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REVIEW ESSAY

The Battle over Burke

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Daniel O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016)

David Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke: From the Sublime and Beautiful to American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014)

Like Karl Marx, Edmund Burke has remained a partisan figure, even though the specific partisan context in which he wrote is long gone. To a greater degree than Marx, however, Burke's partisan identity is itself frequently contested.[1] Burke was a hero to the conservative writer Russell Kirk, who devoted his life to undoing the triumphs of twentieth-century American progressivism.[2] But Burke was also a hero to Woodrow Wilson[3]—whose presidency enacted and inspired so many of the progressive reforms that Kirk wanted to overturn—and to a number of the Victorian liberals who did so much to form Wilson's political mind-set.[4]

These debates over Burke's political identity have persisted into our own time. Yet they have been complicated by two recent developments. The first is a wave of scholarship linking nineteenth-century liberalism to empire. Emphasizing Burke's campaign against Warren Hastings, scholars such as Jennifer Pitts and Uday Mehta have sought to strictly distinguish Burke from traditional liberalism—not to defend the view that Burke was genuinely conservative but rather to recover a pre-nineteenth-century liberal worldview that was untainted by imperialism.[5] The second development is a growing skepticism that eighteenth-century political thought even can be interpreted through ideological categories like "liberalism" and

[1]The twists and turns in how Burke has been politically identified are explored in Drew Maciag, *Edmund Burke in America: The Contested Career of the Father Modern Conservatism*, (Ithaca, 2013); Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830–1914: An Intellectual History* (Oxford, 2017); Richard Bourke, "What Is Conservatism? History, Ideology and Party," *European Journal of Political Theory* 17/4 (2018), 449–75.

[2]Russel Kirk, *Edmund Burke: A Genius Reconsidered* (New Rochelle, 1967)

[3]Woodrow Wilson, "Edmund Burke: The Man and His Times," in *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar-President*, ed. Mario R. Dinuzio (New York, 2006), 83–92.

[4]Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism*, chap. 4.

[5]Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago, 1999); Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, 2005).

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"conservatism," both of which date to the nineteenth century. Richard Bourke's recent intellectual biography of Burke exemplifies a more rigorously historicist approach.[6] He argues that Burke's political worldview was a synthesis of Christian, Enlightenment and Whig ideas that cannot properly be called liberal or conservative, and that instructs us on our own political problems only in the most indirect way.[7]

Bourke's work has added immensely to our understanding of Burke.[8] Yet it has not ended the battle over Burke's political identity nor erased the desire to have him speak directly to our contemporary political moment. This review essay will consider two other recent books about Burke. I will first examine Daniel O'Neill's *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, which treats Burke as a manifestly conservative thinker and a defender of empire. I will then turn to the first volume of David Bromwich's intellectual biography of Burke. Despite their divergent conclusions, both books offer ambitious new interpretations of Burke while treating him as a figure whose ideas must grappled with for the sake of understanding contemporary politics. According to O'Neill, "Burke's views … represent the quintessential expression of conservatism *avant la lettre*."[9] According to Bromwich, Burke was a secular reformer who foresaw possibilities for corruption and inhumanity that are inherent in modern political life.[10] Indeed, Bromwich has used Burke in order to fashion a sharp critique of contemporary American politics.[11]

While both authors have produced creative and powerful interpretations of Burke's corpus, the effort to read Burke as a figure who speaks to our current political moment faces certain challenges. If Burke's conclusions can seem familiar to us, he often arrived at them from premises that are entirely alien. Trying to make Burke speak to us risks erasing those aspects of his thought that are unfamiliar. These challenges may not be insurmountable. Yet there are good reasons to suspect that properly understanding Burke will require putting more distance between the great eighteenth-century parliamentarian and ourselves.

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Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire is O'Neill's second book on Burke. His first examined Burke together with Mary Wollstonecraft, expertly situating both authors in relation to the Scottish Enlightenment.[12] O'Neill contended

[6]Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, 2015).

[7]Ibid., 16–17, 24, 926–7. Bourke argues that the utility of reading Burke is that this helps us see that some aspects of our world still resemble Burke's and were not transformed by the revolutions of the late eighteenth century. "Burke's anatomy of the crisis taught posterity to recognize the attitudes and structures that survived." Ibid., 926–7.

[8]For a positive assessment of *Empire and Revolution* in this journal, though with some concerns and criticisms, see Iain Hampsher-Monk, "The Spirits of Edmund Burke," *Modern Intellectual History* 15/3 (2018), 865–77.

[9]O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 7.

[10]Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 6, 21–2.

[11]To grasp Bromwich's belief in Burke's relevance one must read his writings on Burke together with his many of critiques of American politics since 2001. For one attempt to do this see Samuel Moyn, "The Burkean Regicide," *The Nation* 299/9–10 (2014), 33–9, at 36.

[12]Daniel O'Neill, *The Burke–Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (University Park, 2007).

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that whereas Wollstonecraft made use of Scottish social theory to show how the development of civilization necessitated greater equality, Burke articulated the opposite perspective: he argued that civilization is simply impossible without hierarchy, subordination, and discipline. This conviction led Burke to reject the French Revolution and to instead advocate aristocracy, established religion, and the patriarchal family. Indeed, Burke not only defended "habitual social discipline" in all spheres of human life; he also sought to demonstrate that such hierarchies were rooted in "nature."[13]

In *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, O'Neill extends this interpretation so that it encompasses Burke's views on the British Empire. Because of his belief in hierarchy and subordination, O'Neill argues, Burke defended British imperial rule across the globe. Not only was he not a critic of imperialism—as recent scholars have argued—Burke was nothing short of an arch-imperialist. O'Neill also asserts that because Burke's political project was defined by the defense of hierarchy and subordination, we should have no compunction about characterizing him as "conservative."

Foundational to this argument is the undeniable fact that Burke supported the British Empire. O'Neill rightly notes that "one will search the vast corpus of Burke's writings and speeches in vain for a rejection of the British Empire," and that "Burke cherished the British Empire and strongly defended its legitimacy."[14] This is not a new discovery on O'Neill's part, as he concedes. It is acknowledged even by those scholars who have interpreted Burke as a critic of imperialism, such as Jennifer Pitts and Uday Mehta.[15] However, it is fair to ask whether these scholars understated the significance of this fact. Moreover, whereas Pitts and Mehta emphasize Burke's attempts to reform the British Empire, O'Neill emphasizes his devotion to it.

Indeed, O'Neill is convinced that Burke's entire quest to reform the British Empire was really about preserving and entrenching it. Towards this end, Burke pursued divergent strategies for different subject populations, depending on their degree of "civilization," a theme which is no less central in *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* than it was in O'Neill's first book. O'Neill argues that Burke cast Africans and Native Americans as savage and incapable of civilization, a rhetoric that justified settler colonialism and led Burke to be wary about the immediate abolition of slavery. When it came to India, by contrast, Burke emphasized similarities with Europe. This justified a policy of using native aristocrats to rule in partnership with Britain—a strategy Burke also preferred for Ireland. O'Neill labels the first strategy, in which Burke emphasized the differences between Britain and the particular colonial population, *orientalist*. The second strategy, in which similarities are emphasized, he calls *ornamentalist*, drawing from David Cannadine.[16] O'Neill summarizes his argument as follows: "to understand what

[13]Ibid., 138.

[14]O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 7.

[15]Jennifer Pitts writes that "Burke opposed not the imperial relation per se but rather the spirit of domination, oppression, and exclusion that often characterized British imperial conduct." Uday Mehta also makes clear that "Burke did not oppose the empire in the sense of calling for its immediate dismantling." See Pitts, *A Turn to Empire*, 60; Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*, 157.

[16]See David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (Oxford, 2002).

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Burke meant by acting 'prudently' with respect to imperial policy, or rendering 'liberty' or 'justice' to the diverse inhabitants of the empire, one must recognize that these terms derive their substantive meaning from Burke's assessment of the degree of 'civilization' or 'savagery' that obtained in the New World, India, and Ireland."[17]

When it comes to analyzing Burke's *orientalism*, O'Neill is quite persuasive. He shows that Burke drew from the historian William Robertson, among other sources, a view of Native Americans as lacking in "habitural social discipline."[18] Burke supported continued westward settlement by American colonists, against a British government that sought frequently to prevent it. O'Neill also shows that Burke's views on slavery are more complex than many scholars have realized. There is no question that Burke saw slavery as an affront to the natural rights of mankind. However, O'Neill pushes us to see that he favored only a very gradual emancipation and always had considerable reservations.

When it comes to Burke's *ornamentalism* (i.e. his ideas about empire in contexts he viewed as similar to Britain) O'Neill is less persuasive. In Britain itself, O'Neill claims that Burke favored the rule of a "natural aristocracy."[19] This is simply a caricature. And because O'Neill believes that Burke saw rule in India as generally modeled on rule in Britain, that ends up becoming a caricature as well.

For O'Neill, the key fact about Burke's politics in Britain, Ireland, and India (as well as France) is that he defended social and political hierarchy. But how thoroughly were Burke's political commitments determined by this? If there is a single line of philosophical reflection that runs through Burke's stance in all these different political engagements, it is that we must distinguish the question of where political authority is located from the question of how political authority is exercised. Burke thought that in most circumstances, political authority should be distributed unequally: ruler and ruled should be clearly distinguished. Yet he also believed that such arrangements could be designed so that rulers were more or less accountable for their actions, more or less likely to rule in the public interest. In all of these contexts, Burke's primary aim was not only to defend political authority; it was also to ensure that those exercising political authority could be held responsible for their actions.

O'Neill's refusal to accept that Burke favored *both* hierarchy *and* accountability leads him to simply ignore many of Burke's most famous statements and principles. Let us take, for example, Burke's struggle to change British policy in India. While this struggle culminated in the famous impeachment of Warren Hastings, Burke had earlier sought to reform British rule through radically overhauling the structure of the East India Company. In 1783, he and Charles James Fox introduced legislation that would place the company under stricter parliamentary supervision.

O'Neill describes this policy and its genesis in the following manner: "By 1783, after his service on the Select Committee, Burke had been fully won over to the idea that parliamentary sovereignty had to be invoked in the strongest possible terms, and the Company brought to heel, in the name of Britain's national and imperial

[17]O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 45–6.
[18]Ibid., 66.
[19]Ibid., 52–4.

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interest."[20] Was it really "in the name of Britain's national and imperial interest" that Burke proposed the defining legislation that he would introduce with respect to India? In fact, Burke says repeatedly that the natural rights and basic well-being of the people of India are what required "the Company [to be] brought to heel." Indeed, Burke says that there is *no other reason* that could possibly justify Parliament taking such a grave step as to disrupt the rights of a chartered corporation. He declared,

> I … freely admit to the East India Company their claim to exclude their fellow subjects from the commerce of half the globe. I admit their claim to administer an annual territorial revenue of seven millions sterling, to command an army of sixty thousand men, and to dispose (under the control of a sovereign, imperial discretion, and with the due observance of the natural and local law) of the lives and fortunes of thirty millions of their fellow-creatures … But, granting all this, they must grant to me, in my turn, that all political power which is set over men, and that all privilege claimed or exercised in exclusion of them, being wholly artificial, and for so much a derogation from the natural equality of mankind at large, ought to be some way or other exercised ultimately for their benefit.[21]

O'Neill rightfully notes that Burke believed in the legitimacy of British rule in India. Yet Burke also thought that the East India Company had in its "very frame and constitution" a tendency to "suspend the natural rights of mankind at large."[22] Because it combined "political power and commercial monopoly," it was prone to act lawlessly and arbitrarily.[23] Burke believed that without giving up imperial authority, it was possible to render the exercise of that authority less arbitrary and unaccountable, by giving Parliament the power to appoint and control the company's leadership. When his effort in that direction failed, he turned to judicial procedures, and sought in the trial of Warren Hastings to constrain the British governors of India through the mechanism of impeachment.

Burke's aim was not simply to defend a structure of hierarchy and subordination in India. It was also to give that structure a degree of accountability. Nor was this true only when it came to the rulers of India. Burke was equally insistent on accountable rule in England. For that reason he championed an independent judiciary, the rule of law, the power of public opinion, representative government, and political parties. When a nation was blatantly abused by its rulers, Burke was willing to countenance civic unrest, and even revolution. Although he did not think the French Revolution counted as such a situation in which revolution was justifiable, he criticized the *Ancien Régime* for not having basic mechanisms of accountability. "Your government in France, though usually, and I think justly, reputed the best of the unqualified or ill-qualified monarchies, was still full of abuses," he wrote in

[20]Ibid., 95. O'Neill (ibid., 175) explicitly denies that Burke was motivated by the natural rights of mankind in his effort to reform the East India Company.

[21]Edmund Burke, "Speech on Fox's India Bill," *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 5, ed. P. J. Marshall (Oxford, 1981), 384–5.

[22]Ibid., 384.

[23]Ibid.

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Reflections on the Revolution in France.[24] "These abuses accumulated in a length of time, as they must accumulate in every monarchy, not under the constant inspection of a popular representative."[25] Burke was certain that the Revolution would bring much worse; however, he was emphatic that the old French monarchy was "by no means a free and therefore by no means a good constitution."[26]

O'Neill overlooks or ignores all of this. This may partly be because O'Neill himself is convinced that any genuine structure of political accountability requires egalitarianism and the abolition of empire, so he does not even see Burke's commitment to constitutionalism and reform. Yet one also begins to suspect that these oversights are essential to O'Neill's larger argument that Burke is "conservative." After all, countless *liberal* thinkers have believed in a hierarchy of civilizations, contended that only authoritarian government is possible in many parts of the world, or defended settler colonialism. O'Neill not only must therefore demonstrate that Burke favored constitutional liberty just for "advanced civilizations," as, for instance, John Stuart Mill did; he also must show that Burke's way of thinking about constitutional liberty, even in a place like Britain, was completely repugnant to the liberal tradition. This is a very tall order. There are undeniable similarities and historical connections between Burke's portrayal of a free parliamentary constitution and nineteenth-century liberal constitutionalism. O'Neill is therefore particularly unsuccessful at distinguishing Burke from the liberal tradition, and in truth he barely attempts to do this. He tells us that "liberalism" had as its "foundational theoretical premise … free and equal citizens," which Burke obviously did not subscribe to, and claims it to be a long-standing puzzle that "the same thinker who became the touchstone for Victorian liberalism [could] also have written such a vitriolic attack on the French Revolution." In fact, many Victorian liberals found a great deal that was persuasive in Burke's attack on the French Revolution,[27] and most would have been astonished at the suggestion that "the foundational theoretical premise" of liberalism was "free and equal citizens."[28] Given the book's explicit title and framing, O'Neill's account of the difference between conservativism and liberalism and his explanation for why Burke belongs in the former camp are remarkably thin.

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Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire is reminiscent of the pamphlets written against Burke by eighteenth-century radicals such as Catharine

[24]Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, in *Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, vol. 8, ed. L. G. Mitchell (Oxford, 1989), 53–293, at 175.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid., 176–7.

[27]For a careful analysis of Victorian liberal commentary on Burke and how liberals dealt with Burke's analysis of the French Revolution see Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism*, chap. 4. Jones makes clear that while only a few Victorian liberal commentators subscribed entirely to Burke's critique of the French Revolution, most thought that it contained indispensable insights.

[28]For a recent book that demonstrates just how far this was from being the fundamental principle of nineteenth-century British liberalism see Gregory Conti, *Parliament the Mirror of the Nation: Representation, Deliberation, and Democracy in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2019).

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Macaulay or Thomas Paine. Like O'Neill, these radical pamphleteers claimed that Burke's fundamental goal was to defend individuals with unjust privileges from the demands of those who were subordinate to them. One can occasionally detect some pity for Burke in this literature, since it was clear, to the authors, that he had genuinely deluded *himself* into thinking that he was fighting for high principles instead of naked privilege. Thus Wollstonecraft could plead with Burke, "I beseech you to ask your own heart, when you call yourself a friend of liberty, whether it would not be more consistent to style yourself the champion of property, the adorer of the golden image which power has set up."[29]

I have suggested that Burke's engagements in India and elsewhere were motivated not only by the defense of power but also by the goal of making the exercise of power accountable. In *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, David Bromwich offers an account of Burke's life and political career in which the accountability of power is indeed his preeminent political aim. "Power in whatever hands, is rarely guilty of too strict limitations on itself." That quote from Burke's *Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol* is the epigraph to the book, and it perfectly captures the book's argument.

As of now, only the first volume of *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* has been published, which follows Burke from his upbringing to the death of Lord Rockingham in 1782. We thus do not know how Bromwich will treat Burke's central engagements with India, France, and Ireland. But hitherto, one of Bromwich's undeniable virtues is that he is able to capture the strength of Burke's conviction in favor of responsible, accountable government, even as he also makes clear Burke's evident failure to accomplish that goal. Just as Burke failed to bring about the reform of the East India Company, he also failed to maintain accountable government, as he understood it, in Britain.

Unlike O'Neill, who treats Burke as consistently defending established hierarchical relations across his political career, Bromwich argues that Burke's position shifted over time. In the early stages of his political career, Burke thought that the Crown posed the greatest threat to liberty and responsible government. His concern over the growing power of the Crown guided his analysis of both the American war and the Wilkes affair—the crisis in British politics that followed the expulsion of the flamboyant radical John Wilkes from the House of Commons in 1769, and which helped motivate Burke to write one of his most important pamphlets, *Thoughts on the Cause of Present Contents*. Bromwich notes that by the middle of the 1770s Burke was not unwilling to support the Americans engaging in revolutionary action to defend their "original rights."[30] Burke's preference, however, was for the government's actions to be contested by an organized opposition party in Parliament.

Burke's conception of a parliamentary opposition was complex. He argued that a parliamentary opposition party had not only a duty but also a strong incentive to give voice to the people's genuine grievances (identifying legitimate popular

[29]Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men,* in *Political Writings: A Vindication of the Rights of Men; A Vindication of the Rights of Women; An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, ed. Janet Todd (New York, 1994), 1–63, at 11

[30]Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 294–5.

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discontent tended to be the opposition's best path back to power). Burke also defended forms of popular action—including protests and petitioning as well as elections—that could help motivate and guide parliamentary opposition. However, Burke did not think that opposition politicians in Parliament should simply do what the public demanded. Along with its duty to give voice to the public's discontent, a parliamentary opposition had an equal duty to inquire into the true causes of that discontent, to refine the public's demands, and to find practical solutions.

Bromwich argues that by the early 1780s, Burke's confidence that popular discontent could motivate effective parliamentary opposition had precipitously declined. In part, this was due to Burke's shock that the English people for a while fervently supported the conflict with America rather than turning their anger against the government which had brought about such a disastrous and unnecessary war. Burke's distrust of popular passion was furthered by the Gordon riots in 1780. He watched firsthand as London was ransacked by Protestant mobs angry about the (limited) rights and privileges that had been granted to Catholics in 1778. Finally, there was Burke's failure to win reelection at Bristol in 1780, even after events had proven him right on the great issue of the day: the disastrous course of action Parliament had taken with respect to the American colonies.

Burke never turned against an organized parliamentary opposition. Nor did he give up on the people venting their discontent as a way of forcing a change in government policy. This is evident in Burke's great effort in the 1780s to reduce patronage and corruption so that the House of Commons would be less dependent upon the Crown. But Bromwich suggests that Burke did become more pessimistic about the prospects of both popular and parliamentary opposition, and that he increasingly worried about the threat posed to lawful government by the people itself. As a result, by the early 1780s, Burke was increasingly willing to define himself as a lone champion of justice and liberty, fighting evil on all sides.

* * *

The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke is beautifully written. It brims over not only with brilliant interpretations of Burke's prose but also with many memorable lines of its own. However, if O'Neill overemphasizes Burke's commitment to hierarchy and authority, does Bromwich underemphasize it? At first glance, the answer would appear to be no. Bromwich recognizes that Burke viewed "subordination" and "discipline" as preconditions for liberty.[31] Nor does he shy away from discussing Burke's opposition to expanding the suffrage in England, or his loyalty to monarchy and property. "Throughout his career, he was a defender of hierarchy, the tacit principle of subordination that cements an aristocratic society," Bromwich writes.[32] And while Bromwich states that "no serious historian today would repeat

[31]Ibid., 245.
[32]Ibid., 6.

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the commonplace that Burke was the father of modern conservatism," he is also clearly unwilling to read Burke as a straightforward modern liberal.[33]

Yet one might question whether Bromwich really does justice to this side of Burke. In ways both subtle and not, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* tends to emphasize its protagonist's liberal and even radical leanings. This is apparent from the very beginning of Bromwich's account. Unlike most scholars, Bromwich claims that Burke was a secular rather than a Christian thinker.[34] Indeed, for Bromwich, Burke's moral vision takes on an almost Arendtian quality. It is not about accepting a larger moral-theological order, but rather about taking responsibility for a human world always faced with potential destruction. Thus Bromwich writes that "with Burke, the defense of human nature has to find its final justification in life on earth."[35]

When he discusses Burke's early book *The Vindication of Natural Society*, Bromwich accepts that the book was a parody; however, he suggests that Burke was to some degree profoundly tempted by the radical anarchism it expressed.[36] A similar interpretive strategy is displayed in Bromwich's brilliant reading of *The Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*. After evoking the "imaginative energy" that Burke associates with our experience of the beautiful and, especially, the sublime, Bromwich argues that Burke subsequently felt the need to "domesticate" this energy.[37] In a new preface for the *Enquiry*'s second edition, Burke thus emphasized the role that custom and habit play in disciplining passion and imagination. One might say that *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke* as a whole tells a similar story of domestication, one in which Burke's authentic radical impulses are molded and tamed, and from being a champion of the discontented people he develops into a wary defender of the status quo.

Bromwich would no doubt contend that this moderation of radical impulse is what produced Burke's distinct political character, with all its tensions and contradictions. The effect of such a narrative, however, is to make Burke's hatred of unaccountable government his most fundamental passion. Indeed, for Bromwich, Burke's eventual wariness about the people flowed from his suspicion of unchecked power. Essentially, Burke's worry was majority tyranny.[38] Bromwich expresses some surprise at how unyielding Burke's opposition to the expansion of the suffrage was in the 1780s.[39] One wonders whether, under slightly different circumstances, Bromwich's Burke might have supported the French Revolution.[40] And yet, if Bromwich chooses to make Burke's liberal and radical motivations more

[33]Ibid., 19.
[34]Ibid., 11–15.
[35]Ibid., 15.
[36]Ibid., 43–4.
[37]Ibid., 89–96.
[38]Ibid., 209–10, 424–5.
[39]Ibid., 375–83.
[40]In an article admittedly written well before this book, Bromwich notes Wollstonecraft's belief that Burke would have supported the Revolution had he been French. The general claim of the article is that Wollstonecraft "assimilates Burke's thinking about morality" and "builds on his argument for a moral imagination" in developing her more radical theory. See David Bromwich, "Wollstonecraft as a Critic of Burke," *Political Theory* 23/4 (1995), 617–34, at 628, 630.

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fundamental to his character than conservative ones, he does clearly acknowledge the latter.

As I noted earlier, we still do not know how he will interpret Burke on India. Like the French Revolution, Burke's engagements with India (and Ireland) will be in volume two of *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*. However, the introduction to this volume provides some fairly strong indications. Bromwich argues that Burke judged British rule and condemned British wrongdoing in India according to the standards of morality, in the process transcending the more usual considerations of commercial profit, cultural difference and even national interest. "I impeach him in the name of human nature itself," Burke declared in his indictment of Warren Hastings, a line that Bromwich treats as exemplary.[41]

Bromwich views Burke more generally as the rare politician who struggled to make political action subservient to moral principles. While "pious toward the customs it knows well," Burke's political judgment was always "answerable to a standard of right and wrong that is not circumscribed by the nation."[42] "He refers political decisions to the same tribunal at which we reflect on the most exacting of moral choices."[43] Burke's effort to reform British rule in India thus becomes something like his finest hour, for it was there that the demands of morality stood in greatest opposition to *both* cultural parochialism and narrow interest. By attacking his own nation for the wrongs it was committing against a people thousands of miles away, and with vastly different customs, Burke demonstrated what it means to be a morally engaged political actor, and to judge one's own nation according to something like "human nature itself."

This may succeed as an interpretation of Burke's rhetoric at the Hastings trial. However, it remains to be seen whether Bromwich can do full justice to Burke's more general stance toward the British Empire while retaining the image of Burke offered in this volume. The question is not whether Burke judged all politics, including imperial politics, by a standard of morality—he did. It is rather whether this political morality, when taken as a whole, is as accessible and as inspiring to the twenty-first-century reader as Bromwich wants it to be. To begin with, although Bromwich would deny it, a strong case has recently been made that Burke's whole moral worldview rested on first-order Christian theological commitments.[44] Moreover, as O'Neill reminds us, Burke's moral worldview contained very deep assumptions about the hierarchies between civilizations, meaning that Native Americans, for instance, did not inspire the same forthright defense from Burke as the people of India. Finally, empire achieved through conquest was, for Burke, a legitimate moral and political relationship within the natural order. Is it possible to separate out, in a way that is not merely arbitrary, the aspects of Burke's moral worldview that are inspiring? Or were the principles that led Burke to condemn certain excesses of empire intimately related to the principles that led him to defend the legitimacy of empire? As Bromwich wrestles with Burke's entire range of reflections on the British Empire—not to mention the French Revolution—in volume 2

[41]Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 23.
[42]Ibid., 23.
[43]Ibid., 22.
[44]Bourke, *Empire and Revolution*.

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of *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, it will be fascinating to see what remains of the Burke from volume 1.

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I began this review by noting that what unites these two books is their shared conviction that Burke represents an approach to politics that we still must grapple with today. For Bromwich, this is because of all that we can learn from Burke:

> There are some [ideas], demonstrably the product of a given time and place, which break free of their original limits. Such was the idea of a generous commonwealth that Burke bequeathed to the nineteenth century … Though he was not a democrat, he remains for this reason a thinker whom democrats must learn from. The party he served is long dead, and no successor can claim him, but every party has been the better for what it learned from Burke. Thoughts of permanent value, universal in their application, appear in his writings to arise from the ground of mere legislative business.[45]

For O'Neill, Burke represents the antithesis of all that is currently good in the world. "To be clear," he writes, "the principles that Burke most hated and feared were those of modern secular liberal democracies."[46]

As instructive as each of these books is on important aspects of Burke's thought, they also reveal a danger that can arise when one treats Burke as either the source of, or an obstacle to, greater justice in the contemporary world. This is that distinctions and concepts which are compelling in contemporary politics may only go so far in making sense of Burke's thought. In O'Neill's case, the danger is much more apparent. Fundamentally, his reason for reading Burke as an enemy of "modern secular liberal democracy" is that Burke was not an egalitarian but rather favored social and political hierarchy and believed in a hierarchy of civilizations. Yet how far into Burke's thought does this observation really take us? The answer is not all that far. In the vast majority of Burke's political engagements, his defense of hierarchy was shaped, modified, and complicated by a whole series of other commitments—especially to accountable government, individual liberty, political deliberation, and universal natural rights. Any interpretation of Burke's account of the English constitution or of his engagements with the East India Company that is based entirely on Burke's belief in hierarchy will inevitably fall short. If O'Neill usefully reminds us that Burke was not an anti-imperial thinker—and that Burke's constitutionalism, no less than Montesquieu's or John Stuart Mill's, was entangled with a hierarchical interpretation of the world's civilizations—he also occludes that constitutionalism and much else completely from view in order to lock Burke into the ideological straitjacket of an "illiberal" conservatism.

Something a bit similar might be said about Bromwich's emphasis on Burke's *moral* politics—though any final judgment must await the second volume. It is clear why Bromwich would find this aspect of Burke so appealing. In an age

[45]Bromwich, *The Intellectual Life of Edmund Burke*, 22.

[46]O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 177.

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when many politicians have stopped even pretending to care about large numbers of their constituents, let alone the faraway victims of drone strikes, how can one not be inspired by Burke's decade-long effort to punish Warren Hastings for his crimes in India? Yet Burke's outrage against what he perceived as manifest injustice may tell us as little about his larger moral worldview as his opposition to egalitarianism tells us about his larger political worldview. Just as Burke's defense of hierarchy was profoundly complicated by his commitment to political accountability, so his conceptions of justice and injustice were in turn deeply complicated by his conceptions of civilization, natural law, and Christian theology.

What is fascinating about Burke is precisely all these complications, which may make it ultimately impossible to read him as either a menace to, or a moral exemplar for, contemporary liberal democracy. He was a figure who brilliantly defended key components of a modern constitutional order, without being a political egalitarian; and who was profoundly committed to the equal natural rights of all mankind, yet defended the range of inequalities created by civil society. The reason to read Burke, I would contend, is that reading him challenges everything we might naively suppose about our political values: where they lead, what they require, where they come from. Efforts to make him speak more straightforwardly to our political moment may not be doomed from the start, but they are liable to occlude inconvenient truths.

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