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Reply to Critics[1]

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In his characteristically insightful comments, Ulas Ince questions why I bypass what he sees as the manifestly liberal features of Burke's political economy. For Ince, my book misses the opportunity to discuss the ways in which Burke's economic liberalism is imbricated within his simultaneous commitment to political illiberalism, or what I have called Burke's conservatism. There is a good deal to be said for Ince's view—not least that it gestures at more contemporary admixtures of liberalism and conservatism—but I wonder if he is perhaps too quick to overlook significant differences between Burke and liberal political economists like his friend Adam Smith. Here, I mention three such differences briefly.

First, when it came to the British settler colonies in the New World, Smith's position in the *Wealth of Nations* was a good deal more skeptical than Burke's. In assessing colonial political economy, Smith engaged in a withering critique of chattel slavery in the British colonies as both fundamentally immoral and economically unwise and developed a recognizably anti-slavery position. But, as I show in the book, Burke's view on colonial slavery was very different. In his early work Burke argues for expanding the slave trade from West to East Africa (76).[2] Later, in arguing against freeing the slaves in the American South for fear of drawing colonial ire, Burke insisted that one of the reasons this should not be done was that "slaves are often much attached to their masters" (79). During the American Revolutionary War itself, he lamented that the slave trade, which he called the "most valuable Branch of Commerce" within the Empire, had "been wholly lost," and this became the basis of one of the draft articles of impeachment he drew up against Lord North in 1779 (83). Similarly, while it is little remarked

by scholars, Burke was horrified by the Haitian Revolution, considered by many as the most successful slave rebellion in human history. Burke read the revolution as disastrous proof of the pernicious consequences of the French doctrine of the Rights of Man, whose spread he compared to a deadly communicable disease infecting and destroying the French West Indian colonies, which he called "most happy and flourishing" until they were exposed to it (88–89).

The second point of contrast between Burke and liberal political economy as set forth by Smith regards India. Here, Smith argued strenuously against the British East India Company's simultaneous role as monopoly economic firm and regnant political power. Smith believed that the East India Company should either cease to be a monopolistic merchant or cease to have political power. Burke, however, declared his "insuperable reluctance in giving my hand to destroy any established institution of government, upon a theory, however plausible it may be" (38). Which is to say that in the case of imperial conquest in India, as with that of slavery in the New World, Burke's commitment to the conservative notions of "prescription" and "prejudice" led him to argue against the conclusions that Smithian liberal political economy suggested.

Third and perhaps most importantly, as Donald Winch has argued in *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (1996), Burke and Smith had fundamentally different views on the role of aristocracies and established churches. For Smith, the aristocracy was largely unproductive and corrupt, and church establishments threatened the eighteenth century with the specter of religious "enthusiasm." However, as I argued in *The Burke-Wollstonecraft Debate: Savagery, Civilization, and Democracy* (2007), for Burke an organized religion connected to the state and a landed aristocracy were the central institutions in his theory of history. On Smith's version of the traditional Scottish Enlightenment four-stages historical thesis, it was changes in modes of production that ultimately drove the movement from savagery through barbarism to civilization. However, Burke inverted the Scottish Enlightenment/Smithian

story to argue that it wasn't changes in political economy that propelled the civilizing process, but rather the church and the nobility taming and civilizing "manners" within accepted social hierarchies over historical time, which enabled the "natural aristocracy" to govern, and in turn made commercial society and its political economy possible. In short, I agree with Ince that there was "imbrication" between economic liberalism and political illiberalism but want to hold fast to the notion that the "lexical priority" of the latter over the former is nevertheless crucial for understanding Burke's conservative logic of empire.

I want to turn next to Burke Hendrix's thoughtful remarks on the role of political imagination, or what he calls a "Burkean understanding," and the possibilities for imperial critique and greater intercultural understanding that it might open up. Hendrix is one of the leading experts on colonialism in North America and has done a great deal of terrific work reconstructing the political, social, and economic worldview of Native Americans. Thus, I found Hendrix's juxtaposition of Burke's description of the Onandagas as set forth in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* against the richness and complexity of their actual beliefs and social practices edifying. Edifying, to be sure, but also perplexing from the standpoint of how one should interpret Burke. For, as Hendrix notes, "This is not the Onandagas as Burke describes them." The difficulty I am struggling with is how a view of the Native Americans in general, and the Onandagas specifically, that contradicts what Edmund Burke actually thought of them can appropriately be seen as employing a "Burkean method" to develop a "Burkean understanding" of them.

Burke's actual understanding of Native Americans is more aptly captured when he pleads with the American colonists during the midst of the Revolutionary War: "You will not, we trust, believe, that…we could have thought of letting loose upon you, our late beloved Brethren, these fierce tribes of Savages and Cannibals, in whom the traces of human nature are effaced by ignorance and barbarity. We rather wished to have joined with you, in bringing gradually that unhappy part of mankind into civility, order, piety, and virtuous discipline." For Burke, Native Americans were

exemplars of "savagery," and their radical alterity made them ripe for a civilizing imperial mission, one which he hoped would bind the British and Americans together in one Westward moving empire under "the Command and Blessing of Providence, 'Encrease and Multiply'" (71–72). In short, I am a good deal more skeptical than Hendrix that we can sever such sentiments from something called a "Burkean understanding" and privilege the latter at the expense of the former. The subtlety, interpretive sensitivity, and appreciation of difference here all belong to Burke Hendrix, not Edmund Burke, and there is a wide gulf separating their respective understanding of Native Americans, notwithstanding their shared name.

Looking more closely, however, one sees that neither Hendrix's sensitive understanding of the Amerindians nor the "Burkean method" he advocates is actually derived from his reading of Burke on the Indians of North America, but rather of Burke on India. As for most interpreters, for Hendrix the "real" Burke on empire is not to be found in the New World, or even in Ireland, but rather on the subcontinent. But it doesn't seem to me that in attempting to come to grips with Edmund Burke's overall interpretation of otherness or difference that we are interpretively free to cleave one portion of his argument from the rest and have it stand in for his broader position on these phenomena, a mistake made all too often in the secondary literature. India is crucial, but it is not the whole story.

Having said that, I turn to Lida Maxwell's challenging comments, which do focus principally on India, as well as raising a number of important methodological and terminological issues. With respect to her second set of concerns, Maxwell criticizes my depiction of Burke as an "imperialist" as an oversimplification, and she is wary of my description of him as having developed a "logic of empire." Let me take the latter point first. The "logic of empire" I am saying animated Burke's thinking is not an a priori analytical category but rather my inductive reading of the evidence, which concludes that his particular view of history as a civilizing process crucially informed his interpretation of empire (as well as revolution). I argue further that Burke's historical understanding of other

societies as "savage" or "civilized" structured both the nature and extent of his critique of empire and shaped the practical policies he offered across the empire's landscape to rectify its problems as he saw them. With regard to Maxwell's terminological point, I would argue that a logic so understood certainly does not preclude the possibility of one being a critic of empire. Indeed, throughout the book I am at great pains to demonstrate that Burke criticized imperial practice at length, albeit very differently depending on whether the locale in question was a "savage" or "civilized" society.

I would hasten to add, however, that being a critic of empire in some respects does not preclude one from also being an imperialist. Even if we leave the New World aside, where the evidence is copious, in the Indian case Burke's career-long defense of Robert Clive is also surely a defense of imperialism. It was, after all, Clive and Company forces—not Warren Hastings—that conquered Northern India and established Britain's territorial empire there, which began the siphoning of India's incredible wealth through plunder, taxation, and bribery. And it was Clive and his immediate successors before Warren Hastings ever took office whose avarice created the conditions that exacerbated a famine in India which killed approximately 10 million people in 1769–1770. Yet Burke sang Clive's praises on the floor of the House of Commons in that very year. And in 1772–1773, he fought the creation of a select committee to inquire into Clive and the Company's misdeeds, arguing that "no nation ever formed a tribunal to sit and inquire by what Crimes it was they acquired an augmentation of their empire" (37).

Twenty years later, during Hastings' impeachment trial, when the scale of Clive's crimes was well known, Burke nevertheless praised Clive's "daring and commanding genius" and claimed "that the plan which he laid down, and the course which he pursued were in general great and well imagined" (33). Indeed, during Hastings' trial, Burke relied on his conservative doctrine of "Prudence" to argue that when it came to the violent conquest of India and the fifteen years that followed it (1757–1772) before Hastings took power, the British ought to draw a "veil over a business in which otherwise the fortune, the genius, the talents and

military virtue of this Nation never shone more conspicuously" (36). I would submit that Burke's defense of Clive as well as his preferred policy of willful historical amnesia as a means of bracketing off the violence of armed conquest and its aftermath in India do not exculpate him from the charge of imperialism but rather demonstrate its plausibility.

But what of Burke's later attempt to forge an empathetic bond across the boundaries of difference during the Hastings trial, which both Maxwell and Hendrix point to as the most redeeming feature of his arguments? On this score, I think Maxwell and Hendrix are right to point to Burke's recognition of the limits of such analogies between Europe and India, but of course Burke freely admitted those limits. Nevertheless, in my view it is Burke's *attempt* to efface the differences between India and Europe that really matters, not that he couldn't succeed in doing so completely. The larger point to be made against Uday Mehta and his followers in the postcolonial endeavor to enlist Burke as an ally is simply that Burke's goal was never to valorize cultural difference or alterity. Rather his aim was to erase that difference to the extent possible, thereby assimilating the unfamiliar to the familiar, rather than meeting it happily on the plane of its unfamiliarity, as Mehta would have it.

This approach makes perfect sense given Burke's commitment to the eighteenth century concept of sympathy (or what today we would call empathy), which is after all elicited based on similarity, not difference. To that end, Burke repeatedly tells his parliamentary audience in the Hastings Trial that they should care about what happens in India because it is a civilization like Europe and Britain, not a savage land like America. For Burke, India was defined by great organized religions connected to politics: it had a large land holding aristocracy (the *zamindars*), a Hindu caste system that Burke compared favorably to the European system of ranks, and a Muslim ancient constitution that Burke analogized directly to Britain's. And, as Ulas Ince reminds us, it was also a great commercial society.

Turning next to what Maxwell appropriately calls the "stakes" involved in all of this interpretive debate, I think it is important to

note that my affinity for David Cannadine's notion of "Ornamentalism," which Maxwell rightly points out stresses class similarities as the basis for civilizational affinity, also sits right alongside my deployment of perhaps the quintessential postcolonial notion, Edward Said's concept of "Orientalism," which stresses "Othering." Of course, it the case that in the book I describe the "Other" not in racial terms but rather as a form of "savagery" predicated on a lack of organized religion and aristocracy. But that is because *Burke* does not rely on race as an independent category of analysis. For him the Amerindians and Africans are "savages," whereas the Indians of the subcontinent are "civilized," but this has nothing to do with race per se. Nevertheless, when confronted with what he perceives as real cultural differences, as in the New World, rather than differences that could be greatly diminished if not effaced through analogical acts of theoretical imagination, as in India, Burke's impulse was in fact to defend a civilizing imperial mission. For me, this makes his work of very limited utility for those seeking to embrace cultural difference and other forms of diversity in the present.

All of which brings me to Ross Carroll, among whose probing concerns is a worry that I have reduced the great Burke to a reactionary and doctrinaire conservative and condemned him as a mere "imperialist ideologue." Yet, if we understand political theory as an act of communication intended to further a particular set of practical needs, interests, and activities then seeing Burke as "ideological" should not be shocking. In a classic statement made over forty years ago, Richard Ashcraft asserted that, "A theory is political… only in relation to the maintenance or furtherance of the social, political, and economic objectives of a specifically identifiable group within society," which is "[t]o say that political theory is ideology."[3] One might not wish to go quite this far, but in Burke's case it is nevertheless well worth asking: What would a non-ideological set of arguments concerning empire put forth by a lifelong member of British Parliament look like? One need not hold Marx's view of ideology to believe that considered political judgments don't constitute a view from nowhere and cannot simply be

detached and made to float freely from the particular social and economic interests that they are articulated in part to defend.

For his part, Burke always argued that he was a consistent thinker and, as Carroll points out, recently both Richard Bourke and David Bromwich have described him as such. So, the real question becomes: to what do we attribute Burke's consistency? Like Ashcraft, I believe that the appropriate interpretive standard for answering this question ought to be plausibility based on the available evidence.

Take the issue of Irish free trade, which Carroll mentions. I have produced evidence from Burke's texts taken in historical context to make the case that, on balance, his commitment to Irish free trade was principally about keeping the empire together. Now, I may be dead wrong about this, but that cannot be shown by reference to hypotheticals concerning what constitutes an interpretive "possibility" for a given thinker to have argued. Lots of things are possible. Carroll of course is right that politics sometimes makes for strange bedfellows, but the trick is not to point to the simple fact of superficial agreement between otherwise divergent thinkers on a particular policy, but rather to explain it.

For example, as I also discuss in the book, both Burke and the United Irishmen supported the elimination of the anti-Catholic penal laws. On the one hand, Burke saw the popery laws as eviscerating the Catholic aristocracy and church, the two pillars of the civilizing process. By clinging to these discriminatory measures, he believed that the Protestant Ascendancy was thereby driving four-fifths of Ireland's population into the waiting arms of the Godless, leveling French Revolutionaries, and thus fomenting Irish independence, a prospect Burke found terrifying. For Burke, then, eliminating the penal laws was a means of quelling Catholic discontent and keeping Ireland within the fold of empire. On the other hand, for the United Irishmen eliminating the penal laws was the first step to Irish independence, universal manhood suffrage, and the universal Rights of Man—for which reason they sought (and achieved) a military alliance with the French Revolutionaries. Again, all of this could be wrong, but it is based on my reading of

the available evidence and does not constitute a Procrustean diminution of Burke's argument into an ill-fitting analytical bed.

Without leaving Carroll's final set of concerns behind, I want to turn directly to Brandon Turner's remarks. Turner's comments are very generous, but in some ways he also asks the most difficult question for me to answer; namely, what valuable lessons can we import directly from Burke and employ to help us grapple with political problems in our own time? Or, as Carroll might put it, why should we leave Burke on our syllabi?

One is tempted to answer by saying that while diving into the texts of canonical thinkers for pearls of wisdom is certainly one approach to political theory, it is not the only one. We can also profitably read Burke from a Nietzschean genealogical perspective—to try to understand how we've become what we are, or how the phenomenon of empire unfurled, and with what consequences, up to and including for our own present. I argue here that both elements of Burke's theoretical strategy—Ornamentalism and Orientalism—prefigured a good deal of Britain's subsequent imperial ideology and thus helped shaped the modern world we inherited and inhabit.

Yet somehow I don't think that this answer would completely satisfy either Turner or Carroll, and surely it shouldn't. I believe that one of the fundamental differences between history and political theory is that political theorists are bound by duty to offer a normative assessment of the texts they interpret, whereas historians are not. (I leave aside the question of whether historians can actually evade making normative judgments; I don't believe that such evasion is actually possible.) In any event, the vast majority of political theorists who have written on Burke and empire in the past twenty years have sought not only to *reconstruct* his position but also to *defend* it. In this respect, I am taking issue not so much with their approach as with their conclusions.

So, to answer the normative question that both Turner and Carroll raise: I think there are certainly some principles in Burke's thought which are conventionally associated with conservatism that can serve valuable political purposes. These include reminding us

of human imperfectability, cautioning us about the limits of our rational capacities, recommending skepticism about grand utopian schemes, warning us about the threat of unintended consequences, and recommending incrementalism as sometimes the best mode of change. These concepts have some appeal in an abstract philosophical sense. However, I think that other Burkean principles are less defensible from a normative standpoint: a commitment to an organized religion connected to the state, a defense of aristocracy and hierarchy, a belief that prescription and prejudice constitute the wisdom of the species. Moreover, when we move from the abstract to the concrete, we see that Burke's philosophical principles were actually used politically to excoriate what he saw as the advent of democracy and democratization, to lambast the language of universal rights, to defend massive economic inequality as natural and beneficial, and to mock gender equality as a monstrous assault on nature, all of which viewpoints Burke's writings on the French Revolution amply demonstrate.

Similarly, my book shows that when we turn to the concrete elaboration of Burke's political principles in the context of empire we see that they led him to defend a civilizing mission against the Native Americans of the New World, to celebrate the civilizing capacities of religion for African slaves, to oppose the Haitian Revolution, and to argue passionately against Irish independence. They also provided the basis for a critique of empire in India that overlooked its most violent period and the catastrophic famine that accompanied it, only to later criticize Hastings for attacking the Indian equivalent of the *ancien régime*. But this last move was not meant to decouple India from the British Empire but rather to recall Britain it to its glorious Providential purpose in defending a colonial society as hierarchically structured as its own, a point Burke repeatedly argued until the very end of his life. As a political theorist, I admit to finding these positions normatively troubling, to say the least.

Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Ross Carroll, Burke Hendrix, Onur Ulas Ince, Lida Maxwell, and Brandon Turner for their generous participation in

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2. All references to Burke, including quotes, are taken from Daniel I. O'Neill, *Edmund Burke and the Conservative Logic of Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016) and will appear parenthetically in the text.
3. See Richard Ashcraft, "On the Problem of Methodology and the Nature of Political Theory," *Political Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1975), 20. For a further elaboration of Ashcraft's view that, by definition, political theory *is* ideology, see "Political Theory and the Problem of Ideology," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 42 (1980): 687–705; and "One Step Backward, Two Steps Forward: Reflections upon Contemporary Political Theory," in *What Should Political Theory Be Now?* ed. John S. Nelson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1983), 515–48.