Edmund Burke
Reflections on the Revolution in France
Shalem Press, 1999.
Translated by Aharon Amir.
Introduction by Yoram Bronovsky.
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Reviewed by Gadi Taub

Reflections on the Revolution in France, as Yoram Bronovsky notes in his introduction to the first Hebrew edition of Edmund Burke's classic work, is at once a political polemic rooted in a particular place and time, and a wide-ranging work of ethical and social philosophy which resonates in all societies. Burke was not only one of the most astute critics of the French Revolution; he also laid the foundations for modern conservative thought.

Burke wrote his *Reflections* during the course of 1790, at a time when many of his contemporaries in England were inspired by the Revolution, in an attempt to explain his staunch opposition to the unfolding developments in France. But Burke was, it is important to recall, a Whig and not a Tory: He made a name for himself through his opposition to Britain's corrupt rule in India and through his passionate defense of the American colonies' independence. Yet the French Revolution was, in Burke's eyes, a different matter. The events of 1789 were, in his view, both a political watershed—a horrifying event which had fateful consequences for France and threatened to set all of Europe aflame—and at the same time a philosophical watershed, which endangered the traditions and norms that were the bedrock of European culture. *Reflections* quickly became the cornerstone of anti-Revolutionary thinking in the West, and remains so today.

Burke's philosophical attack was directed not only against the French revolutionaries of his time, but also against their spiritual predecessors, the enlightened *philosophes*, and against the spirit of the Enlightenment itself. As against the notion that society could be reinvented on the basis of rational principles and a universal concept of man, Burke presented an organic conception of societal development. While John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau sought to understand society on the basis of a "social contract," a voluntary arrangement formulated in the light of reason, Burke maintained that every society evolves through a slow and complex process, under unique historical circumstances, and is therefore characterized by subtle tones and shades uniquely its own. For Burke, there are no abstract "universal" human beings, but only members of different societies whose spirit and sentiments are the product of a time and

a place. People are tied by a "myriad of cords" to culture and tradition, and no mechanical philosophy that is the "offspring of cold hearts" can impart the same wholeness and harmony, the same ancient majesty that suffuses the heritage of their forefathers. Institutions grow through a lengthy process of adaptation, with moderate and careful amendments which require exceeding care, so that the spirit of the nation be preserved. A nation's history, too, is not a random collection of events, but a powerful body of shared experiences, a process of development that takes place over many generations, in which sentiment and circumstance are active alongside reason.

On the basis of this conception, Burke rejects the redemptive promises of the Enlightenment and its revolutionary emissaries in France, warning that the dismantling of societal traditions will necessarily bring disaster:

> All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.

According to Burke, no method of government that comes into the world on the basis of logic alone, the product of the spirit of "those who make calculations," would be capable of inspiring the reverence that brings about the sentiments of fidelity and love; in the end, it will be able to maintain its rule only by brute force. Under "this barbarous philosophy," which is "as void of solid wisdom as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors," and in "the groves of their academy ... you see nothing but the gallows."

Burke's prediction was uncannily accurate. Writing in 1790, several years before the terror of Robespierre, he foresaw the rivers of blood that would be shed by the supporters of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. And yet, with hindsight, there can be no doubt that Burke misunderstood the great spirit which fueled the Revolution. For the latter was not only the product of a cold, calculating philosophy. It was also borne on a wave of profound emotions; it aroused enthusiasm, respect and faith to a degree unknown by any other European political movement. A broad, revolutionary patriotism emerged from the heart of the universal philosophy, along with a flood of blazing moral faith that swept the continent and left its indelible mark. Ironically, within a short time the Revolution itself became an orthodoxy, hallowed by the following generations, and it aroused in many

Europeans the very reverence of a sanctified past in whose name Burke had opposed it.

The Revolution did not spring forth *ex nihilo*. It was nurtured by intellectual sources extending over many years which had resonated in the West since the Magna Carta and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. These ideas completely transformed the political and philosophical world of the West, and became an integral part of it. Some of this "cold-hearted" philosophical heritage that Burke so despised has become, in the view of modern conservatives in Europe and the United States, one of the basic underpinnings of Western thought, a cherished legacy passed down by our spiritual and intellectual forebears.

Burke's argument with the Enlightenment, however, was not limited to its political expression, nor even to its ideas about the structure of society. The conception of man lay at the basis of the dispute. Burke did not share the Enlightenment's optimism regarding the possibility of human happiness and perfect social justice. He countered this optimism with a tragic view of human life, a profound sense of man's powerlessness. Man, for Burke, is not a rational being, not because he does not possess reason, but because along with this reason he also has desires and longings—shallow and sublime—as well as needs that he does not always understand. The social system that has developed over the course of many years demands his respect, and gives him self-respect in return. It alone is capable of meeting his complex and contradictory needs, of maintaining relative freedom alongside order; it alone can impart to him a sense of worth, and offer him the solace that will stand by him in the face of the inevitable difficulties of human life, in the face of the transient and the contingent, the inequality resulting from chance, birth and fate that civil equality can never rectify. "The people of England," he wrote, "well know that the idea of inheritance furnishes a sure principle of conservation, and a sure principle of transmission, without at all excluding a principle of improvement."

In order to preserve this essential social power of consolation, Burke assailed what he regarded as the presumptuous skepticism of Enlightenment thinkers regarding what he referred to as "prejudice." Society's prejudices, the opinions that it inherits, which cannot always be explained through reason, are the cords of its fabric of life; they are the force of continuity that passes along its power and wisdom from one generation to the next. Those who seek to cast aside whatever is not supported by pure reason threaten to sever man from what is truly dear to him, from what is the very essence of his nature. At the end

of the twentieth century, after torrents of blood have been shed in the name of utopian ideologies that promised complete redemption, Edmund Burke's warnings cannot be ignored.

And yet, despite the broad implications of his philosophy (and despite his Irish origins), Burke was still a very English thinker. He suited his country, just as his country suited his ideas. England, after all, is the only nation that has succeeded in changing over from a feudal to a constitutional monarchy and on to a modern democracy almost without severing the cords of continuity. The Cromwellian revolution was rejected by English political thinkers, and even the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was perceived as an expression of English continuity and political tradition. Accordingly, Burke's conservatism was not the tight-lipped rigidity of the Austrian Prince Metternich, who attempted to return post-Napoleonic Europe to the *ancien régime*, nor was it the despotism of the philosopher Joseph de Maistre, who presented the hangman as the linchpin of every society. Burke had a true love of liberty, a revulsion to violence and fanaticism; he also harbored affection for the singular and the unique, a sympathy which both preceded him and remained after him in English society as a whole. Burke was a conservative, but not a reactionary; he believed in hereditary monarchy, but opposed its transformation into a despotism; he supported the struggle of the American colonies for independence. Moderation as the proper way to realize principles was possibly the very crux of his worldview, even if not of his polemical temperament. And it is this stabilizing tendency that has stood English society in such good stead in its darkest hours.

The translation of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* into Hebrew naturally raises the question of what the worldview of this important English philosopher has to offer in Israel two centuries after Burke. To answer this question, it is instructive to compare the situation in Israel today with that of the United States, which boasts a strong conservative movement. Both Israel and the U.S. are immigrant societies, both were founded more or less from scratch, more on the promise of a shared future than on the basis of a common past. Of course, the comparison has its obvious limits: American society has always had a shared past—the struggle for freedom from the British Crown—while Israelis share an ancient common past, or collective tradition, despite the fact that the immediate pasts of the different immigrant communities are radically divergent. Nonetheless, there is still a common thread, which distinguishes both from Burke's England.

In America, conservatism is not a simple thing, primarily because it does not oppose Enlightenment the way Burke did, and because the "prejudices" that became the foundations of American thought have their roots in the Enlightenment. The tradition of the United States is revolutionary. Its founding experience is that same rational, legalistic social contract which Burke so strongly opposed. When the American conservative looks back in the spirit of Burke, he discovers that the conception of society as a contract, the rejection of the edicts of the past and the longing for the new are all part of his own tradition.

This paradox was formulated most poignantly by Louis Hartz, one of the most articulate critics of the American creed, in his *The Liberal Tradition in America*. Since the United States was founded on the basis of a social contract, Hartz writes, it has "transformed the rationalist doctrine of Locke to the traditional reality of Burke, so that anyone who dared to use conservatism in order to refute [Locke's] liberalism would discover that he had merely refuted himself." Beginning with the first settlers who disembarked from the *Mayflower*, who hastened to form a "compact," the belief in the power of social contracts and the legal basis of society have remained vibrant to our time. How else can one explain the bizarre spectacle of Clinton's impeachment trial? The tradition to which the Americans turn at the end of the 1990s is the same contract James Madison composed more than two hundred years ago. In other words, those Americans who view themselves as earnestly applying Burke's philosophy to today's America find themselves turning to the very social contract to which Burke was so opposed.

Another complication comes up in the context of a second pillar of American conservatism: The belief in the free market. Like the Constitution, the tradition that conservatives are protecting is itself anti-traditional in nature. If there is anything in America which is dynamic and forever changing, it is the economy. The free market blazes its trail of profits without regard for tradition, and it frees itself, without a second thought, from the chains of prejudices and accepted practice which become, with the advance of technology, obstacles to efficiency. The tension between economic liberalism and traditionalism is not merely theoretical, it is tangible. Is there anything that has torn at the heart of traditional America more than industrialization and urbanization? The paradox is embodied in today's Republican Party, divided between the Christian Right and the champions of free enterprise. The new managerial class, for whom mobility is the economic lifeblood,

and which was nurtured by Republican economics, is cutting off the branch on which the party's traditionalist values rest. Republican economics, perhaps more than anything else, is contributing to the unraveling of the communal fabric upon which Republicans look with nostalgia. The young professional is without chains, without Burke's "decent drapery of life." He is the particle which streams efficiently within the frenetic field of capitalism. In order to realize the economic role that the Republican Party has sought for him, he must free himself precisely of those "family values" which this party so fervently defends. American conservatism is constantly faced with this tension.

In Israel, too, conservatism is haunted by a fundamental contradiction. Like America, Israel is a modern, future-oriented society. And just as the United States began with a dream of founding a new kind of republic in a New World, so too did Israel begin with a Zionist mission to carve out a "New Jew." As a result, the traditions of Israeli culture, just like those of America, are at heart revolutionary: Israel's founding experience *is* the Zionist revolution; hence Israeli traditionalism, of necessity, embraces revolution.

Importing *American* conservatism to Israel makes things vastly more complicated. Could there be anything "conservative" about the free market in Israel? In the United States, where the free market is unquestionably a Burkean "prejudice," it poses no small difficulty for conservatives. But in Israel, the free market philosophy is not even a "prejudice." The adoption of Burke's perspective is likely to reveal that Israel's economic traditions are none other than the socialist creed of Labor Zionism, and that the free market is therefore not only revolutionary in its inherent dynamics, its adoption is also a radical break from Israel's tradition and ethos.

The translation into Hebrew of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is undoubtedly a commendable endeavor. Both conservatives and revolutionaries, Right and Left, supporters and foes of the tradition of the French Revolution, cannot allow themselves to forgo this important thinker. If Burke did not see the good that could emerge from the Revolution, he nonetheless shed much light on the dangers and difficulties to which the revolutionaries themselves were blind. Consequently, Burke does not lose his relevance, even after more than two hundred years, for any culture facing either revolutionary ideas or a contradictory, conservative impulse.

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