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Burke, Cultural Difference, and the Problem of Imperial Critique

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Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire.
By Daniel I. O'Neill. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016. 272p $34.95 paperback.

The two primary connected claims of Daniel O'Neill's book are, first, that, far from being an anti-imperial exemplar, Edmund Burke was actually a fervent imperialist who justifies empire as a civilizing force in the world; and second, that attending to what O'Neill calls this "conservative logic of empire" usefully complicates the recent scholarly emphasis on liberalism's entanglements with empire. O'Neill's book makes an important contribution in synthesizing Burke's diverse writings on empire, and it offers a productive corrective to oversimplified depictions of Burke as an anti-imperialist.

However, I have three related sets of questions and concerns about the book. First, I am concerned that while O'Neill is surely correct that it is incorrect to call Burke an "anti-imperialist," it may also be an oversimplification to call Burke an imperialist. Second, I critically examine O'Neill's claim that Burke's analogization of India to Britain erases difference and serves as a tool of empire. Finally, and connectedly, I ask after the political stakes of O'Neill's reading of Burke. In particular, I wonder if O'Neill's focus on class as the driving force of empire ends up dismissing the importance of imperial (and post-imperial) forms of subjection that lie along racial and cultural vectors.

Burke, Imperialist

O'Neill states his basic claim succinctly in the first chapter when he says that "Burke's great innovation was to develop a substantively conservative logic of empire that relied on his notion of history as a civilizing process to justify and defend the new global British Empire in both the West and East."[1] While O'Neill is surely correct that Burke is not an anti-imperialist, I am less compelled by his claims that we should view Burke as an imperialist, especially since the vast majority of Burke's writings on empire consist in critiques of the way the British Empire operates in practice. Burke is critical of the Crown's policy toward the American colonists; he is critical of attempts to ally with Native Americans and slaves against the colonists; he is critical of oppressive policies in Ireland; he is critical of oppressive practices and policies in India. While I agree with O'Neill that it is incorrect to read these criticisms as amounting to "anti-imperialism," I am also not sure that they amount to a civilizational logic of empire. To read Burke's writings as developing a "logic" of empire suggests that his focus is only on sustaining British sovereignty/imperial rule rather than also and perhaps equally on combating injustice and suffering within the empire. Put differently, to call Burke an "imperialist" seems to miss what is distinctive about him: that he was one of the most fervent critics of British imperial practice.

In my view, it seems more appropriate to call him a critic of empire or, in Jennifer Pitts' terms (drawing on Michael Walzer) a "connected critic."[2] Burke did not critique empire as such, but his critique of British imperial practice called for unsettling British identity and practices of governance more than O'Neill's focus on his "logic" of empire allows. For example, in his speech opening Hastings' Impeachment trial, Burke says that he and his fellow Britons should not try to "force nature" into the "circle of municipal justice," but instead "enlarge the circle of justice to the necessities of the Empire that we have obtained."[3] In this passage (and others), Burke looks less like he is implementing a conservative logic of empire and more like he is trying to identify new standards of judgment and governance for a novel imperial situation.

To read Burke as a critic of empire does not require that we avow everything he says, but it does allow us to acknowledge what is meaningful in his critique, as well as the tensions and ambivalence in his thought, even if he does not call for the dissolution of empire as such.

Burke on India

In his chapter on Burke's writings on India, O'Neill offers a serious critique of Uday Mehta's reading of Burke as offering a cosmopolitanism of sentiments, which Mehta opposes to a liberal cosmopolitanism of reason. Mehta's emphasis in his book is on two different ways of addressing the unfamiliar: whereas liberals assume they can categorize and classify the unfamiliar through recourse to the generalities of reason, Burke's cosmopolitan project assumes (on Mehta's account) mutual unfamiliarity and pursues a conversation between "two strangers" that "has as its purpose the understanding of the sentiments that give meaning to people's lives," with the hope that "wider bonds of sympathy can be forged."[4]

O'Neill suggests that Burke's analogization of India to Europe shows Mehta's argument to be flawed. If Burke portrays India as *like* Europe—both structured by traditional political and social hierarchies, and civilized by organized religion—then there is no conversation "across difference." Instead, Burke's quest to "save" India from British rule is (on O'Neill's reading) a quest to save traditional hierarchies, and the elites who compose their upper echelons, from the uprooting, leveling impulses that Burke sees in both the East India Company and the French Revolution. While I agree that Mehta insufficiently explores how Burke's analogization of Britain and India may diminish difference, I also think that O'Neill's reading insufficiently attends to Burke's references to the *limits* of that analogy and thus misses the ambivalence of Burke's writings on India: that they may shore up traditional political hierarchies while also challenging forms of imperial oppression that align with culture and race.

Just to note one example of this in his speech opening the impeachment, Burke says that "if we must govern such a Country,

[we] must govern them upon their own principles and maxims and not upon ours … we must not think to force them to our narrow ideas, but extend ours to take in theirs." There is, he says, a "great gulf … fixed between you and them"—a "gulf created by manners, opinions, and laws, radiated in the very nature of the people, and which you can never efface from them."[5] Given Burke's references here to the "great gulf" between Britain and India (a sentiment he repeats elsewhere in different forms), it does not seem quite right to say, as O'Neill does, that the "act of theoretical imagination" Burke called his fellow Britons to engage in was not "to confront the experience of difference" but to "show that, despite their seeming differences, Europe and India were essentially the same in all the ways that mattered."[6] Rather, Burke was trying to do both: to ask Britons to see Indians as civilized subjects governed by the rule of law, like themselves (on this point O'Neill is surely correct), but to also see Indians as civilized in a very different way that demands that Britons extend the boundaries of the circle of sympathy in ways that are challenging and unsettling to their own identity.

The Stakes

I think the reason that O'Neill does not sufficiently acknowledge this part of Burke's writings on India is because he, like David Cannadine (on whom he relies), tends not to see cultural, religious, political, and racial differences—the ones Burke is talking about it in his reference to the "great gulf"—as aligned with the domination of empire. For O'Neill, Burkean empire appears to be a project of class hierarchy—of keeping the elites of various nations in power and the have-nots out. As O'Neill puts it, Burke's "deepest concerns … lay not principally with the common people but rather with their social and economic superiors, in India no less than in France."[7] Burke, O'Neill says, "took up the cudgels not on behalf of all human beings but rather in the service of a very specific conservative, hierarchical understanding of civilization and those who had made it possible, the landed aristocracy and the purveyors of organized religion."[8] From this perspective, Burke's ongoing

descriptions of the deep cultural difference between Britain and India, and the need to engage in imaginative sympathy for Indians, appear as so much window dressing for a conservative, elitist project of keeping everyone else down.

Maybe. But the reason that Mehta and some other postcolonial scholars have found promise in Burke is precisely because oppression and domination—in empire and in a post-imperial constellation—consist of more than class domination. There is a form of domination that consists in economic privation and political disenfranchisement. There is also a (connected) form of domination that consists in the portrayal of non-Western people as backwards, less rational, inherently linked to oppressive cultural and religious practices, or as simply illegible. This is the kind of oppression to which postcolonial scholars, among others, have drawn our attention—a form of oppression that may not legally or politically exclude non-Western people from rights to freedom and equality but portrays them as unequal, un-hearable, and uncivilized in practice. In our contemporary political context, it is not surprising that Burke's writings on India have captivated the imagination of those who are concerned about, and who face, this kind of oppression. While Burke's writings on Hastings and the East India Company undoubtedly served to reinforce (in some ways) class domination, they were also an extended, sometimes profound, sometimes profane testament to the injustice of treating non-Western people, just because they are non-Western, as deserving of despotic rule and domination by the West.

I think it is important to draw out the ambivalence of Burke's critical writings on empire: namely that they offer an enabling precedent for a certain kind of imperial critique while at the same time sanctioning (differing forms of) oppression of other imperial subjects (African slaves, Native Americans, the lower classes). Attending to this ambivalence reminds us that the lingering forms of oppression bequeathed to us by empire are not only class-based and not only formal and legal in nature but also may consist in informal cultural, disciplinary, and political forms of exclusion and (il)legibility that Burke both resists and sanctions in his writings.

Endnotes

1. Daniel I. O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 27.
2. Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 100. On this point, see also: Lida Maxwell, *Public Trials: Burke, Arendt, Zola, and the Politics of Lost Causes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
3. Edmund Burke, "Speech Opening the Impeachment," in *Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 6 (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2000), 279.
4. Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 22.
5. Burke, "Speech Opening the Impeachment," 302.
6. O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 98.
7. Ibid., 115.
8. Ibid., 175.