pride and triumph, to teach men, that they are to conform their practice to principles, and not to derive their principles from the wicked, corrupt, and abominable practices of any man whatever. Where is the man that ever before dared to mention the practice of all the villains, of all the notorious depredators, as his justification? To gather up, and put it all in one code, and call it the duty of the British governor? I believe so audacious a thing was never before attempted by man. 'He have arbitrary power!' My Lords, the East India Company have not arbitrary power to give him. The King has no arbitrary power to give. Neither your lordships, nor the Commons, nor the whole legislature, have arbitrary power to give. My Lords, no man can govern himself by his own will; much less can he be governed by the will of others.
>
> We are all born—high as well as low, governors as well as governed—in subjection to one great, immutable, pre-existing law, a law prior to all our devices and all our conspiracies, paramount to our feelings, by which we are connected in the eternal frame of the universe,

> and out of which we cannot stir. This great law does not arise from our combinations and compacts; on the contrary, it gives to them all the sanctions they can have. Every perfect gift is of God: all power is of God; and He has given the power, and from whom alone it originates, will never suffer it to be corrupted. Therefore, my Lords, if this be true—if this great gift of government be the greatest and best that was ever given by God to mankind, will He suffer it to be the plaything of man, who would place his own feeble and ridiculous will on the throne of divine justice?

Claiming that Burke's appeals to natural law or the laws of God are a mere rhetorical tactic makes nonsense of Burke's counterargument to Hastings' defence of possessing an arbitrary competence. Surely, a substantial study of Burke's thinking and political insight, leaving aside the serious work of a law scholar, would not lead one to conclude that Burke was prepared to base sixteen years of legal and political effort on a paper-thin rhetorical device? In 1796, less than a year before his death, Burke wrote to one of his closest friends, Dr French Laurence, that

> this cruel, daring, unexampled act of public corruption, guilt and meanness [the acquittal of Hastings] should not be forgotten. Let my endeavours to save the Nation from that shame and guilt, be my monument; the only one I will ever have. Let everything that I have done, said, or written, be forgotten, but this.'

Norman ends the fourth section with a brief account of King George III's suspected madness. In November 1788, after some odd behaviour that raised the embarrassed eyebrows of his retinue, people whispered that the King was going mad. The king's possible madness presented an extremely difficult situation for Pitt. Fox wanted the 'notoriously dissolute' Prince of Wales put on the throne without delay. Pitt would have none of that. He also had to deal with Burke who agitated for a Regency period. Burke, thinking a Regency period consistent with the constitutional settlement of 1688-89, continued to put the House offside with lurid and injudicious accounts of the state of madness. The King, however, perversely put a stop to the political agitation and wild talk by recovering. Norman notes that 'the danger had passed. Pitt was triumphant.' Norman then passes to the fifth and final section of Part One, Chapter 5, 'Reflecting on Revolution 1789-97.'

Burke had reached a low point during the Hastings trial. He seemed physically, emotionally, and intellectually spent. Now, it was his turn to have his sanity questioned. But simmering across the channel were economic and social pressures that would explode in a way nobody seemed to have foreseen. On 14 July 1789, a rioting mob stormed the Bastille to release a small number of prisoners. The numbers were not important. It was the symbolism of the people storming and overcoming the hated *Ancien Regime*. The Revolution had begun. The news did not unduly excite most Britons, Norman continues. They were happy to see the old foe humbled. It was entirely different for the radicals and progressives. They were overjoyed at 'the triumph of Enlightenment ideals over intolerance and inequality.' Fox gave in to his characteristic indiscipline and burst forth with, 'How much the greatest event it is that ever happened in the world! And how much the best!' He had no idea—or didn't care—how such an unrestrained outburst would affect Burke.

If many of Burke's colleagues remained sanguine about the events in France, thinking it was a momentary convulsion and France would eventually right itself, Burke, like the radicals, saw it differently. It was as if he were seeing from afar the cities on the plains, with God's judgment hanging over them. The forced march of the royal family from Versailles to Paris by revolutionary riff-raff struck Burke deeply, as would be revealed in the *Reflections*. But it was

altogether too much when dissenting minister Richard Price, in a state of revolutionary fervour and democratic rapture, gave a speech to the Revolutionary Society extolling the holy action of the lovers of freedom, even daring to quote Simeon's words from Luke's Gospel on entering the temple and seeing the Christ child in the arms of his mother. Burke's disgust was without bounds. He steeled his nerve and retrimmed his quill once again. Norman writes, '…we have Burke the Celtic *vates*, the seer, inspired by cold passion and intellectual energy, prophesying the future when all around were absorbed in fantasy, folly and self-congratulation.' (p. 162)

For Burke, the French Revolution was no world-shattering event to usher in a new era of freedom and progress. It was certainly world-shattering, but in the sense of being intellectually and morally disordered, denying the fundamentals of human nature and the world's natural order. It was destined to lead to violence and chaos. What issued from Burke's pen was his masterpiece, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in November 1790, which, Norman rightly says, 'refines and extends ideas with which Burke had been working for almost thirty years.'

He covers Burke's dismissal of abstract natural rights as the basis of government; Burke's condemnation of a Hobbesian or Lockean idea of social contract; what it means to be a people; the limits of individual reason; a valid idea of social contract that links the past, present and future; the force and prescriptive nature of tradition, that is, of settled arrangements; legitimate change through careful reform that preserves those elements of society that have proven themselves; and affection over reason (reason understood as an abstract mathematical process) as a basis for community. This last is a vital point in Burke's thinking, and Norman will develop it in the second part of his book.

He once again evades the many references in the *Reflections* to man's nature and the 'eternal law' that underwrites social contracts and supreme authority in the state—and what this means philosophically. He also evades Burke's fulsome claims about the centrality of religion in state and society, and that man is fundamentally a religious animal. In a long, detailed discussion about the function of religion in the state, Burke makes the central claim:

> We know, and what is better we feel inwardly, that religion is the basis of civil society, and the source of all good and of all comfort … We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against not only our reason but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long.

The *Reflections* was an overwhelming success in England and throughout continental Europe. Thirty years of bad relations with George III were at once forgotten. Burke found himself invited to one of the King's levées, during which the king congratulated him, saying, 'There is no man who calls himself a gentleman, who must not think himself obliged to you, for you have supported the cause of the gentlemen.' But if the book reconciled differences with some longtime critics, it stirred a hornet's nest among radicals and progressives, some of whom had strongly supported Burke during the American conflict. Norman says these last considered Burke in betrayal and apostasy from his previous writings and actions on behalf of liberty. The attacks were many and furious. The *Reflection*s also meant the beginning of the end of Burke's strange but close friendship with the untrustworthy and dissolute Charles Fox.

There had been growing tension between them while Burke was writing the *Reflections*, but it all came to a head in April 1791 during a debate on Russia. In explicit defiance of Burke, Fox expressed extravagant support for the actions and ideas of the French revolutionaries. Such a direct attack, Burke could not ignore, nor could he ignore Fox's accusations of inconsistency,

drawing on private conversations he and Fox had had. Such a breach of confidence, twisting his words, was unforgivable. Fox tried to heal the breach, but Burke was nowhere near as morally malleable as Fox. Norman points out that it was not only the end of a vital collaborative friendship between Burke and Fox, but '6 May 1791 marks the beginning of the end of the first genuine proto-political party … created by Rockingham in 1765-66.' He again summarises the Rockingham party achievements for which he has provided compelling arguments and evidence:

> '… the core idea—of party not faction, of a political group sustaining itself on principle and policy for long periods out of office, then implementing that policy on its return—this idea originates in practical terms with them [the Rockinghamites].' (p. 171).

Burke wrote obsessively against the Revolution. In April 1791, he published his *Letter to a Member of the National Assembly*, referring to the influence of Rousseau's 'ethic of vanity.' The issue of Revolutionary France had forced Burke to turn his attention to Rousseau's idea of social contract and the 'General Will' as underwriting the actions of the revolutionaries. It was no different from other materialist contract theories. France, he said, had become a tyranny run by a band of assassins who would eventually see no need for the King and Queen. It was prophetic. Burke was now on his own against Fox and his supporters, while those in sympathy stayed on the sidelines, among whom were leading aristocratic Whigs, the Duke of Portland and Earl Fitzwilliam.

Burke tried to drive a wedge between the more moderate Whigs and Fox and his supporters. The effort came in one of his most powerful pamphlets against the French Revolution and its driving ideas, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, in August 1791. As Norman says, it is 'a work teeming with ideas.' He briefly summarises some of those ideas, ideas that are repeated from the *Reflections* or developed further. Burke refutes the charge of inconsistency by showing that his ideas on the French Revolution are consistent with those applied to the Glorious Revolution of 1688/89, whereas those of the Foxites rest on an abstract natural-rights theory of government that is wholly inconsistent with the Constitution. Such ideas did nothing but 'fix disorder and methodize anarchy.' Burke's constitutional arguments defending the Glorious Revolution are the same as those condemning the French Revolution. One was to restore the constitution and safeguard the nation; the other was to tear apart the nation's fundamental agreements and destroy the nation.

Burke's answer in the *Appeal* to a theory of abstract natural rights is lengthy. The essential points, however, can be laid down. He sets his attack on abstract natural rights against the background of claims made by Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau about a State of Nature. These philosophers had different conceptions of the state of nature, but they shared one idea. Man came out of a state of nature where he enjoyed total freedom and equality into state and society by agreeing about who would govern, who would possess state authority, and what the rules were. If that agreement, a solemn contract, was broken, individuals reverted to their rights in the state of nature.

Burke answered this by saying there was indeed a contract in society, but a contract members could not break on a whim. They were under a strict moral obligation. Only extreme necessity justified action against the government, and then only action to redress the harm done to state and society—the justification for the 1688 revolution. What underpinned Burke's form of contract was his idea of moral obligation, an obligation that was objectively grounded. Burke argues the objective grounding of moral obligation against the framework of the laws of nature and the laws of God. I go into detail on this in the next chapter, 'What does it mean to be a

people?' I remark once again that Norman leaves out mention of this crucial part of the *Appeal*, that is, the objective grounding of moral obligation.

An Appeal did not shift Fox's attitude towards the French Revolution. As virtual leader of the Whigs, he blindly continued to view it as a rerun of the Glorious Revolution. If he was complacent about the nature and objectives of the revolutionaries' program, there was a growing feeling among his Whig colleagues that it may not be as clear-cut as he thought. Events in France, Norman says, decided the matter. On 21 June 1791, Louis XVI and his family tried to flee to safe ground in disguise. They were captured and confined in the Tuileries. Military conflict between France and the European monarchies loomed. Prussia and France clashed, with the Prussians drawing off. Republicanism was at a fever pitch in Paris. Fox remained confident through 1792 that France was no danger, but his outspoken support for the revolutionaries alienated his party.

His proposal to negotiate with France to avoid war was the final straw, destroying, Norman says, 'the last vestiges of Fitzwilliam and Portland's faith in him.' On 21 January 1793, Louis XVI was beheaded, eerily fulfilling one of Burke's major prophecies. On 1 February, France declared war on Great Britain. France descended into an orgy of bloodletting, adopting Terror as their formal weapon to keep the people free and equal. Burke's most remarkable prophecy was yet to be fulfilled. In the *Reflections,* Burke foretold the rise of a general in the civil and military chaos who, by force of character, would bind the military together to take absolute command. Napoleon Bonaparte was making a name for himself in 1793. In 1799, he staged a *coup d'etat,* and by 1806, he was master of continental Europe.

Burke continued to urge Pitt to take a counter-revolutionary war up to the French to destroy 'the seditious canker' at its root. Pitt hung back; his decision was apparently confirmed by the establishment of the Directoire in 1795, which seemed to bring calm. In the meantime, the Hastings trial had been brought to a close with Hastings' acquittal. Burke was ready to retire from the House and a career in politics. Fitzwilliam generously gave Burke's seat of Malton to Burke's son, Richard. In the same month, July 1794, the Duke of Portland took a large group of Whigs to join Pitt, signalling the breakup of the Rockinghamites. With Portland and Fitzwilliam in the government, Pitt sent Fitzwilliam to Ireland with the aim of laying the groundwork for lasting Irish relief, but the inexperienced Fitzwilliam botched it, according to Norman, and he was brought back to Burke's despair. Burke would not see another attempt, but at least he was spared the chaos of the 1798 Irish Rebellion.

Burke was now nearing the end of his life. His closest friends were dying one by one. The death of his brother Richard in February 1794 was a severe blow, but the cruellest of all was the sudden death of his beloved son Richard Burke from tuberculosis five months later. Burke's final two years, says Norman, 'were ones of undiminished intellectual vitality.' He set up a school for the children of French refugees to 'preserve the chivalric values and culture of the French aristocracy.' He produced a pamphlet in October 1796, *Two Letters on the prospect of a Regicide Peace*, which warned again that the French revolutionary government was a party of 'destruction and decomposition.' It would never come good. In this pamphlet, Burke utters a prescient warning about the leftist revolutions that would follow over the next two hundred years.

> We are in a war of a peculiar nature. It is not with an ordinary community … not with a State which makes war through wantonness, and abandons it through lassitude. We are at war with a system, which, by its essence, is inimical to all other Governments, and which makes peace or war as peace and war may best contribute to their subversion. It is with an armed doctrine that we are at war. It has by its essence a faction of opinion, and of interest, and of

> enthusiasm, in every country. To us, it is a Colossus which bestrides our channel. It has one foot on a foreign shore, the other upon the British soil.

Burke was scathing about the shallowness and lack of action of some of his colleagues in the House. They were culpably blind to the dangers that revolutionary France posed to Britain. But there was little Burke could do about it. He was now ailing with a severe stomach complaint, now thought to have been cancer. Despite all, he would not be silenced. He 'maintained a wide correspondence, raging and despairing to the end as the world continued to go up in flames around him.' On 9 July 1797, he succumbed, surrounded by his wife and some close friends. He was carried to his grave in Beaconsfield church, borne on the shoulders of his most distinguished friends and admirers, including the Dukes of Portland and Devonshire, the Earls Fitzwilliam and of Inchiquin, and the Speaker of the House of Commons. He was laid next to his son and brother.

This brings me to the end of my commentary on Part One of Jesse Norman's book, which excels in its lively depiction of the social and historical period that Edmund Burke lived and worked in and, as I have endeavoured to show, in its explication of Burke's writings and speeches in that historical and social context. The major deficit is the failure to come to terms with the many passages that appeal to classical natural law or cannot make real sense without presupposing some form of classical realism.

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