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Library

A MACAT ANALYSIS

**EDMUND BURKE'S
REFLECTIONS ON
THE REVOLUTION
IN FRANCE**



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CRITICAL THINKING AND REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLUTION IN FRANCE

Primary critical thinking skill: REASONING

Secondary critical thinking skill: ANALYSIS

Edmund Burke's 1791 *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is a strong example of how the thinking skills of analysis and reasoning can support even the most rhetorical of arguments. Often cited as the foundational work of modern conservative political thought, Burke's *Reflections* is a sustained argument against the French Revolution. Though Burke is in many ways not interested in rational close analysis of the arguments in favour of the revolution, he points out a crucial flaw in revolutionary thought, upon which he builds his argument. For Burke, that flaw was the sheer threat that revolution poses to life, property and society.

Sceptical about the utopian urge to utterly reconstruct society in line with rational principles, Burke argued strongly for conservative progress: a continual slow refinement of government and political theory, which could move forward without completely overturning the old structures of state and society. Old state institutions, he reasoned, might not be perfect, but they work well enough to keep things ticking along. Any change made to improve them, therefore, should be slow, not revolutionary.

While Burke's arguments are deliberately not reasoned in the 'rational' style of those who supported the revolution, they show persuasive reasoning at its very best.

About the Author of the Original Work

Born in Ireland in 1729, **Edmund Burke**'s initial studies were in law, but he found himself drawn first to writing, then politics. He entered the British parliament in 1765 and soon won a reputation for his debating skills and strong political convictions, including views on the American and French Revolutions and British imperial practices in India. Burke died in 1797, and has since come to be regarded as the father of modern English conservatism.

About the Author of the Analysis

Riley Quinn holds master's degrees in politics and international relations from both LSE and the University of Oxford.

About Macat

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**Rt Hon Charles Clarke, former UK Secretary of State for
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Professor William Tronzo, University of California at San Diego

WAYS IN TO THE TEXT

Key Points

- The politician and political thinker Edmund Burke was born in Ireland—then a part of the United Kingdom—in 1729 and died in England in 1797.
- Written in 1790, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is Burke's response to the French Revolution* of 1789. Here, he outlines the danger of radicalism,* arguing that tradition is valuable and political change should be both gradual and carefully handled.
- *Reflections* is one of the founding works of modern conservative* thought.

Who Was Edmund Burke?

Edmund Burke was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1729 when the country was still part of the United Kingdom. His mother was Roman Catholic* and his father was Church of Ireland,* or Protestant.* He had a middle-class upbringing because his father was a solicitor, studied at a Quaker* school, and went on to Trinity College Dublin. After graduating in 1750, Burke moved to England to study law. But law did not satisfy him and he turned first to writing, then to politics. His political career began in 1765 when he became private secretary to Lord Rockingham,* then the leader of the Whig Party.* Rockingham sponsored Burke to become a Member of Parliament* for the Whig Party, which later became the Liberal Party.*

Burke's rise to social prominence and political power was very unusual. He was an Irishman of relatively humble origins, but after joining the Whigs he moved in the same circles as landed aristocracy,* the social class that owns land and property that generates income for the owner without the owner doing the work. From the start of his political career Burke was closely involved in all the debates of the day. He was in favor of introducing limits to the power of the king and accepted the grievances of the American Colonies, fighting hard against Britain going to war with America over independence in 1775. Burke wrote well-received pamphlets outlining his views on both of these issues. In 1789, the French aristocrat Charles-Jean-François Depont* asked Burke what he thought of the French Revolution and Burke decided to reply publically, writing *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. It quickly became a bestseller and helped to establish Burke as one of the major political thinkers of his time. He died in Beaconsfield, England in 1797 at the age of 68. But his ideas have remained influential to this day.

What Does *Reflections on the Revolution in France* Say?

Edmund Burke felt the radical ideas that had inspired the French Revolution were both seductive and dangerous, and that Britain needed to be protected from them. He wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France* as a way of stopping this movement from spreading across the English Channel to Britain. The book sets out his “counter-theory.” Burke recognized, for example, that the idea that “the people” deserved to rule their countries was a very attractive one that could easily take hold in Britain. There were many people in British public life who saw the French Revolution as the dawn of an exciting new era and who wanted similar reforms. These people included a faction of his own political party, the Whigs. They believed the principle that “the people” should rule applied to Britain as much as it did to France. They also thought England’s own revolution—the Glorious Revolution* of 1688, when the Roman Catholic King James II* was overthrown and a system where the monarch does not have absolute power was introduced—already proved “the people” should have the same rights. But in *Reflections* Burke says legitimate political change needs to come gradually and not through revolution. He thinks that radical beliefs, no matter how rational they might seem, will cause society to disintegrate.

One of the most important ideas Burke opposes is that abstract principles—ideas that people had thought up—can form the basis of a society. He believes society is too complex and too important to be shaped by ideas alone. To him, society is a kind of inheritance. Social institutions are shaped by successive generations slowly finding out exactly what works. For example, England has a king because England has always had a king, and having a king has always kept English society working. If the way the country operated needs reform, then reform should happen slowly so what is clearly already working can be preserved. In Burke’s view, governments that are invented and reinvented based on what is intellectually fashionable at a particular time will descend into chaos.

Burke believed the three guiding principles for society were “prejudice,” “presumption,” and “prescription.” “Prejudice” means that people stick to their own beliefs without needing to establish them as fact. So, for example, in a Roman Catholic country the people will be inclined to think that Catholicism works better than other systems of belief; they will be predisposed towards Catholicism. “Presumption” means that people assume that what has worked in the past, and what works now, will work in the future. So, the people of a Roman Catholic country assume that Catholicism will continue to be the best system. “Prescription” means that institutions such as the Catholic Church are only obeyed because they demand obedience. So citizens believe in Catholicism because they are told to. In Burke’s view it was these three principles that made governments unique to the people they govern.

In *Reflections* Burke speaks out against the idea of a perfect state, or utopia.* Instead of overthrowing an existing system in search of utopia, he says, it is better to keep adjusting our existing political systems until we find the perfect one. *Reflections* argues that politics is always more about pure logic than it is about noble ideas. And Burke reminds politicians that radical change inspired by noble ideas can have unintended—and horrific—consequences. In doing this Burke correctly predicted The Terror*—the time of extreme political violence between 1792 and 1794 that followed the French Revolution. During The Terror there were mass, and often highly subjective, executions of those seen as “enemies of the Revolution.”

To Burke, fending off the ideas of the French Revolution was a burning issue and he did not want to look at the argument from both sides. *Reflections* is a book with a political purpose, a piece of propaganda, as much as it is a political theory text.

Why Does *Reflections on the Revolution in France* Matter?

The French Revolution was a turning point in European history because it spread hope for freedom, but also the fear of violence everywhere. Published in 1790 in the midst of the Revolution, *Reflections* was both a bestseller and a major political text—and it still carries weight today. Burke explores the British political debate about the French Revolution of the time, but he also looks at government reform in general, which means there is plenty of material that is of lasting value for people interested in politics and history.

Burke’s rejection of the idea that radical thinking leads to a better system has led to him being seen as a founding father of modern conservatism. *Reflections* is hailed by some as a kind of “conservative manifesto.” And Burke has been an inspiration to many leading conservative thinkers, including nineteenth-century British journalist Walter Bagehot* and Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli,* American political theorist Russell Kirk,* and the contemporary cultural commentator David Brooks.*

Reflections helps to build a framework that can be used to evaluate political reform projects. Burke asks the key question that can be applied to political reform in any historical or political context: “Is this sensible change?” By sensible Burke means, “Is this a change that will preserve what worked, however imperfectly, about the old ways?”

Burke’s views are valued by modern conservatives in the United States. Russell Kirk said that *Reflections* was the first work of “conscious conservatism”¹ as it explained the importance of looking at society as needing to be nurtured, not cut down and replaced with something entirely new. This had been an important part of the debate about systems of government when the old ways of the United States and the new system of the Soviet Union* battled it out for ideological

supremacy during The Cold War* between 1947 and 1989.

There has also been discussion about how Burke's views have been interpreted by US conservatives in more recent times, especially in relation to American foreign policy in the Middle East. David Brooks has argued that the US government of George W. Bush,* while seeing itself as conservative, did not follow Burke's principals in its policies in invading Afghanistan and Iraq following the terrorist attacks on New York in 2001.* The administration believed that by changing political institutions in these countries, society there would improve. Brooks believes they missed the point, because Burke said society does not benefit from wholesale change, only gradual changes.

The tone of Burke's rejection of liberal* politics—those founded on ideas of individual freedom and liberty—borders on the furious, and many modern readers reject him for his angry language. To get the most from reading Burke's *Reflections* the reader needs to look beyond the passionate prose that is designed to convince, and understand that his argument is not anti-liberal, it is pro-pragmatic.* Burke wants politics to be based on practical, sensible practices, not theoretical ideas.

Notes

- 1 Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: Burke to Eliot* (Washington, D.C.: Eagle Publishing, 2001), 6.

SECTION 1 INFLUENCES

MODULE 1

THE AUTHOR AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Key Points

- *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was part of a debate between “radicals”* and “conservatives”* that has helped form modern ideas of what politics should be.
- Edmund Burke was born into a middle-class Irish family and worked his way into Parliament* as a member of the Whig* Party.
- Burke wrote *Reflections* as a response to the ideas that underpinned the French Revolution* and to defend Britain from their influence.

Why Read This Text?

Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is widely considered one of the most important and influential works of Western political conservatism. Burke’s main concern is to defend the ways of the ancien régime*—the social and political system that ruled France from the fifteenth century until the late eighteenth century—in the face of radical change. But more importantly than that he wanted to prevent Britain from being seduced by radical French ideology.* Burke wanted to discredit the ideas of the revolutionaries and reformers of the French Revolution who he felt wanted a government system based on theories and ideas. To Burke, politics was much more based on experience than ideas. Burke felt that political questions could only be answered by looking at how governments actually deliver order and safety and not by imagining what an ideal government would look like. It is this insight that makes *Reflections* more than an anti-revolutionary work and what has turned it into a template for modern conservatism.

“In [Burke’s] *Reflections* we confront a public political actor of fundamentally liberal values forced by rapidly unfolding events to reconsider his understanding of the preconditions of political liberty. Burke was a liberal carrying out that difficult, self-imposed assignment determined that no one resist his questions, ignore his arguments or evade his conclusions.”

Frank M. Turner, “The Political Actor Thinking,” Introduction to *Reflections*

Author's Life

Edmund Burke was born into a middle-class family in Dublin, Ireland in 1729. He was educated at a Quaker* school and went on to study at Trinity College, Dublin. Burke moved to England in 1750 to follow a legal career, but he left the world of law quite quickly to begin a new career first in writing, then in politics. He joined the Whig Party which eventually became the Liberal Party* toward the end of the nineteenth century. The Whigs were in favor of individual liberty and “small” government—a government that sets low taxes and limits its own activities and powers. Burke first entered Parliament as private secretary to Charles Watson-Wentworth, 2nd Marquess of Rockingham*. Rockingham was the Chairman of the Whig Party and he sponsored Burke to become a Member of Parliament himself. Burke was an outsider in English political life, a middle-class Irishman whose social advancement had been enabled and was supported by members of the aristocracy*—the upper class comprising those of noble birth with hereditary titles. It is possible that the ideas of the French Revolution of 1789—which included overthrowing the aristocracy—may have felt like a personal threat to him.

According to Frank M. Turner,* Burke saw the ideas behind the French Revolution as a “deadly radicalism that has hijacked the vocabulary of political liberty.”¹ He wrote *Reflections* as a warning against these ideas, to set himself up in opposition to the dangers of radicalism in general and to defend the British monarchy.* His ideas touched a chord with people in Britain and *Reflections* became a bestseller. However, the book caused a major split in his party because many Whigs were actually in favor of the French Revolution, in particular those who supported Charles James Fox* to succeed Lord Rockingham in the Whig Party. Despite this, *Reflections* helped to establish Burke as one of the major political thinkers of his era and he continued to be so right up until his death at the age of 68 in 1797.

Author's Background

Burke was active in politics at a dramatic time of important historical events, such as the beginning of the Industrial Revolution* in Britain (around 1760) and the American War of Independence (1775–83). But the French Revolution of 1789 is widely seen as the most important event of Burke's era, an event that changed the course of modern history. France was both an absolute monarchy (a country ruled by a king who has unrestricted power over his subjects) and a theocracy* (a society where the clergy are officially recognized as rulers in the name of God). It was also a nation that was extraordinarily rigid at a social level. Members of the higher social orders believed their privileged position was natural and unchangeable. It is highly unlikely that a

middle-class thinker such as Burke, who became a well-respected politician in England, could have reached the same position in France. The American historian Sylvia Neely* wrote, “The society of the Ancien Régime was hierarchical, in an order believed to have been created by God. The king was at the apex, and below him were his subjects.” The king’s subjects were divided into three “estates”: religious officials, aristocrats, and commoners. The commoners were known as the “Third Estate,” and were the least powerful among them.² There was a widespread belief that the king, aristocrats, and clergy ruled because it was their *destiny* to rule, not because they had any proven ability to lead or to rule. This traditional French society was violently overthrown by radical reformers during the French Revolution.

The revolutionary “moment” came in May 1789 when representatives of the Third Estate declared that the existing government was illegitimate and that in fact they, the Third Estate, were now the government, which they called the National Assembly.* On July 14, 1789 the political battle turned violent when the common people stormed the Bastille—a royal prison in the French capital, Paris, where arms were stored and which was a symbol of the king’s power. After this, the French state was rebuilt completely.

The French Revolution had many complex causes, and different thinkers tend to pick out different reasons as to why it happened. Prime among these are the following:

- new ideas—such as “popular sovereignty”* or the principle that the people have the right to rule
- new taxations—such as those introduced to help pay for France’s role in the American War of Independence
- accidental circumstances—such as the successive failures of grain harvests which led to famine in the lower classes and deep resentment of those who could easily afford bread.

The fact that the Third Estate was socially marginalized and decided to revolt and demand equality with the other two estates certainly contributed to the French Revolution. French thinker and clergyman Abbé Sieyès* wrote: “What is the third estate? Everything. What has it been up to now in the political order? Nothing. What does it ask? To become something.”³ The American historian James R. Arnold* wrote: “The Third Estate asked to have as many representatives in [the government] as the other two estates combined.”⁴ This was a radical shift in favor of populism.

Burke feared these radical ideas would reach Britain and saw evidence that they were doing so. In 1789, the radical democrat* Thomas Paine* wrote a private letter to Burke. In it Paine said, “The Revolution in France is certainly a forerunner to other Revolutions in

Europe.”⁵ This sense of the imminent threat of a revolution in Britain made Burke want to respond. He wrote *Reflections* mainly for his fellow politicians and to “alert the party leaders ... to the dangers to which radical opinions, however innocent and however sincerely held, could run.”⁶

Notes

1. Frank M. Turner, “Edmund Burke: The Political Actor Thinking,” Introduction to Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), XIV.
2. Syliva Neely, *A Concise History of the French Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 12.
3. Abbé Sieyès, quoted in James R. Arnold, *The Aftermath of the French Revolution* (Minneapolis, MN: Twenty First Century Books, 2009), 13.
4. Arnold, *Aftermath*, 13.
5. Frank O’Gorman, *Edmund Burke: His Political Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 110.
6. O’Gorman, *Edmund Burke*, 109.

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available

- [To minimize] the possibility of naked armed conflict.”³

It is the second point that is most problematic for followers of Burke. Neoconservatism thinks the American system is self-evidently the best and wants to reproduce it around the world. Kristol goes further in saying, “there is no superior, authoritative information available about the good life or the true nature of human happiness.”⁴ Neoconservatism believes the American system should be replicated precisely because it “liberates” people from directions. And that is the exact opposite of Burke’s position.

Future Directions

Despite the rise of neoconservatism, Burke’s analysis has not been entirely forgotten and *Reflections* will continue to be quoted and referred to by skeptics of all political views. In recent years political commentators have begun using Burke’s writing to criticize neoconservative policies. In a 2007 article for the *New York Times*, entitled “The Republican Collapse,” conservative intellectual David Brooks* criticized American conservatives for evoking Burkean ideas, but then failing to act on them. Brooks points to the Iraq War* as an example of the declining influence of Burke’s ideals in the American political right. Brooks writes, “The Bush* administration has operated on the assumption that if you change the political institutions in Iraq, the society will follow. But the Burkean conservative believes that society is an organism ... and that successful government institutions grow gradually from each nation’s unique network of moral and social restraints.”

Brooks says that the radical libertarian* streak in conservatism sees government as a threat to freedom. But the Burkean conservative “believes government is like fire—useful when used legitimately, but dangerous when not.”⁵ This suggests Burke’s work has lost relevance as a guide to policy because, as Brooks argues, modern conservatives pursue such ideas as the free market or individual liberty as an ideology. However, they do this at the expense of the pragmatic* decision-making Burke favored. *Reflections* is likely to continue to be relevant as an example of an “ideal type” of pragmatic conservatism. So Burke’s status will continue to make the ideas in *Reflections* central to modern political debates, even if they are no longer directly applicable to political policy.

Summary

Reflections is widely acknowledged as the founding work of modern conservatism. The French Revolution* has been heralded as the birth of modern political liberalism* and *Reflections* was its first major conservative examination. Burke’s writing has remained a cautionary

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

American Revolution (1775–83) a period of political and military conflict in what would become the United States of America, as the inhabitants of Great Britain’s 13 North American colonies overthrew the colonial government and British rule. Also called the US War of Independence or American Revolutionary War.

Ancien régime from the French for “old regime,” this was the political, religious, and social system of France from the fifteenth century until the late eighteenth century. The system was based on the entrenched class system and the authority of the Catholic Church.

Archetype a typical example of a person or thing.

Aristocracy the upper class of society; the aristocracy is generally made up of those with hereditary titles.

Autocracy a government in which one person rules with absolute power.

British Empire (sixteenth–twentieth century) the total area ruled by England and then the United Kingdom. It was the largest empire in history, and covered 25 per cent of the world’s total land area at its height.

Capitalism an economic system based on private ownership, private enterprise, and the maximization of profit.

Catholic Church (or Roman Catholic Church) one of the major branches of the Christian religion. Its hierarchical structure has the Pope at its head.

Chivalry a medieval knightly system with its own moral code.

Church of Ireland is an Anglican Church representing the whole of Ireland that is broadly Protestant in outlook but accepts some Catholic patterns of worship while rejecting the authority of the Pope.

Cold War (1946–89) a period of tension between America and the Soviet Union. While the two countries never engaged in direct military conflict, they engaged in covert and proxy wars and espionage against one another.

Conservatism a political philosophy that promotes a return to traditional

moral values and the defense of existing institutions.

Constitution a body of principles and laws that are used as the basis for governing a country, state, or organization.

Counter-Enlightenment a term used by the twentieth-century Russian-British philosopher Isaiah Berlin to bring together all the thinkers who were against the Enlightenment.

Declaration of Right (1688) an English legal document that instituted 13 legal limitations on the power of the monarchy, especially with regard to taxes and protection of property.

Democracy a form of government where citizens elect a body of representatives who will then act in their name.

Divine Right of Kings the idea that royal authority in a given land is given to the king by God, so to disobey the king is also to disobey God.

The Enlightenment (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) a period of European intellectual history that emphasized reason and anti-traditionalism based on the scientific method.

Entailment a legal term that makes the inheritance of an estate conditional on its not being sold or altered in some way. Burke means the term to suggest that England inherited its constitution on the condition that it be preserved.

French Revolution (1789–99) a decade of intense political upheaval in France where revolutionaries experimented with a number of different regimes—a constitutional monarchy, a revolutionary dictatorship, a popular direct democracy, a liberal republic—before ending with the military dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte.

Glorious Revolution (1688) the name commonly given to the overthrow of the Roman Catholic English King James II by an alliance of Parliamentarians and the Dutch ruler William of Orange, who subsequently became William III of Great Britain, ruling jointly with his wife, Mary II, who was the daughter of James II.

Government by consent a principle of popular sovereignty, which states that rulers are only made legitimate if the ruled agree to the nature, duration, and form of rule.

The Great Purge (1936–40) a period of state violence and political repression in the former Soviet Union, where hundreds of thousands of

people were executed or imprisoned as perceived threats to the government.

Hubris over-confidence or extreme pride.

Ideology a system of ideas and ideals, often forming the roots of an economic or political theory.

Imagery figurative language used in works of literature that helps conjure a picture in people's minds.

Imperialism the process of extending a country's power and influence in other countries through colonization.

Industrial Revolution (eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) a major advance in technology for manufacturing industry, where machines and steam power allowed mass production. It began in Britain before spreading quickly to Western Europe and North America.

Inflation a set of circumstances that causes an increase in prices and a decrease in the value of money.

Iraq War (2003–11) fought between the United States and Iraq in two phases. The first was a conventional war against Saddam Hussein's government, while the second was a prolonged occupation that consisted of state-building efforts on the part of the Americans.

Labor camp a kind of prison in which prisoners are forced to work.

Liberal Party (1859–1988) a political party in the United Kingdom comprised of several parties (including the Whigs, the Radicals, and the Peelites). Notably, they introduced a number of reforms that created the British "welfare state."

Liberalism a political philosophy founded on ideas concerned with individual freedom and equality.

Libertarianism an extremely "hands off" political view that believes in only the lightest state intervention in the lives of its people.

Magna Charta (1215) a legal document enshrining the legal duties of the king towards some of his subjects. It has been considered by some to be the "constitution" of England, establishing "rule of law" over the power of the monarchy.

Metaphor a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used as a