A historical-philosophical analysis of Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France"


Abstract

This study is a historical-philosophical analysis of Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France". There are two main theses of this study. First of all, it is argued that "Reflections" as a classic text cannot be understood and explained without analyzing the interaction between the text and its historical-philosophical context. In that sense, it is contended that "Reflections" was written in order to defend the 18th century British political system by the arguments which that system already used in its own defense against the omnipresent air of change in Europe, triggered by the industrial revolution and spread by the Enlightenment, which declared the intellectual, moral, political, and economic bankruptcy of Europe's ageing political institutions, beliefs, and practices, and on the inevitable necessity of the wholesale restructuring of the European society. Thus, "Reflections" is read as a theoretical defense of the 18th century English political system as being (1) prudently progressive, (2) aristocratic and (3) post feudal and as the system of chivalry which represented the advanced stage of the historical development of the "European civilization" where the interaction of commerce, as the source of wealth, and manners, deriving from noble governance and religious superstition, compounded the spirit of chivalry. Secondly, "Reflections" is interpreted as an inside critique of the Enlightenment thought which obliges the interpreter to study two interconnected dimensions of the text. On the one hand, Burke is by no means read as an anti-Enlightenment hero. On the contrary, "Reflections" is interpreted as an Enlightenment text which used the core conceptions, acknowledged the main assumptions, and philosophized in the very framework of the Enlightenment thought. However, on the other hand, it is argued that Burke in the "Reflections" developed a theoretical criticism, through an intellectual assault to the French Revolution, of the exaggerated role that the Enlightenment put on the concepts of reason, progress, and rights of man, by displacing the "abstract reason" with his "practical reason", contextualizing the discourse of the "rights of men" with his discourse of the "rights of Englishmen", and integrating the concept of progress into, and excluding the concept of perfection from, his theory of prudent reform. It is argued that whilst Burke was attacking (1) to the Revolutionary men of letters as metaphysicians and their theories as abstract and dangerous speculations, (2) to the paper money and unimpeded monied interest as the tyranny of economists and calculators, (3) to the sacred and infallible reason as the new superstition displacing religion as the old one, and to the extremely self-assured to defame and deconstruct everything associated with the past and to recreate a new world from scratch in an abrupt process, he was directly launching a crusade to the very heart of the Enlightenment thought itself; however, within certain limitations because of the organic roots of his political theory in the Enlightenment thought. In the conclusion, the actuality of the "Reflections", as an early modern text, is discussed for our late modern era.

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rejection of the French Revolution and a major inspiration for counterrevolutionary theorists in the 19th century. For Burke and other pro-parliamentarian conservatives, the violent, untraditional, and uprooting methods of the revolution outweighed the French people in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, and, though Paine admired Burke’s stand in favour of the American Revolution, he