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Edmund Burke and the French Revolution: Notes on the Genesis of the Reflections

by WILLIAM PALMER

As EVERY schoolboy knows, Edmund Burke in his Reflections accurately forecast many aspects of the eventual course of the French Revolution. Long before the September Massacres, the execution of the King and Queen, and the Terror, Burke prophesied deepening violence. He surmised that the possible implications of the Revolution were worldwide. He predicted the failure of democratic principles. And he foresaw the emergence of a military despot.

Every schoolboy also knows that respect for Burke's remarkable prescience must be tempered by the realization that many of the facts on which he based his predictions were wrong. Burke failed to perceive that the Revolution had initially been ignited by a révolte nobiliaire in 1787–88 against royal authority. He ignored inequalities in voting and privilege within the Estates General in May 1789, and failed to understand that part of the opposition to the King and Necker was aristocratic. More critically, Burke's grasp of the social structure of France on the eve of the Revolution was pitiful. Nowhere in the Reflections or his correspondence does Burke exhibit any sympathy for the hardships created by successive harvest failures and exorbitant bread prices. In his anger at the violence of July 1789, Burke neglected to observe that it was triggered by troop movements around Paris.

Still worse, Burke viewed the terrified farmers of the Great Fear and the rioting artisans and shopkeepers of Paris and the towns as the lowest echelon of society waging its perpetual struggle against property and order. Adherence to this view led Burke to his most serious error: he believed that the Revolution was a conspiracy of the propertyless elements of French society urged on by misguided and foolhardy men of property. Behind the lawyers, petty officials, and professional men of the National Assembly, Burke detected two sinister influences. First, he blamed the clique of "literary men" for undermining a vital component of society in their long and odious campaign against religion. Second, Burke condemned the "monied interest," which, jealous of the wealth and prestige of the old aristocracy, had allied with the descendents of Voltaire and Rousseau to contrive the destruction of French society. Examining

2. The best summary of Burke's misconceptions may be found in Alfred Cobban's introduction to the sixth volume of Burke's correspondence. See Alfred Cobban and R. A. Smith, eds., The Correspondence of Edmund Burke (Chicago and Cambridge, 1967), VI, xv–xvi. Hereafter the work will be cited as Burke, Correspondence.
Burke's use of evidence, Alfred Cobban concluded that Burke's view of the Revolution's origins was "inadequate and irrational," and that he was "persistently and ludicrously wrong in his detailed estimate of French affairs."

In many of his views Burke was clearly mistaken about key aspects of the Revolution. Yet on occasion some of the charges amount to holding him responsible for evidence and interpretations which were only revealed by later scholarship. For example, the significance of the révolte nobiliaire was not fully appreciated until the work of Georges Lefebvre in the twentieth century. As late as 1943, the English historian J. M. Thompson could begin his graceful and much-admired synthesis of pre-World War II scholarship with the summoning of the Estates in May 1789. And it required decades of research, numerous monographs, and ferocious disputes in the pages of scholarly journals to unearth the social origins of the Revolution. Thus, in certain ways it is anachronistic to expect Burke to match the sophisticated understanding of Lefebvre or even Carlyle. Making a fair determination of Burke's use or misuse of evidence requires an examination of the corpus of information available to him in 1789 and locating the instances at which he followed it or departed from it. Or, to summon up a phrase from the vasty deep of the American political psyche: What did Burke know and when did he know it? If Burke is to be charged with ignorance or distortion, he can only be judged on the basis of evidence available to him in 1789, not on that uncovered by the labors of modern scholars.

Burke derived information about the French Revolution from several sources: conversations with friends, private correspondence, and newspapers. He was even able to examine some of the cahiers. Concerning the first source, conversations with friends, nothing can be said with certainty. There is no way to know what passed between Burke and his friends. We will also never know precisely what information, if any, Burke obtained from the cahiers. The prospectus for gathering information from the other sources, however, is more heartening. Burke's correspondence survives most abundantly in the years 1789-91, and the most important contemporary newspapers are available.

From 1789-90 the British press presented a remarkably uniform assessment of events in France. Although particular papers sometimes differed on certain matters and violent divisions erupted during the later course of the Revolution, in 1789-90 a fairly consistent appraisal emerged. In the early months of 1789 both Government and Opposition newspapers displayed a detached, yet sympathetic, attitude toward events in France. They believed that the calling of the Estates was an attempt to overthrow despotic rule and they predicted that

5. There is also an excellent article on the British press reaction to the Revolution. See Rosemary Begemann, "British Press Reactions to the French Revolution, 1789–1793," Red River Valley Historical Journal of World History, IV (Summer 1980), 332-45. I am much indebted to this fine study.
it would result in the establishment of a limited, constitutional monarchy.  

Interest in French affairs increased with the summoning of the Estates, and the British press reported on the events of the early summer of 1789 with surprising accuracy. Several papers perceived the powerful consequences of the scarcity of grain and the high cost of bread. Most English newspapers also recognized that the principal problem confronting the Estates-General concerned voting and privileges. But, even as early as the first week of June 1789, a conservative line began to emerge. The World, a Government paper, criticized the Estates-General for doing nothing, although somewhat contradictorily arguing that inaction was the most prudent policy, since, "Abstract questions, impracticable reforms, and dangerous innovations can alone betide them."  

Interest again mounted in July 1789 and newspapers devoted more attention to French affairs. Reportage was so closely tuned to events in France that none of the papers expressed surprise when the Bastille was stormed. Moreover, contemporary accounts of the storming of the Bastille were sometimes more accurate than those of later historians, who transformed the event into a massive expression of national will. In the summer of 1789 the British press rightly stressed the symbolic over the strategic significance of the event.  

In late July 1789, with evidence of rampant violence in Paris and the provinces, newspapers again expressed reservations about the course of the Revolution. Both the Times and the World argued that the French were not ready for liberty and that the King would be justified if he fled the country. But in August, following the renunciation of feudal privileges and the passage of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, British newspapers abruptly reversed their position and applauded the Assembly.  

While the press continued to display some sensitivity toward the situation in France, the outbreak of violence clearly altered their overall outlook. For example, in early 1789 several papers had cited the inequities of the French system as a reason for France's severe economic plight. But, by August 1789, most papers appeared to overlook them. Instead, they blamed war and extravagance while failing to discern the problems created by the French economic and social structure and the privileges granted to the highest orders of French society. Moreover, almost all the newspapers naively assumed that France's problems could be solved by implementing the English constitution.  

Renewal of violence in October 1789 provoked yet another burst of outrage from the British press. Most papers regarded the October violence as far more serious than that of July since Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were threat-
ened. Newspaper criticism centered on three points: excessive violence, physical threats to the monarch and monarchy, and imprudent reliance on abstract principles.11

Sympathy for the Revolution again surfaced in November 1789 as the violence subsided and the National Assembly attempted to write a new constitution. The Assembly's ecclesiastical policies generated the most interest from the British press. Attributable no doubt to anti-Catholic bias, most papers applauded the removal of the clergy's privileges and predicted fierce resistance by the clergy to the Assembly's actions. An article in the Times reported, “The French clergy are using every species of influence to set the public minds against the late innovations on their former dignities and estates.”12 The article went on to describe a “pious trick” played by a “fanatic priest” to coerce his congregation into opposing reform.

With the exception of the World and the Morning Herald, the remainder of the British press shared the Times opinion. It was not until 20 December 1790, several weeks after the publication of the Reflections, that the Times changed its stance, referring to the Assembly as a gang of “infidels and atheists” bent upon the destruction of all religion.13

Edmund Burke's perceptions of the Revolution before he began writing the Reflections closely parallel the response of the British press. Readers familiar only with the thunderous fury of Burke's denunciation of the Revolution in the Reflections may be surprised to learn that his initial response in his correspondence was temperate and often ambivalent. Throughout the spring and summer of 1789 Burke reserved judgment, gathering information from newspapers, English friends in France, and French acquaintances of his son Richard. Evidence of Burke's cool and fairly balanced appraisal and also of some confusion may be glimpsed in his letter of 9 August 1789, addressed to one of his oldest friends, James Caulfield, first earl of Charlemont. Burke expressed his astonishment at the “wonderful spectacle exhibited in a neighboring and rival country,” adding that most Englishmen were “watching the French struggle for liberty not knowing whether to blame or applaud.” Burke then arrived at precisely the same conclusion that the British press had reached: “the spirit it is impossible not to admire . . . but the old Parisian ferocity has broken out in a shocking manner.” Burke concluded by questioning the fitness of the French people for liberty, and characterizing the Revolution as “mysterious and paradoxical,” one of the “most curious matters for speculation that was ever exhibited.”14

11. Ibid., pp. 335–36.
13. The Times, 20 December 1790; The Times, 5 January 1791.
14. Burke to Caulfield, 9 August 1789, Correspondence, VI, 9–10. Several scholars have traced the immediate evolution of Burke's ideas in the fall of 1789. Most prominently, see J. T. Boulton, "The Reflections: Burke's Preliminary Draft and Methods of Composition," Durham University Journal, New Series, XIV (1958), 114–19; Carl B. Cone, Burke and the Nature of Politics: The Age of the French Revolution (Lexington, Ky., 1964), pp. 294–302; A. Goodwin, "The Political Genesis of Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France," John Rylands' Library Bulletin, L (1967), 336–64; and O'Brien in his introduction to the Reflections, p. 21. While each scholar disagrees slightly on certain points of emphasis, all agree, as will be argued here, that Burke was initially indecisive, but had developed the principal lines of argument in the Reflections by.
Burke's detachment was still evident in a letter to William Windham on 27 September. He again doubted the ability of the National Assembly to fulfill its mission of writing a new constitution, arguing that both the Crown and the Assembly were paralyzed by forces beyond their control. The interests of the Crown lacked "an armed party to support them"; the Assembly was shorn of any real legislative capacity by a "mob of their constituents ready to hang them should they deviate into moderation." Considering his later views on the Assembly, Burke's sympathy with its plight is surprising to say the least. The entire course of events to this point, he wrote on 27 September, "puts all speculation to blush."15

Thus, by the end of September 1789 Burke had not arrived at any firm conclusions regarding the nature and meaning of events in France. He apparently regarded it as a curiosity, a matter "mysterious and paradoxical," which puts "all speculation to blush." His reaction closely parallels that of the British press, praising efforts at reform, objecting to violence. None of the dramatic events of the summer of '89: the Tennis Court Oath, the storming of the Bastille, the abolition of "feudalism," or the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, seems to have fired his imagination and inspired the passionate response of the Reflections.

This mood of critical appraisal disappeared in November 1789. Burke's response to the events of October and early November was expressed first in a letter to Earl Fitzwilliam on 12 November. Burke now surmised that France was a "country undone" and "irretrievable for a very long time," adding gloomily that he feared the "total extinction of a great and civilized nation." Moreover, for the first time, Burke was alerted to a threat to England, "the interest of this country [England] requires[,] perhaps the interest of Mankind requires[,] that she [France] not be in a condition despotically to give law to Europe."16

In another letter, written later in November, Burke provided a preview of the philosophical principles of the Reflections. Nothing is good but in proportion and with reference, while prudence, in all things a virtue, "is politically the first of Virtues." Liberty entails chiefly security of life, property, and opinion, as the ideal society maintains "a Constitution of things in which the liberty of no one man and no body of Men . . . can find the Means to trespass on the liberty of any Person or any description of Persons in the Society." Tra-
dition and experience provide sounder foundations for a political system than abstract theorizing and human desire. Clearly, then, sometime between late September and early November 1789, Burke shifted from a mood of critical detachment to firm opinion, suggesting that something occurred in October to crystallize his opinions. What events occurred in France in October 1789? On 5 October 1789 a group of Parisian demonstrators/agitators transformed a demonstration of women against the high price of bread into a march on Versailles to present grievances to the Assembly. The National Guard of Paris was assembled to monitor the actions of the mob. Arriving at Versailles, the demonstrators obliged the Assembly to send a deputation to the King demanding action about bread prices. That night, despite the presence of the Parisian guards, a party of demonstrators broke into the palace, killed several guards, and (it was commonly believed) attempted to murder the Queen. The next day the crowd and the Guard returned to Paris bearing the royal family with them. After the Assembly had been transferred to Paris, debate continued on the proposal that ecclesiastical revenues should be appropriated by the nation. On 2 November the Assembly declared in a euphemism for confiscation that all church property should be placed at the “disposal” of the nation.

Burke’s fury at the actions of the Assembly is evident from an examination of both the Correspondence and the Reflections. As we have seen, his mood of suspended judgment disappears in his November correspondence: Burke had clearly arrived at a judgment of the Revolution. Readers of the Reflections will certainly recall Burke’s vitriolic denunciation of the confiscation of the church estates. As J. G. A. Pocock has written, “It is not possible to read the Reflections with both eyes open and doubt that it presents this action—and not assaulting the bedchamber of Marie Antoinette—as the central, the absolute, and the unforgivable crime of the revolutionaries.”

Two conclusions may be advanced on the basis of this evidence. First, there is little in Burke’s appraisal of the Revolution that clashes with the opinion of the British press until October 1789. In his correspondence in the summer and early fall of 1789, Burke followed the British press in applauding attempts at constitutional reform and abhorring violence. Many aspects of the Revolution, such as the importance of the révolte nobiliare and the aristocratic opposition to the Crown, eluded both Burke and the press. Both were appalled by mob violence, abstract speculation, and the assault on Marie Antoinette, but neither believed that the violence was justified by food shortages or unjust conditions. And both believed that the violence was perpetrated by the lowest classes of people, the scum of the earth.

17. Burke to Depont, November 1789, Correspondence, VI, 48-49. This letter is undated, but the editors of the Correspondence believe it was written in mid-November as a response to Depont’s letter of 4 November and mailed toward the end of the month. See Correspondence, VI, 39.
18. See particularly the passages in Burke, Reflections, pp. 186-218.
20. See, for example, The Times, 8 May 1789, and Burke, Reflections, p. 173.
Thus, while Burke was clearly mistaken about many aspects of the Revolution, he was largely following the evidence available to him. On only one issue did he adamantly reject contemporary wisdom, and this was the Assembly’s ecclesiastical policy, suggesting that this was the issue which most deeply engaged him. This line of argument sustains, from a different angle of vision, the interpretation advanced some years ago by Conor Cruise O’Brien in his introduction to the Pelican edition of the *Reflections*. O’Brien contended that Burke’s response to the Revolution was conditioned principally by his Irish heritage, his Catholic background, and his “attachment to Christianity at large.”21 Burke’s mother was Catholic. His wife was Catholic and tradition holds that their marriage was solemnized at a Catholic mass in Paris.22 Thus, Burke’s sharp divergence from contemporary wisdom on the matter of the confiscation of church property supports O’Brien’s argument that Burke’s response to the Revolution was colored by, if not an attachment to Catholicism, an attachment to Christianity at large. Undoubtedly Burke’s hostility mounted as he considered other factors. Clearly the *Reflections* assumed the structure they did because of Burke’s antipathy for Richard Price’s sermon, *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, delivered on 4 November 1789. The editors of the sixth volume of Burke’s correspondence have demonstrated, however, that Burke did not read Price’s sermon until January 1790, and, as we have seen, Burke had established the principal tenets of his argument by November 1789.23

One additional matter concerning the question of Burke’s handling of evidence in the *Reflections* remains to be resolved. The issue on which Burke is most frequently faulted is his description of the Revolution as a conspiracy. Alfred Cobban has been the scholar most critical of Burke, accusing him of ignorance amounting to an almost willful refusal to understand French affairs. According to Cobban, Burke “resorted to the absurd expedient of describing the Revolution as mainly the result of a conspiracy.” The *Reflections* themselves comprise a “colossal example of special pleading.”24

There is no question that Burke’s mastery of events in France was less than profound. The question remains, however, were Burke’s errors willful, the result of deliberate ignorance or distortion, purposely contrived to substantiate his predetermined conviction that the Revolution was a catastrophic, op-

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22. Ibid., pp. 29–30.
23. See particularly Frederick A. Dreyer, “The Genesis of Burke’s Reflections,” *Journal of Modern History*, 1 (September 1978), 462–79. Dreyer, however, does not consider the arguments of the scholars (see n. 14) who have shown that the main lines of Burke’s argument had been established before he read Price’s sermon.
24. See Cobban’s introduction to Burke, *Correspondence*, cited in footnote 1. In one of the most engaging recent works on Burke, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism* (Chicago, 1979), Michael Freeman has pointed out that Burke’s view of revolution was more complex. For the purposes of the present article, three points should be made. This article is concerned solely with Burke’s views in the *Reflections*, and Freeman marshals evidence from Burke’s later writing on the Revolution to sustain his argument. Secondly, Freeman claims that, since Burke commonly blamed governments for disorder, he did not adhere to a conspiracy theory. However, as will be shown in the following pages, even conservatives like Burke and Hume believed that conspiracy existed in all walks of life, including government. Finally, it is hard to read the invectives against the “literary cabal” and the “monied interest” and doubt that in 1789 Burke regarded the Revolution as a result of conspiracy.
probrious event? As we have seen, Burke adhered, with a fair amount of close-
ness, to evidence and interpretations presented by the British press, suggesting
that his errors were not deliberate. Moreover, on the issue of conspiracy, the
conceptual apparatus available to Burke for dealing with revolution also made
it difficult for him to perceive the deeper origins of the events he was analyz-
ing. Several early modern writers pondered the nature of revolution. In the
seventeenth century Clarendon isolated a number of “grand contrivers and
designers” (perhaps comparable to Burke’s “calculators, sophisters, and
economists”), including the earls of Manchester and Essex, Lord Say, Pym,
Hampden, St. John, Vane, and Holles, as the “engine which moved the rest.”

In the eighteenth century David Hume believed that the Revolution of 1640
resulted when the “nation caught fire from the popular leaders . . . . Tumults
were daily raised, seditious assemblies encouraged . . . the pulpits . . . re-
sounded with faction and fanaticism.” According to Hume, in an explanation
similar to Burke’s later interpretation of the French Revolution, the “popular
leaders” of England in 1640, angered without warrant at a number of niggling
grievances which could have been easily adjudicated, “were content to throw
the government into violent convulsions.”

Conspiracies need not originate solely with insurrectionists. Governments
and rulers were equally culpable. Examining the court of Charles II, Hume
asserted that a formal plan had been devised to “change religion and subvert
the constitution.” No evidence could be adduced to sustain this view, said
Hume, but it had to be true: no other hypothesis could explain the strange
behavior of the court. Burke himself adhered to the same mode of explanation
in his Thoughts on the Causes of the Present Discontents (1770). There were,
according to Burke, no discernible reasons to explain the current discontents
in the British nation. These could only be explained by hidden causes: a double
cabinet, for example, operating behind the scenes against the will of the peo-
ple. Basing his argument on the same principle, Thomas Paine, in his
response to the Reflections, the Rights of Man, admonished Burke, “Mr. Burke
has spoken a great deal about plots, but he has never once spoken of this plot
against the National Assembly, and the liberties of the nation . . . . Mr. Burke
never speaks of the plots against the Revolution, and it is from these plots that
all the mischiefs have arisen.”

Conspiratorial theories also dominated the earliest attempts to explain the
French Revolution. Burke was not the first or the only observer to accuse the
Duke of Orleans of designs on the monarchy. Many Frenchmen suspected that


“Pitt’s Gold” was the underlying cause of their troubles. Protestants were also accused of attempting to undermine royal authority. At various other times Jews, freemasons, philosophes, and brigands were all blamed for starting the Revolution.29

Outlandish as they sometimes seem, conspiratorial fears were not simply reflections of the paranoia or ignorance of their authors. Rather, they were in a sense rational attempts to explain events in terms of human actions and motives, and they were founded upon the assumption that the world was composed of autonomous, freely acting individuals, each of whom was capable of causing or influencing events. Good individuals could only have good intentions and naturally produced good events. Evil individuals necessarily possessed evil intentions and produced evil events. As Burke himself reproved his friend Depont in November 1789, “Never wholly separate in your mind the merits of any Political Question from the Men who are concerned in it.”30

In addition to this understanding of the importance of conspiracy, the term revolution possessed a different meaning on the eve of the French Revolution than it does today. Few early modern theorists of revolution, with the possible exception of James Harrington, ordinarily sought causes beyond immediate triggers and individual ambition. In the seventeenth century the term revolution reflected an age’s awareness of the cyclical movements of the heavens. When the term was applied to political affairs, the idea of circularity was retained and described such attendant events as changes in ministers or court favorites.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688 did, however, serve to expand the term’s range of meaning. Both English and French observers realized that the fall of James II involved more than a palace revolution or a change in succession. The term revolution was now employed to denote constitutional discontinuity, and this was the sense in which the term was understood in the eighteenth century.31 Thus, when Arthur Young, and later, Camille Desmoulins, announced in the summer and late fall of 1789 that the Revolution in France was over, finished, and the whole business complete, they were not being foolish or shortsighted. They were correctly observing that when absolute monarchy had acceded to the demands of a representative body of subjects, a real constitutional change had occurred, one worthy of the term revolution in its eighteenth-century usage. Burke himself made the same point in his letter of late November 1789 about the Revolution when he admonished his friend Depont, “You have made a Revolution, but not a Reformation.”32

Ultimately, the French Revolution provoked a dramatic shift in historical consciousness. An event so vast, so tumultuous, could not be reduced to mere

30. Burke to Depont, November 1789, Correspondence, VI, 47.
32. Burke to Depont, November 1789, Correspondence, VI, 46.
individual conspiracy. The Terror and reemergence of absolute rule spurred the realization that conventional modes of explanation were inadequate. Robespierre and Napoleon combined to shatter the assumed affinity between cause and effect, intention and result. As Wordsworth mourned, reflecting the despair of the post-revolution intellectual, the French Revolution revealed the “awful truth” that “sin and evil are apt to start from their opposite qualities.” Later analysts of the Revolution, particularly Hegel and Tocqueville, were forced to confront the question of how the finest and most noble personal intentions could create such tragic consequences.33

Thus, it seems difficult to accuse Burke of special pleading for describing the Revolution as a conspiracy, or for his failure to appreciate its social origins. Eighteenth-century understanding of revolution emphasized the constitutional and conspiratorial over the social. Conspiracy was a common and usually convincing explanation. Burke’s opinions must be judged in the context of these contemporary assumptions. He was operating firmly within contemporary frameworks of causality and explanation, and he followed, with one significant exception, the line of interpretation presented by the British press. Burke was hardly an objective observer, but his analysis of the Revolution as a massive conspiracy, though false, was not a deliberate and contrived distortion. Believing that the great crime of the revolutionaries was the apparent attempt to destroy the church, Burke saw no reason to look any further than the National Assembly and the sinister influences upon it to assign blame.

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33. Wordsworth is quoted in Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style,” p. 431. See also Wood’s argument on pp. 429–32, which I have followed.