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# Edmund Burke, Imperialist Ideologue?

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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.*

In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* Edmund Burke attacked two alarming trends in French politics. One was the growing taste for what he called "innovation." The French, he warned, had been bamboozled by novel doctrines to their extreme detriment, a fate his English readers would avoid provided they remained true to their native reluctance to innovate. The second trend was the prevalence of what we might today call "ideological thinking" among French political and cultural elites. Those who are blinkered by an ideology (in this case the rights of man), Burke suggested, will lack the capacity for finessed political judgment necessary to steer the state through choppy waters.

In this very fine book Daniel O'Neill takes this alleged critic of innovation and ideology and argues that he himself was both innovator and ideologue. Burke, O'Neill claims, made a "great innovation" by blending ornamentalist and orientalist justifications of Britain's imperial endeavor in ways highly original to him (27). This innovation, however, also made of Burke the most dogmatic of ideologues, whose several interventions on issues of imperial policy were informed by an overarching conservative ideology. "Informed" is perhaps too light a word; so blinkered was Burke by his conservative logic of empire, O'Neill suggests, that it "dictated" his responses to the various imperial crises he was confronted with

throughout his career (58). There is little here of the moderate, flexible pragmatist that conservatives today look to for inspiration, or of the critic of imperial abuses that has attracted even the left of late. On O'Neill's reading, Burke as thinker and political actor was ideological to the core, to the point where his criticism of ideologues in 1790s France starts to resemble an act of projection.

This revised account of Burke's imperial thought is nothing if not bold and should be commended for offering a useful corrective against the tendency to read too much into Burke's criticisms of British imperial abuses. Advocates of imperial withdrawal were rare among British political elites of the eighteenth century, and this book establishes beyond a shred of doubt that Burke was not among them. It also helpfully brings to light some unsavory aspects of Burke's writings on empire that other commentators have either glossed over or ignored entirely. One is that Burke sought reconciliation with the American colonists partly because he saw them as a potential vanguard in a westward imperial push against Native American "savages" (72). Another is that the "Sketch of a Negro Code," often described as an anti-slavery tract, was in fact nothing of the sort (it would be a strange anti-slavery document that proposed re-enslavement of the manumitted as punishment for crimes as innocuous as "idleness, drunkenness" or "vagrancy") (87). Even Burke's impassioned denunciation of Warren Hastings' abuses of power starts to look a little less pristine when we take seriously his condoning of Sir Robert Clive's earlier plundering of Bengal.

Welcome as this willingness to confront uncomfortable evidence undoubtedly is, I have concerns about the overall portrait of Burke we are left with at the end of it all. Although the book's treatment of individual pieces of evidence is persuasive, I am not convinced that in each and every case Burke's decisions emanated from a single identifiable "logic." Put otherwise, I want to question whether all of Burke's writings on empire can be considered mere expressions of a coherent conservative ideology, as O'Neill suggests.

My first apprehension concerns the relation between theory and practice in Burke's project. O'Neill insists that Burke had an

unwavering commitment to the British Empire as a theoretical ideal and it is this that interpreters of his writings should emphasize first and foremost. The profound reservations Burke had about how imperial policy had been "bungled in practice" (reservations often confused with a rejection of empire as such) are thus, for O'Neill, of secondary importance (39). The risk here, however, is that privileging Burke's theoretical vision over his judgments about political practice will impair our ability to understand what Burke was about in writing what he did. Burke was a consistent thinker, but he was no less consistently interested in the unavoidably practical question of how imperial power was being used (and abused). One gets the impression from O'Neill that Burke only took an interest in imperial policy to the extent that it undermined his theoretical ideal, and that so long as Britain's empire remained civilized (i.e., hierarchical and religious) his sympathy for the Indians, Irish Catholics, and coerced American colonists who were its victims would have been far more muted. Those who pretend otherwise, O'Neill implies, are guilty not only of misdirecting their interpretive attention, but of extending to Burke an interpretive charity that he ill deserves.

O'Neill maintains that Burke, in order to defend this theoretical ideal, tacked back and forth between opposing "theoretical strategies," one emphasizing civilizational similarities between core and periphery (ornamentalism) and the other stressing exotic otherness or difference (orientalism), and that most of what Burke wrote on empire can be understood as exemplifying one of these (1). However, this seems to rule out those cases where Burke's assessments may not have been mere ideological reflexes but considered political or moral judgments. Take, for instance, Burke's decision to blame the Protestant Ascendency for the oppression of Irish Catholics rather than take issue with the government in London. In O'Neill's view, this shows Burke at his most ideologically blind. Unable to imagine that his beloved imperial metropolis might be at fault, Burke heaped all the blame onto the Protestant Ascendency and so failed to trace the roots of Irish oppression to its true source. Likewise, O'Neill claims that Burke's

campaign for freer trade with Ireland was mainly an instrumental move aimed at preserving Ireland's place in the empire and that he was more than willing to forgo free trade in other circumstances.

Did Burke, then, arrive at these conclusions merely from a steely determination to keep his imperial ideal alive? Maybe. But Burke was often in broad company in adopting the positions he did, and not everyone who agreed with him can have shared his precise vision for the empire. Gustave de Beaumont, a French thinker with little investment in Burke's imperial dream, offered a very similar condemnation of the Irish aristocracy for their colossal failure to sympathize with the Catholic majority and made clear that he attributed responsibility for Ireland's sufferings to them rather than to London.[1] On the issue of Irish trade Burke was also far from alone. Adam Smith, most notably, called British attempts to "crush" Irish industry "equally unjust and impolitic."[2] Mary Wollstonecraft, hardly an ideological fellow traveler of Burke's, similarly decried the "painful subordination" that Ireland had to suffer as a result of British trade policy.[3] Now it might be that these thinkers were ideologically hamstrung in the same way Burke was. But it could also be that they, like Burke, arrived at these judgments on the basis of considerations of justice unrelated to keeping Ireland anchored in the empire. That this is at least a possibility suggests that the notion of a "conservative logic of empire" is being asked to explain too much of what Burke said and did.

My second concern is that the book seems overly conditioned by the literature to which it responds. All academic productions need to show how they are correcting a scholarly consensus in order to clarify their contribution. In this case, however, I wonder if in O'Neill's haste to refute certain authors he has allowed himself to mirror some of their mistakes. Whereas O'Neill's opponents not only *interpreted* Burke as a critic of empire but also *celebrated* him as such, he responds by not only interpreting Burke anew as favorably disposed toward empire but also by *condemning* him on those grounds. If Burke had become a "kinder, gentler, figure" appalled

by imperial violence, then he must now be exposed as the unrepentant and unsentimental hack for the British imperial cause that he was (7). If some have looked fondly on Burke's sensitivity to cultural difference, we must now see him as nothing other than an inveterate foe of "modern secular liberal democracies" (177). There is a seesaw quality to this sort of exchange, and the risk is that we will end up with two contrasting Burkes that are little more than stand-ins for ideological positions. The three-dimensional historical figure, in the meantime, fades from view.

My final point is related to the previous one and concerns O'Neill's insistence that "conservative" is the appropriate label for a thinker like Burke. Michael Oakeshott famously defined conservatism not as a set of doctrines but as a kind of skeptical disposition. There is little trace of this sort of skeptical conservative in O'Neill's portrait of Burke. His Burke is a doctrinaire conservative all the way down and apparently we must recognize him as such lest we be duped into thinking that he might have had something interesting to say about the political world in which he lived. This return to the hoary old reactionary Burke leaves the reader with the following final impression. 'Some on the left have been tempted to learn something from Burke's imaginative and rhetorically devastating critiques of British imperial abuses. But let us not make that mistake; conservatives are rotten and Burke was among them!' In other words, it is the polemical note that rings in the reader's ear rather than the contribution the book makes toward our understanding of a vital figure of the eighteenth century. The book's concluding sentence proclaims that the debate about Burke's defense of empire is well worth having, but one gets the sense from O'Neill that there is little of worth to be had in reading Burke at all. At most he should be glanced at as a representative (maybe a particularly eloquent one) of British conservative ideology but otherwise can be consigned to the dustbin along with the rest of the reactionaries. Those of us who still include Burke on our syllabi will be inclined to disagree.

**Endnotes**

1. Gustave de Beaumont, *Ireland: Social, Political, and Religious* (London: Harvard University Press, 2006). The chapter entitled "A Bad Aristocracy is the Primary Cause of all the Evils of Ireland" makes Beaumont's case clear.
2. Smith cited in Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 158.
3. Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 42.