



Ahmet Özcan

# Edmund Burke, The French Revolution, and The Enlightenment

A Historical-Philosophical Analysis of Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France"

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"Reflections" as a classic text cannot be understood without analyzing it within its historical-philosophical context. On its historical side, it was written in order to defend the 18th century British political system against the omnipresent air of change in Europe. On its philosophical side, "Reflections" is an inside critique of the Enlightenment thought. Although Burke was by no means an anti-Enlightenment hero, he developed a criticism of the exaggerated role that the Enlightenment put on the concepts of reason, progress, and rights of man by replacing the abstract reason with practical reason, contextualizing the discourse of the rights of men with that of the rights of Englishmen, and excluding the concept of perfection from his theory of prudent reform. Whilst Burke was attacking to the Revolutionaries as metaphysicians, to the paper money and unimpeded monied interest as the tyranny of economists, to the infallible reason as the secular superstition, and to the extremely self-assured will to defame 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.



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Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France

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## INTRODUCTION

This study is an analysis of Edmund Burke's political thought essentially through a reinterpretation of his classic "Reflections on the Revolution in France". There are two ways of interpreting, in Pocock words, two histories to be written of, a classical text.<sup>1</sup> The first is the history of authorship in which the interpreter studies, first of all, the historical – philosophical context that produced the text and the subsequent effect of the text itself on its historical – philosophical context, i.e. an analysis of the interaction between the text and its context; secondly, the intention of the author of the text in producing the text and the eventual degree of realization of that intention; and finally, how the author of the text came to do the what he did, i.e. an analysis of the conceptions of the author as the theoretical means of the text. The second is the history of readership and reception in which the interpreter studies how the text was read. This study belongs to the history of authorship.

The main goal of this thesis is to analyze the relationship between Burke's political thought and the Enlightenment by starting from the naïve question "How can Burke, as an Enlightenment philosopher, be designated as the master theorist of prejudice, prescription, myth, and superstition, and the champion of noble, clerical, and royal mystery?" The main argument of this study is that "Reflections" is an inside – critique of the Enlightenment thought, though Burke was certainly not an anti – Enlightenment hero. On the one hand, "Reflections" was a critique from inside; since Burke was an Enlightenment philosopher and he believed in, and wrote with, the fundamental notions of the Enlightenment thought, such as reason and progress. On the other hand, while "Reflections" developed a theoretical criticism, through an intellectual assault to the French Revolution, of the fundamental conceptions of

<sup>1</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, "Introduction", in Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Ed. J. G. A. Pocock, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987, p. viii.

the Enlightenment, such as reason, progress, social change, and rights of man; he was directly launching a crusade to the very heart of the Enlightenment thought itself, however within certain limitations because of its organic roots in the Enlightenment.

In order to examine the relationship between Burke's political thought and the Enlightenment, the relationship between the text and its historical context should be examined. In this respect, it is argued that "Reflections" was written in order to defend the 18<sup>th</sup> 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. The 18<sup>th</sup> century British political system was based on the Glorious Revolution of 1688 – 1689, and according to its defenders, including Burke, it had three main characteristics: First of all, this political system was already progressive; however, by the invention of the concept of the "ancient constitution", which the king could not alter at will and which provided certain liberties, rights, and duties for the people and the crown, it was argued that a prudent spirit of change prevailed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century British political system which derived from the "ancient constitution" and expressed itself in the Glorious Revolution. The English Revolution of 1688 was interpreted as glorious because it did not introduce no new principles of government; on the contrary, it was realized to secure the rights of the Englishmen and to preserve the existent, however abused, hereditary principle by protecting its substance and regulating its operation. By adhering to the means of preservation, i.e. church and aristocracy, and of improvement, i.e. commerce and learning (science), the English constitution was neither wholly new in what it improved nor wholly obsolete in what it retained. In short, 18<sup>th</sup> century British political system was prudently progressive, therefore never destructive. Secondly, 18<sup>th</sup> century English



political system was an aristocratic regime in which aristocracy had a central position in the state structure by dispensing favor, interest, and influence in exchange of reverence. However, thirdly, 18<sup>th</sup> century English political system being aristocratic does not make it feudal, since the state structure had been already burgeoning since the growth of trade and commerce, and the English political system was *consciously postfeudal*.

By paying attention to these three points, Burke's defense of the 18<sup>th</sup> century English political system – as being (1) prudently progressive, (2) aristocratic and (3) post feudal – reflects his cardinal belief in the prudent progress and the harmony between landed and commercial wealth. For Burke, 18<sup>th</sup> century English political system was the system of *chivalry* which represented the advanced stage of the historical development of Europe where the interaction of commerce, as the source of wealth, and manners, deriving from noble governance and religious superstition, compounded the spirit of chivalry. Therefore, Burke argued very strongly that the French Revolution was more than the subversion of the monarchy; it was in fact a crusade, an uncompromising war against the chivalry which would lead to the demise not only of aristocracy, clergy, and monarchy, but also of commerce.

By depending on this historical background, this study is divided into two main chapters, though the first chapter only serves as an introductory part for the analysis of the "Reflections" in the second chapter. In the first part of Chapter I, Burke's political life is examined by paying close attention to his political career and to his positions towards the "American problem", Gordon Riots, and the "Indian business". It is crucial to note that because Burke defined himself as a "Whig politician" after his connection with Rockingham until the French Revolution, when he preferred the title of "Old Whig", the definition of these conceptions is examined. In this respect, Lewis Namier's deconstruction of the conventional historiography, which explains the eighteenth century British politics through a historical narrative based on the dichotomy of Whig vs. Tory parties, in his "The Structure of Politics at

the Accession of George III", served as a guide for the study to grasp the 18<sup>th</sup> century England. Because it is hardly necessary to defend the use of the term "Whig Party" in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century England, especially after the disintegration of the Rockingham Whigs, it is contended that when Burke referred himself as a "Whig", or an "Old Whig", and when his rivals, such as Paine or Price, designated him as a "Tory", they were referring to his defense of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British political system. In the second section of Chapter I, the historical background of the main arguments of the "Reflections", with reference to the 18<sup>th</sup> century England, is presented briefly, and the reactions of Burke's contemporaries to the "Reflections" are examined.

Chapter II constitutes the core of this study where the relationship between the text and the Enlightenment thought is analyzed by examining the text, its historical – philosophical context, and their interaction. It is argued that while 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 will to defame and deconstruct everything associated with the past and to recreate a new world from scratch in an abrupt process, "Reflections" became an inside critique of the Enlightenment thought. In this respect, Chapter II is divided into three sub-sections.

In the first section on the "Revolutionary Men of Letters", Burke's analysis of the French Revolution, as the sign of the total destruction of the Chivalry, i.e. the unique 18<sup>th</sup> century European political system, and his criticism of the modern revolutionary mind are analyzed and discussed in detail. In this respect, Burke's understanding of the historical role of the French Revolution is examined with reference to one of his most loyal readers, Tocqueville. In the second section on the "Moneyed Interest, Paper Money, and Commerce",



Burke's perspective of the historical development of the European political system, his position towards commerce and free trade, and his theory on the relationship between commerce and manners with reference to his belief in the harmony between landed and commercial wealth are explained. In this respect, it is contended that Burke shared the classical defense of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British political system as progressive, aristocratic, and postfeudal, in which landed and monied interest coexisted peacefully. On the other hand, it is noted that unlike most of his contemporaries, Burke designated the *manners*, which were the direct products of religion and nobility, as the reason of the growth of commerce, not the other way around. In the third and final section, Burke's displacement of "abstract reason" with "practical reason", his theory of social change with reference to the prudent reform, and his defense of superstition are analyzed. Moreover, in this section, Burke's systematization of the classical defense of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British political system, with reference to its traditional, historical, sacred, and natural aspects, is examined.

In conclusion, along with the main arguments of this study, the actuality of the "Reflections" for our contemporary world is discussed and the questions that remained unanswered in this study about Burke's political thought, which would lead us to various directions of political theory, are examined.

## I. "Reflections on the Revolution in France" and the Eighteenth Century British Politics

By the publication of Lewis Namier's "The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III", the conventional historiography, which explains the eighteenth century British politics through a historical narrative based on the dichotomy of Whig vs. Tory parties, shattered. Prior to 1929, British political history from 1688 was broadly conceived of as a two-party rivalry of Whig and Tory, underpinning a constitutional monarchy and a modern cabinet system based on a party majority in the House of Commons. That was the classic "Whig interpretation" of history for the period. Though "Whig history" went through various phases in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries; it always promoted a certain type of methodology and of message about the British politics. It had two methodological assumptions: First of all, the study of British history should be rooted in political or constitutional developments; and secondly, past could, indeed should, be examined with the present controversies constantly in mind.<sup>2</sup> Through this methodology, Whig history promoted certain historical messages, that Britain's past was the history of progress, that its primary domestic products were the unique British constitution, the modern cabinet system, and the office of Prime Minister, and that the benefits obtained from these institutions were extended to other countries. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Whig history presented English politics as a sacred struggle, in the name of the "ancient constitution", against the attempts of all Stuart monarchs to subvert that constitution and impose a foreign model of government, i.e. absolutist monarchy.<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century, Whig history became the

<sup>2</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics*, Ed. Iain McLean, "Whig Interpretation", Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 529.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 530.