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O'Neill on Burke's Not-Particularly-Conservative Logic of Empire

Brandon Turner
Clemson University

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 *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, Dan O'Neill sets out to get a few things straight, and by the time he concludes this tightly focused book he largely succeeds. His positions—his "increasingly heterodox" positions—are three: first, that "Edmund Burke was a consistently conservative political thinker"; second, that "he was a passionate defender of the British Empire in the eighteenth century"; and third, that "Burke's conservatism … provided the theoretical framework within which his defense of empire was built."[1] It is, I think, quite fair to say that O'Neill's real focus in *Conservative Logic of Empire* is on the second of these propositions, so I'll start there.

There is a clear-sightedness to this book that is rare in academic writing. O'Neill circles back again and again to one plain fact: that, despite his celebrated attacks on British rule in India under Warren Hastings, Burke's support for British empire in India—and many other places besides—never flagged. O'Neill deftly follows Burke's arguments for empire across the globe, tracking Burke's rhetorical and conceptual changes as they shift to meet new terrain. The principle shift here is between a strategy of Orientalism to one of Ornamentalism. In the New World and elsewhere, Burke "others" the natives of the New World and the African slaves forcibly brought there; in the colonies, Ireland, and India, meanwhile, he

shifts rhetorical registers and embraces subjected populations by emphasizing their civilizational closeness to Britain. In so doing, he lends justification to a British *mission civilisatrice* upon the savage "Others," and to a moderate and profitable imperial subjection for Britain's cousins. On these points, O'Neill accumulates a wealth of oft-unsettling textual evidence; few readers will finish this book still holding that Burke was one of Britain's first anti-imperialist figures.

The Conservative Logic of Empire is, however, a work unusually constrained by its literature, where the *facts* of Burke's imperialist sympathies have taken something of a backseat to the remarkable ways in which these sympathies were *expressed*. Recent work on empire in modern political thought by Uday Mehta and Jennifer Pitts, among others, as well as recent treatments of Burke's life and ideas, have emphasized Burke's role as an often-vicious critic of British imperialism—indeed, a critic of often surprising depth and imagination. These accounts tend to draw at length from Burke's extended engagement with the East India Company's activities in India and, in particular, his near-decade-long pursuit of Warren Hastings, and they tend to highlight the impressive rhetorical heights of Burke's many long speeches delivered before and during Hastings' trial. This Burke repeatedly and powerfully prods the imaginative and sympathetic powers of his audience by emphasizing at great length the profound similarities between British and Indian society.

> This multitude of men [India] does not consist of an abject and barbarous populace; much less of gangs of savages, like the Guaranies and Chiquitos, who wander on the waste borders of the River of Amazons or the Plate; but a people for ages civilized and cultivated—cultivated by all the arts of polished life, whilst we were yet in the woods.

India, to Burke, was no backwards land of strangers—rather, it was as a wealthy and civilized distant cousin of the English, complete with "princes … of great dignity, authority, and opulence," an "ancient and venerable priesthood," a "nobility of great antiquity

and renown," a "multitude of cities, not exceeded … by those of the first class in Europe," along with "merchants and bankers … ingenious manufactures and mechanics … [and] millions of the most diligent, and not the least intelligent, tillers of the earth."[2] By rendering the unfamiliar familiar in this way, Burke attempted to bridge the gap of sympathy between his British colleagues and their besieged imperial subjects in a project that Mehta describes as a "conversation between two strangers," part of a "cosmopolitanism of sentiments."[3]

O'Neill is having none of this. What Mehta and others celebrate as a cosmopolitanism of sentiments is, for O'Neill, precisely the opposite: Burke's rhetorical strategy during the India affair is one of "saming"—itself a strategy within what David Cannadine labels imperialism as "Ornamentalism": "the process of theoretically assimilating the unknown and potentially alien world of the colonial periphery into the conservative, hierarchical social world that prevailed at the imperial core and ruling on the basis of that conception."[4] Attempts to appreciate Burke as a theorist of difference—let alone *radical* difference—are thus doomed to fail: his loving and lovely descriptions of Indian society were a "celebration of the known and familiar, not the unknown and unfamiliar."[5] This "saming" allows Burke to recognize those features of Indian society that mirror those he most cherishes in England—in particular, its time-worn hierarchies and sturdy religious institutions. This, in turn, generates the titular "conservative logic of empire"—Hastings here plays the part of the leveling Jacobin, and Burke seeks to reassert parliamentary oversight over the Company in order to begin the necessary reform of British rule. Throughout this discussion, O'Neill keeps his plain fact in steady circulation: that, despite the ferocity of his pursuit of Hastings, Burke sought to maintain British imperial control in India. In an oft-quoted line from "Speech on Fox's East India Bill," Burke writes that "if we are not able to contrive some method of governing India *well*, which will not of necessity become the means of governing Great Britain *ill*, a ground is laid for their eternal separation, but none for sacrificing the people of that country to our Constitution"; O'Neill, however,

goads us into finishing that paragraph as Burke immediately continues: "I am, however, far from being persuaded that any such incompatibility of interest does at all exist."[6]

If anything, this could be pushed harder. It's easy enough to imagine a counterargument that acknowledges the fact of Burke's imperialist sympathies while insisting that his sympathetic engagements with Indian society point the way out of the universalist logic of liberal imperialism and towards a respect for difference. This, anyway, seems consistent with the hope that one sometimes spies lurking in the background of this particular literature—the hope that better *approaches* to difference will generate more respect (and less violence) towards those who are different. For O'Neill, however, in a conclusion that could easily be expanded considerably, "*nothing at all* can be divined about a given thinker's association to some strand of Enlightenment ideas and his or her commitment to empire."[7] O'Neill helps us see glimmers of a logic of imperial control even within Burke's sympathetic engagements. What, after all, would an American intelligence official stationed in Afghanistan prefer: a liberal idealist's progressive conception of history, or a rich and textured—one might even call it a sympathetic!—account of Afghanistan's people and its institutions? As political theory continues what some have called its "affective turn," we'd do well to remember that we are not always kind or just or beneficent to the subjects of our sympathy.

Where *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* stumbles a bit, in my view, is in the way it conceives of Burke's conservatism. Dan O'Neill is not what a disinterested observer would consider to be an admirer of Edmund Burke, or of Burkean conservatism—an impression that is reinforced by his previous book, *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy*. O'Neill's Burke is a "deeply conservative figure, one thoroughly beholden to the illiberal idea of natural inequality and hierarchy among human beings … entirely antipathetic to any notions of political equality, universal declarations of rights, or secularism … [who] resolutely rejected all forms of democracy and democratization (understood as the right of the lower orders and

women to vote, hold office, and take an active role in politics)."[8] Here, Burke's abiding inegalitarianism informs his handling of the India affair. How might one, for example, spur British elites into reconsidering imperial policy? Tell them stories "focusing on the downfall of the great" to engage their sympathies. For O'Neill, this "rhetorical strategy … [was] wholly consistent with his earlier moral theory, and in keeping with his broader principles … it was profoundly reflective of Burke's own deepest concerns, which lay not principally with the common people but rather with their social and economic superiors."[9] Yet surely it's plausible to suggest that Burke might actually believe that inegalitarianism of a certain kind is necessary for the maintenance of a stable and beneficent civil society, the existence of which benefits all, including the lower orders. One recalls that (and Burke reminds us that), for all its egalitarian rhetoric, revolutionary France was not a particularly egalitarian place in practice.

What might a more, say, sympathetic Burkean conservatism have to teach a would-be imperialist? If conservatism—and here I mean, for lack of a better word, *good* conservatism—if conservatism is understood primarily as a reaction *not* to the leveling or ennobling effects of democratization but rather as a reaction to the pernicious and frequently disastrous effects of what Friedrich Hayek called "the fatal conceit" of modern utopian thinking—if *this* is what we mean by conservatism, then there may be something on offer.[10] A conservative in the mold of a Friedrich Hayek or Michael Oakeshott might say to an aspiring imperialist, as Burke so often does in his letter on France: "slow down! These people are not pieces on a chess board; you act from a dangerously inflated sense of what you're capable of; these attempts to impose order and meaning on a people from the outside will lead inexorably to disaster." If O'Neill is right that having the right ideological or sympathetic commitments has done little to inure us from the siren song of empire, then perhaps this good conservative could offer something else: a stern warning against meddling in what we do not understand.

Endnotes

1. Daniel I. O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016), 1.
2. Edmund Burke, "Speech on Fox's East India Bill," in *Selected Writings of Edmund Burke*, ed. W. J. Bate (New York: Modern Library, 1960), 272–3.
3. Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 22.
4. O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 170.
5. Ibid, 109.
6. Burke, "Speech on Fox's East India Bill," 265–6.
7. O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire*, 174, emphasis mine.
8. Ibid., 6. On this description of Burke's conservatism, O'Neill cites Don Herzog's *Poisoning the Minds of the Lower Orders*.
9. Ibid., 115.
10. Friedrich Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, ed. W. W. Bartley III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).