

Book Reviews



David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 500.

This very fine book is the first installment of a two-volume intellectual biography that aims at recovering Burke's significance as a "moral psychologist" (16). Combining close exegesis of Burke's better known works with an extensive combing of his correspondence, Bromwich charts Burke's activities as thinker, writer and political actor in the roughly three decades from the early 1750s to the end of his tenure as MP for Bristol in 1780. Rather than examine the book's (without exception compelling) interpretations of individual texts in Burke's early corpus, I want to reconstruct what I take to be the core of Burke's moral psychology as Bromwich presents it. Bromwich, I contend, has found in Burke a thinker who saw with unparalleled clarity the importance of the "fear of man" to the maintenance of a free political order (14, 47). "Fear," Thomas Hobbes once argued, was "the Passion to be reckoned upon" and so it is with Bromwich's Burke.¹ But while Hobbes relied on the fear of violent death to bind subjects to an absolutist state, Burke's insight, Bromwich shows, was that if we cease to fear *ourselves* then we will leave our society vulnerable to unconscionable abuses of power. By examining Burke's thought through this lens of the "fear of man,"

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99.

Bromwich allows us to see consistency in Burke's words and actions where many have seen only careerist opportunism.

What, then, must we fear in ourselves according to Burke? In the first place, we should fear our tendency to gape admiringly at energetic men of talent and thereby hand them untrammelled access to power. In *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents* (1770), Burke insisted that the ambitious, unconnected courtier, however naturally fitted for governing he may be, poses more danger to freedom than a host of more modestly talented MPs operating in sympathy with the people at large. However unexceptional its members may be, the House of Commons was, to the early Burke, an indispensable guardian of popular liberty precisely because even when mistaken its errors would at least fall "on the popular side" (160). The same could never be said of even the most virtuous of individual courtiers. This is not Burke arguing, in the mode of Aristotle or Machiavelli, that the many are wiser or more constant than the few (Bromwich correctly emphasizes throughout that Burke saw the people mainly as a check on power, never its wielder). But it does show how deeply Burke took to heart Montesquieu's claim that "even virtue needs a limit" (160).

That Burke could voice suspicion of ambitious men of talent even while hoisting himself up by his own abilities would draw derision from later critics. Mary Wollstonecraft, for one, would mockingly hail Burke as a new "Cicero" for having risen by talent alone, only to then damn him all the more thoroughly for fighting a rearguard action for aristocrats against what he called in the *Reflections* the "invasions of ability."² It is unlikely that Burke paid much heed to Wollstonecraft's remark, but had he done so he may well have smiled wryly at her choice of comparison. As Bromwich informs us, Burke from his earliest days "was conscious of Cicero as his model" and alluded to his ancient predecessor by styling himself a *novus homo*, the kind of man of energy and ability that wise governments would do well to encourage (122). But what Wollstonecraft failed to recognize and Bromwich helps us see is that there

2 Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 45. Edmund Burke, *Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Iain Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 52.

was nothing inconsistent about Burke deploying his talents to defend the privileges of those who were considerably less talented than himself. Though he was more than capable of expressing his own disdain for idle aristocrats who had never had occasion to exert themselves (his *Letter to a Noble Lord* springs to mind) he did so because they failed to play their allotted political role to his satisfaction, not because they had no such role at all. Burke was thus that very rare thing: a talented individual in politics who balked at the idea that talent should convert easily into power.

A second form of salutary self-fear Bromwich highlights concerns our ever present temptation to pass judgment in our own case. For Burke, the British government succumbed to exactly that temptation when it arrogated the right to determine, on its own, the extent of British sovereignty over the American colonists. In his *Speech on Conciliation with America* (1775), Burke confessed that “the character of a judge in my own cause is a thing that frightens me,” not because he was particularly doubtful of his own impartiality, but because he clung to the principle that no one, not even a government that enjoys the blessing of popular support, should consider its own will as the final arbiter of its actions (248). Bromwich’s analysis of this speech is the one moment in the book where he (half-apologetically) sees fit to speculate anachronistically about what Burke would have made of recent developments in our own political world. So deep was Burke’s sense that governments are no better than individuals when it comes to judging their own conduct that Bromwich is ready to state “with confidence” that Burke would have endorsed the rise of “international laws to civilize the conduct of nations” (248). This strikes me as plausible, but once we have embarked down the path of anachronistic speculation it is difficult to stop. Would Burke, a fierce critic of imperial abuse but one who carefully refrained from calling for an end to empire as such, have supported the wave of independence movements that gave rise to our current international legal order? Or would some form of international trusteeship by European imperial powers over much of the non-European world have been his preference? Bromwich is quite right when he calls speculation of this sort “tempting but dangerous” (248).

To be feared also, on Bromwich's reading of Burke, is our perverse appetite for frightening things themselves. Most readers of Burke posit an opposition in his psychology between our tendency towards imitation and habit, on the one hand, and what Bromwich calls our "unreasoning hunger for extreme sensations" evoked by the sublime, on the other (285). Key to Bromwich's interpretation of Burke, however, is that the customary and the sublime need not always be at odds. Boldly combining terms that Burke himself was careful to separate, Bromwich finds in Burke's psychology a concern that whole societies can be drawn, in spite of themselves, into a "habit of the sublime" (236). The anxious craving for the extraordinary experiences that disrupt habit, in other words, can itself become habitually engrained, and woe be to the society in which it has. In the excitement of war or revolution in particular, a people may come to desire risk and frightful shock as part of its daily sustenance, causing its members to neglect those more mundane habits upon which their lives and properties depend. Worse still, what began as shocking to our collective conscience (the suspension of basic rights for instance) may soon be dulled into something regrettable but nevertheless acceptable, resulting in a transformed society ever willing to accommodate new barbarities.

This fear that "the dreadful may become habitual" fueled, on Bromwich's reading, much of Burke's opposition to the war against the colonists that the *Speech on Conciliation* failed to avert (237). It also made a clear-cut English victory in that war a more disturbing prospect to Burke than a fudged stalemate with no clear winner. "Victory" in a war with America, Burke memorably stated, would only "vary the mode of our ruin," because no society in which the recourse to coercion has become reflexive could be expected to revert to a calm respect for liberty once the fighting concludes (279). If victory in such a war be considered a success, in other words, then we need fear our successes more than our failures. In several issues of the *London Review of Books*, Bromwich has himself forcefully exposed how the tempting prospect of easy victory in Iraq and Afghanistan has distorted American foreign policy and threatened American freedoms at home. Having read *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* it is difficult not to hear echoes of Burke's writings on the American crisis in many of Bromwich's criticisms of the Bush and

Obama administrations. It is also difficult not to predict that Bromwich will draw again on the notion of a “habit of the sublime” in his analysis of Burke’s response to the French Revolution in the book’s sequel.

Finally, Burke’s “fear of man” is also, on Bromwich’s telling, a fear of our propensity to regard our favorite form of government as somehow enjoying a monopoly on political virtue. From Burke’s perspective, Bromwich writes, a “democracy that keeps its people at war is inferior to a limited monarchy that enables its people to live in peace” (274). Ardor for democracy may encourage the belief that the instant the people acquire power is the same moment we may cease scrutinizing what they get up to with it. Nowhere is Burke’s refusal to grant to the people the kind of license he had similarly denied to monarchs clearer than in his 1780 *apologia* before his constituents at Bristol Guildhall. Accused of extending benevolence too far by voting for Sir George Savile’s attempted repeal of Catholic legal disabilities and for less draconian punishments for debtors, Burke insisted that deferring to the people need not imply a commitment to satisfying their every whim, especially when doing so may mean “acting the tyrant for their amusement” (416). When the people loudly proclaim their intention to act in opposition to basic justice then the “fear of man” should take the form of a mild demophobia that even committed democrats should endorse.

It is moments like the Guildhall speech that Bromwich presumably has in mind when he contends that although “not a democrat,” Burke was a “thinker whom democrats must learn from” (22). He later qualifies this somewhat by declaring that Burke did in fact possess at least the “negative components of a democratic thinker” (namely an unstinting opposition to absolutism and a commitment to the people as a necessary check on government) (421). That Bromwich sometimes struggles to pin down the appropriate role for the people in Burke’s thought owes much to the fact that it is one area of his thinking that varied across contexts. In 1777, Bromwich notes, Burke “reasons like an American,” adopting the Lockean language of original rights and of a contract between people and government to assail crown policy. In the *Speech on the Reform of Representation*, by contrast, the “people” have morphed into a “peril to the constitution” (293, 383). By the 1790s, as Bromwich is ready to concede, Burke had shed even his “negative” democratic doc-

trines, leading Bromwich to ponder whether Burke had forgotten “his radicalism of a decade before” (421).

These shifts in attitude need not fatally undermine Bromwich’s overall claim that Burke’s thought is basically consistent. But they should press him to be more specific about the enduring value he imputes to Burke for democrats today. If Burke’s stance on democracy hardened into outright “hostility” by the 1790s, such that what had begun as imminent critiques became histrionic denunciations, then conceivably it is the early Burke and the early Burke alone from whom democrats must learn (421). Bromwich’s strong sympathy for Burke is evident on nearly every page of this book (consciously or not, even his prose style mimics Burke’s own, to the point where readers may have to occasionally pause to double check whether the words before them are quotation or paraphrase). However, such sympathy is arguably easiest to sustain when relating the first half of Burke’s career, as Bromwich himself admits.³ One wonders whether it will be just as strong in his close engagements with the Burke of the revolutionary 1790s, to which I look forward with relish.

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3 The years from 1777–1783 are, Bromwich contends, the “happiest to contemplate for an admirer of Burke as a statesman” (312).