

# 1

## INTRODUCTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EDMUND BURKE

The reputations of some political thinkers rise and fall with the times. Considered great in one period, they are largely ignored in another. Other thinkers, Edmund Burke among them, seem always to be of interest and significance. Ever since his own day, Burke's writings have been studied with great care—both as a guide to the politics of the late eighteenth century and as a program for action in subsequent periods. Thus, at first glance, it might appear odd that scholars cannot seem to agree on an assessment of Burke. In fact, in the nearly two hundred years since his death, his thought has been characterized in a bewildering variety of ways. In the nineteenth century, the dominant interpretation of Burke, advanced by writers like Leslie Stephen and John Morley, saw him as a politician-philosopher, who grounded a cautious reformism on a combination of Humean skepticism and pre-Benthamite Utilitarianism.<sup>1</sup> However, in the twentieth century and increasingly since World War II, the utilitarian approach has given way to a natural law interpretation.<sup>2</sup> As exemplified by Peter Stanlis, this school holds that “in every important political problem he ever faced . . . Burke *always* appealed to the natural law. What is more, by Natural Law Burke always meant essentially the same thing . . .”<sup>3</sup> To the objection that Burke rarely explicitly mentioned natural law, these writers reply that Burke considered natural law to be imminent in history, and, therefore, held that “Natural Law can enter our cognition only so far as it is embodied in social prescription or character.”<sup>4</sup> The political implications of this interpretation are, of course, profoundly conservative, for it suggests that the measure of what is good is to be found in what is established. For this reason, the natural law school somewhat neglects the more reformist and empirical aspects of Burke's thought. Therefore, some advocates of the approach, Burleigh Wilkens, for example, offer a

softer version of the thesis, or even, as in the case of Michael Freeman, seek to combine it with the utilitarian view.<sup>5</sup> Outside the framework of the utilitarian-natural law debate, still other interpretations have developed. C. B. Macpherson, for example, deemphasizes the discussion of Burke's philosophical roots and insists that Burke should be understood as a defender of early capitalism. Macpherson thus attributes the continuing interest in Burke to his being the first major British thinker to recognize that the traditional intellectual defense of elitism could be adapted to capitalist use.<sup>6</sup> Alfred Cobban, on the other hand, sees Burke not as a modernist, but as the principle early spokesman for the Romantic "revolt" against the Enlightenment.<sup>7</sup>

If the students of Burke's thought cannot agree, those who study his political career do little better. Frank O'Gorman largely rejects the claims for Burke as a profound thinker, preferring instead to think of him as a defender of the material interests of the aristocratic Rockingham Whigs.<sup>8</sup> However, John MacCunn, though agreeing with O'Gorman's emphasis on Burke as a practical politician, sees considerable merit in Burke's political philosophy.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, MacCunn identifies Burke as one of the major sources of late nineteenth century liberalism. MacCunn's attempt to link Burke to liberalism brings us to the source of much of the confusion about his significance, for the modern consensus that Burke was a founder of conservatism was not shared by his immediate heirs. In fact, even the earliest apologists for twentieth century conservatism paid little attention to him.<sup>10</sup> Only when Hugh Cecil hit on the tactic of linking Burke's denunciation of the French Revolution to his own opposition to the dangers of creeping socialism did Burke become a popular conservative source. Along this line, Irving Babbitt, for instance, contrasted Burke to Rousseau, whom Babbitt saw as a political extremist and intellectual godfather to the French Revolution.<sup>11</sup> According to Babbitt, Burke defended the two cornerstones of European civilization, the spirit of Religion and the spirit of the Gentleman, against the radical leveling of the Revolution and advocated instead an ethic of moderation and humanistic control. Still more recently, Burke achieved virtually paradigmatic conservative status. Thus, Anthony Quinton writes, "Edmund Burke is plainly the first of English conservative thinkers in influence and importance."<sup>12</sup> Yet even now the conversion remains incomplete. In his important study of the history of the English Conservative party, Lord Robert Blake scarcely mentions Burke and begins, in-

stead, with Disraeli and Derby's organization of right-wing Tories into an opposition to Robert Peel's move to repeal the Corn Laws.<sup>13</sup> In Blake's opinion, Burke is no more than a vaguely sympathetic precursor of modern Conservatism.

Why is there such controversy about Burke? Quinton makes a useful point when he distinguishes between two different conservative traditions: the first, religiously-based, draws its inspiration from the doctrine of original sin and stresses the mutual support of Church and State, while the other is more secular, skeptical, and pragmatic.<sup>14</sup> In this interpretation, Burke can thus be seen as an important fount of one form of Conservatism, the more religious line, but relatively uninfluential with the other school. From a slightly different perspective, Fair and Hutcheson explain the modern conservative's ambivalence toward Burke by suggesting that the radical branch of the movement finds it difficult to reconcile his many liberal views with his reputed Conservatism, while more moderate Conservatives see that very liberalism as his primary appeal.<sup>15</sup> In this study, I will go a step further. I will suggest that Burke's appeal lies in his Whiggism. That is, I believe that Burke sought to reconcile a generally conservative outlook with an acceptance of the need for change through reform. Burke's accomplishment was to recognize that the past could be a guide to the future, and, therefore, need not be set in opposition to it. However, before I attempt to present yet another interpretation of Burke's political thought, I should perhaps make clear why I think it worthwhile—indeed, necessary—to do so. In the next section of this introduction, I will explain the approach I have taken to Burke, and attempt to clarify some of the assumptions about his thought and about its intellectual and political context which I have made. I will also try to offer a reason for reading Burke beyond an antiquarian interest in the eighteenth century. In my view, there is good and ample reason to study Burke in the insight that study provides into the development and nature of modern Western politics. This book as a whole will be concerned with making that argument, but, as an inducement to read further, I will briefly anticipate it here. Thus, in the last section of the introduction, I will offer a brief outline of the remainder of the book. I will describe how Burke's argument develops, how its various components fit together, what role it played in the politics of its day, what strengths and, perhaps more importantly, what weaknesses it contained, and how adequate, both as a description and a prescription, it was to the politics of his, and our, day.

## I

R. G. Collingwood suggested sometime ago that all history, especially the history of ideas, is, in a fundamental sense, "present" history.<sup>16</sup> We go to the past, he said, not in a disinterested attempt to discover how things actually were, but to seek answers to questions which concern us in the present. We seek to discover the origins and to plot the development of those factors which shape our own time in the hope that such a search will give us understanding of and, if we are especially fortunate, a degree of control over our world. The purpose of history, then, is self-knowledge. We wish to know what we are and what we should do, but to do so we must know how we got where we are: "knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is."<sup>17</sup> As we do not approach history blind, we begin with some ready-made set of assumptions, indeed prejudices, about the nature of the past and about how to recover it. Moreover, these "pictures" of the past, formed out of our concerns in the present, are the very bases of the questions we ask, determine the nature of our research, and provide the grounds for assessing whatever conclusions we come to. In addition, as the problems of contemporary society change, so do the questions we ask and the solutions we seek. Thus, there is an inherent element of indeterminateness in the study of ideas, for "each historian sees history from his own centre, at an angle of his own: and therefore he sees some problems which no other sees, and sees every problem from a point of view, and therefore under an aspect, peculiar to himself. No one historian, therefore, can see more than one aspect of the truth; and even an infinity of historians must always leave an infinity of aspects unseen."<sup>18</sup> Political theory, then, even in its historical dimension, has an immediacy which many other disciplines lack, for it is oriented to action in circumstances which are both difficult and urgent. John Dunn has put it well: "Unlike history or moral philosophy, political theory cannot select a subject matter for its apparent epistemological tractability. It cannot confine itself to detached explanation or abstract prescription but has to set itself, as best it can, to judge how human beings now have good reason to act, both in the light of modern politics and within modern politics."<sup>19</sup> Against this constantly shifting background, there can be no final or fully completed explanation of any of the major historical thinkers

or ideas. Each generation of scholars must reexamine its intellectual traditions in the light of its own needs and concerns.

My interest in Burke stems from a desire to understand the nature of modern representative government. It is relatively clear, I think, that, while many of the ideas, practices, and institutions associated with representative government were anticipated by the Ancient Greeks, and even the European Middle Ages, its earliest development was primarily in Great Britain and the United States. I would further argue that this growth occurred in three broad stages.<sup>20</sup> First, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came the idea that government rests on the consent of the governed, and an attempt to embody that idea in constitutional devices intended both to render government responsible to the people, however defined, and to limit its power. Yet, the political conflicts of the seventeenth century also taught that purely formal limitations on government were insufficient in the real world of politics. Something more was needed, and that something was often perceived as a measure, again usually rather narrowly defined, of popular participation in ruling. Thus, the eighteenth century witnessed the second stage of the process—the growth of representative institutions.<sup>21</sup> This growth brought with it a host of problems, both theoretical and practical, and was accompanied by a major transition in the way people viewed politics. At the most abstract level, it introduced changes in the way both the public and private spheres were conceived, and in the manner in which conflict within the community was conceptualized. For example, Kishlansky has suggested that in England the meaning of so basic a feature of representative institutions and practices as parliamentary elections changed extensively during the seventeenth century, as a process of “selection,” in which “patrons and peers, civic dignitaries and officeholders, community leaders and community neighbors were designated members of Parliament without opponents, competition, or votes,” gradually, and under the pressure of revolutionary developments, was replaced by something like elections in our modern sense.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, J. H. Plumb has argued that the period of one-party Whig rule in the early eighteenth century was vital to the growth of representative government, for it provided a context of social and political stability in which conflict over office and policy could be domesticated and accepted as normal and safe.<sup>23</sup> Finally, in the third stage, once a functioning representative system was fully implemented, the issue of democracy came to the front. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became obvious that the

logic of consent and participation tends toward universalism, but not everyone was happy with that conclusion. Thus, a major political debate developed around the question of who was entitled to participate in the political process. At first, control of the representative parts of the political system was preserved for members of various elites determined by class and gender. Eventually, however, universal suffrage came to prevail as the idea of the "people" constantly expanded.

Though marked by important differences in detail, a very similar process took place in America. This was not by coincidence. As Ian K. Steele has indicated, "the North Atlantic united that empire more than it divided."<sup>24</sup> Americans saw representative institutions, in this case their own colonial legislatures, as a means of gaining control of local affairs and of limiting their dependence on the mother country.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as in the British case, these changes in institutions and practices were accompanied by shifts in outlook and theory. Gordon S. Wood, among others, has written extensively of the changes in American political thinking in the eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup> He notes that one of the most important of these was in the concept of representation. In the years leading up to the Revolution, the American radicals rejected those theories which characterized representatives as relatively independent trustees of the public interest, and instead asserted that they were merely delegates required to enact the will of their constituents.<sup>27</sup> Some thinkers went even further. They asked why, if all political authority is derived from the people, are not the people capable of governing themselves? Thus, especially among elements of the Antifederalists, all representation became suspect, and it was claimed that the people constituted the only legitimate authority. Along this road, of course, lies mass democracy.<sup>28</sup> Still, the story is both complex and ambiguous. On the one hand, for instance, the recognition and acceptance of political conflict was an important step in the movement toward modern pluralistic democracy. On the other, the suspicion of both politicians and parties undermined confidence in representative institutions and discouraged participation in them. John Taylor, one of the first to decry the seamy side of legislative politics, wrote: "knaves or fools only, surrender their duties and rights to party despotism. Knaves, to get a share in its acquisitions; fools because they are deceived. Can an honest man of sound understanding think himself bound by wisdom or duty, to give or sell himself to one of two parties, prompted by interest and ambition to impair the public good? Are men bound by wisdom or honour to

take sides with one of two competitors, if both are robbers or usurpers?"<sup>29</sup> Even in his own day, Taylor was considered something of an extremist, but his questions continue to concern us.

In my view, Burke played a vital role in this process. I believe that Burke's greatest contribution to modern politics lies in his role as a theorist and practitioner of representative government. In my opinion, his key contribution was his formulation of a conception of politics which identified political change as the central issue of the day and which defined representative government as the appropriate mediator of that change. In his advocacy of a political model which saw society as a corporation suspended in history and evolving over time, in his acceptance of political controversy as an appropriate device for driving that process, and in his characterization of the professional politician as responsible for directing evolution into progress, Burke provided a defense of representative institutions which also rendered change safe. Here, it seems to me, we have an explanation for the continuing interest in Burke, while earlier conservatives like Bolingbroke seem more appropriately consigned to a hazy pre-history of modern thought. One of the principal points of difference between Burke and Bolingbroke is their respective conceptions of history. Where Burke took a generally progressive view of history, arguing that civilization develops slowly over time, Bolingbroke was much more radically conservative. He insisted that a study of history reveals a decline from the excellence of the past (chiefly, that is, from the glorious days of Queen Elizabeth), and that, therefore, the proper politics for his own time was a suspension of conflict and a return to old forms. England's past success, Bolingbroke maintained, was due to her maintenance of a balance by which "our free constitution of government hath been preserved so long inviolate, or hath been brought back . . . to its original principles, and been renewed, and improved too, by frequent and salutary revolutions."<sup>30</sup> Bolingbroke's position was, perhaps, minimally cogent in the early eighteenth century, but it had little appeal in the period of the American and French Revolutions. In the late twentieth century, his Ancient Constitutionalism is merely quaint. Burke, on the other hand, with his message of moderated progressivism, still speaks effectively to our concern with the politics of change. Burke meets the test for relevancy proposed by Isaiah Berlin: ". . . the ambition of those who wish to know how we, the present generation, came to be what we are, who our ancestors have been, what they have done, what were the consequences of their activities, what were their hopes and fears and goals, and the natural

forces with which they had to contend; for it seems obvious that only barbarians feel no curiosity about the sources of their own forms of life and civilization, their place in the world order as determined by the antecedent experiences of their ancestors, which alone can give a sense of identity to their successors."<sup>31</sup> While Burke, then, was one of the most important contributors to the intellectual synthesis, based on the acceptance of interest-based politics and a conflict-resolution model of government, which underlay the development of modern representative democracy, Bolingbroke has little to offer—save, perhaps, a sense of the starting-point—to the interested student.<sup>32</sup>

For purpose of introduction, Burke's contribution to the theory of representative government can be summarized in seven propositions. The first four provide a means of conceptualizing change. First, Burke argued that all abstract or "metaphysical" styles of political reasoning, including natural law theories, are inherently unsatisfactory. The complexity and variety of politics is so great, according to Burke, that little can be said without reference to particular circumstances. In the *Reflections*, he contrasted the French reformers unfavorably to ancient law-givers: "the legislators who framed the ancient republics knew that their business was too arduous to be accomplished with no better apparatus than the metaphysics of an undergraduate, and the mathematics and arithmetic of an exciseman."<sup>33</sup> The results of such efforts are at times merely ludicrous, but more often, as indeed in France, they are disastrous.<sup>34</sup> Second, a rejection of abstractions did not, for Burke, require a denial of all reasoning in politics, but was, rather, part of a turn to principles solidly based on the dictates of experience and history. As he put it, "the science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science, not to be taught *a priori*."<sup>35</sup> Third, Burke's conception of history led him to view society as a corporate entity developing through time. For Burke, this proposition has two important sub-headings. First, contrary to much of the commentary on Burke, he clearly denied any analogy between society and a living organism. Society is, he said, based on "a permanent standing covenant," and, therefore, "the idea of a people is the idea of a corporation. It is wholly artificial, and made, like all other legal fictions, by common agreement."<sup>36</sup> Second, Burke held that history is broadly, though not uniformly, progressive; that is, history is the story of a gradual evolution from primitive barbarism to modern commercial civilization. Therefore, he argued that at all times a balance must be main-



tained between the need to adapt society to changing circumstances and environments and the equally strong need to preserve its essence for those who are to come. Fourth, Burke believed that social change may be controlled and directed by human intelligence and effort. Thus, he maintained both the possibility and desirability of political reform. In a kind of eighteenth century Aristotelianism, Burke conceived of such reform as a gradual perfecting of the ongoing system. As he explained to the North American colonists in January 1777, "this constitution has therefore admitted innumerable improvements, either for the correction of the original scheme, or for removing corruptions, or for bringing its principles better to suit those changes which have successively happened in the circumstances of the nation or in the manners of the people."<sup>37</sup> Both sides of this equation must be kept in mind if Burke is to be properly understood. The key is balance; one must preserve and improve as well.

The remaining propositions deal with the way society handles change. The fifth is that, as change is natural and reform necessary, the proper role of the politician, according to Burke, is to serve as the agent and mediator of social and political progress. Further, for reform to be effective, it must be both acceptable to the people and practical as well. Burke maintained that a politician is, in some sense, a public trustee. "It is," he said, "of the essence of every trust to be rendered *accountable*; and even totally to *cease*, when it substantially varies from the purposes for which alone it could have a lawful existence."<sup>38</sup> Burke recognized that this role was not easy to play. Thus, he thought that education and training are essential to a good politician, and defended the leadership role of the landed aristocracy. Sixth, a good ruler, in Burke's opinion, must subscribe to certain political values. For example, he must support a politics based on the reconciliation of interests. Burke wrote of the English constitution: "there is a perpetual treaty and compromise going on, sometimes openly, sometimes with less observation," and, therefore, "the whole scheme of our mixed Constitution is to prevent any one of its principles from being carried as far as, taken by itself, and theoretically, it would go."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, good politicians are also prudent, for prudence is the virtue which adjusts general principles to practical concerns. Burke felt that the practical reason of the politically-active must, almost intuitively, recognize the necessary exceptions and modifications of applied morality.<sup>40</sup> Finally, Burke defended the various devices and weapons, such as political parties, which a politician finds useful in performing his function. As he

wrote early in his career, "I find it impossible to conceive, that any one believes in his own politics, or thinks them to be of any weight, . . . refuses to adopt the means of having them reduced into practice."<sup>41</sup> For Burke, it was never enough to know what is right; one must also seek some means of implementing that truth.

There is, of course, more to Burke than concern with the growth of representative government. I make no claim to have discovered the "real" Burke. What I seek to do is to present Burke from a certain point of view, against a particular background, and in the light of my own theoretical and political interests. No single perspective can exhaust all that Burke has to say, and any approach must remain aware of at least some of the other aspects of his thought. I believe that among these additional factors, three are of sufficient importance that they will have to receive considerable attention in the following pages. To begin with, I think it important to keep in mind that the development of eighteenth century philosophy was marked by a dual crisis of knowledge and values. With the religious conflicts and scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, philosophers began to consider the traditional scholastic and scriptural sources as inadequate guides to truth about the world around them.<sup>42</sup> On the one hand, they wanted to break the hold of the old views by employing scientific methods, but, on the other, they also attempted to prevent those methods from leading to skepticism. They sought, in short, a middle ground between dogmatism and agnosticism. In this battle, John Locke was a key figure. Barbara J. Shapiro notes, "the ultimate spokesman of this generation was John Locke, who voiced the shared concerns of scientists, theologians, historians, and lawyers . . . For Englishmen, the central intellectual phenomenon of the second half of the seventeenth century was the peculiar interaction between efforts to establish a rational basis for a historically based, nondogmatic, Protestant Christianity and comparable efforts to achieve a probabilistic basis for the factual assertions of scientists, historians, and lawyers."<sup>43</sup> In the realm of moral philosophy, the problem was simple: if nothing can be known for certain, how can values be established and defended? While the question was clear, the answer was not. Locke's own philosophy, though widely accepted, did not solve the difficulty, and, indeed, in some ways left matters worse than before. In my opinion, it is no accident that Burke's initial writings sought to provide an empirical psychological basis for values, and, when that effort failed, petered out into incoherence. Burke's characteristic attacks on ab-

stractions, and his embracing of experience and history are, I further believe, also responses to this crisis.

In addition, Burke's political heritage and role are of particular importance. Simply put, it makes a difference that Burke thought of himself as a Whig. That meant, among other things, that when he turned to history, he saw it from a certain perspective. The Whig party had developed at the time of the Exclusion Crisis in the 1670s. As Jones argues, its participation in that crisis largely defined its early character: "the first Whigs were, and had to be, a party, something more highly organized and disciplined than a mere alliance or coalition of small and autonomous groups. They possessed, and required, organization in both Parliament and country, effective discipline, and a wide popular appeal, stimulated and maintained by a large-scale propaganda machine."<sup>44</sup> Moreover, unusual for that time, the Whigs had something of a general philosophy and program. They saw themselves as defenders of the constitution, and as the natural spokesmen for the people. Yet, the Whigs were often unable to agree on the details or the implementation of that program. In fact, over the next century, the party split into so many branches and groups that some scholars question whether the label meant anything at all by the time of the American Revolution. My point is, however, narrower. I argue simply that Burke thought that it did, for he often identified Whiggism in general with the interests and ideas of his own faction within the larger movement. He saw himself and his allies as the natural descendants of the men who had made the Revolution and ruled England for a century thereafter. Burke thus felt obliged to defend the Revolution and to justify the existing political system which had grown out of it. He was, in the language of the time, an "Old Whig," and, in his view, an heir to the politics and philosophy of Robert Walpole and his associates. H. T. Dickinson describes the position well: "the Court or establishment Whigs were anxious to sustain a social system in which a small minority possessed wealth and status and a political system which represented property rather than people."<sup>45</sup> There is, in short, some considerable truth to the jibe that Burke attempted something nearly impossible—a conservative defense of a revolutionary settlement.

Lastly, I hope to give full recognition to those interpretations of Burke, such as that put forward by Frank O'Gorman, which insist on the importance of his activity as a practical politician.<sup>46</sup> Although I do not agree with O'Gorman's contention that Burke's arguments are often little more than a rationalization of the interests

of the Rockingham party, I do think that concerns of the political moment figure prominently in his works. For example, most of Burke's major early political works were, in fact, produced during two waves of party activity. The first, in the late 1760s and early 1770s, saw many of Burke's most radical statements about parliamentary politics. As he attempted to explain the Rockingham Whigs' loss of power in terms of an attempt by George III and his supporters to subvert parliamentary government, Burke was driven to embrace advanced positions on ministerial accountability and the rights of electors. Thus, while most modern scholars believe that Burke's charges were largely mistaken, his theoretical efforts, nonetheless, bore great fruit in his theories of trusteeship, representation, and party government.<sup>47</sup> The American War and the struggle for power at its end was a second important contributor to Burke's thought. Indeed, it stimulated his formulation of ideas on imperial matters, the means of creating and expressing opposition to royal policy, and the importance of representation as a control on government. At the same time, in the various Petitioning Movements, the Whigs, and Burke, learned to work in league with other parties, and also learned something of the limits of such cooperation. Indeed, O'Gorman himself suggests that the Rockingham Whigs' experience with the reformers biased them against working with later radicals: "the success of Wyvill and his friends in beating off the Rockinghamite bid for control of the movement, and the quickening of the reformist impulse which led its leaders to embrace a Plan of Association with its attack on the rotten boroughs, ended Rockingham's brief flirtation with parliamentary reform."<sup>48</sup> Even Burke's major writings of the period around the French Revolution were produced with one eye on party advantage. Much of what he said then was intended to drive the radicals out of the Whig fold, and, that accomplished, to rebuild the party as an anti-revolutionary but still reformist force. In short, while even in his most partisan moments Burke sought to go beyond the immediate issues to a deeper level of understanding, and exhibited a desire to discover broader principles at work, it would be a serious error to ignore the immediate altogether.

## II

It will, of course, require the remainder of this book to present my argument in full detail, but an outline of that argument would,

perhaps, not be remiss here. I believe that the place to begin a study of Burke's political thought is with his early writings on aesthetics and psychology, for it is there that one best sees his response to the crisis he perceived in normative philosophy. As I have already indicated, the effect of work in the tradition of empirical philosophy since Locke had been, Burke believed, to undermine all attempts to establish objective moral values. Thus, in chapter 2, I will discuss Burke's early concern with psychology, his growing frustration at its moral indeterminacy, and his turn to history. I will argue that Burke's first major published work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, was primarily intended as an attempt to establish a purely associationalist psychology.<sup>49</sup> However, because the discussion of psychology had come to be framed as an adjunct of a much broader concern with the nature of human understanding and its limits, Burke's *Enquiry* also had profound implications both for the study of human behavior and for moral philosophy as well. The discussion of human understanding moved toward an increasingly subjective basis, and therefore, had the effect of relativising both aesthetics and morals. When Burke began to study the topic, he soon found that his criticism of the classical standards of taste and his attempt to build a consistent sensationalist psychology only served to worsen matters. Moreover, he also found that proposals, like those of Hutcheson and Hume, to solve the problem by postulating the existence of a moral sense also failed. Hence, in the *Vindication of Natural Society*, written before the *Enquiry* but revised and published after, Burke sought to block the extension of the new relativism from psychology to social theory by demonstrating the dangerous consequences for society of rejecting all standards of judgment outside the passions of the individual.<sup>50</sup>

In light of Burke's doubts about the possibility of establishing either an objective aesthetics or absolute moral standards, it appears to me that it is quite unlikely that he can be classified as a natural law thinker. Rather, in chapter 3, I will suggest that Burke's failure to create an objective morality led him to abandon psychology for history. If, he reasoned, one cannot establish rational absolutes, perhaps values can be discovered through the study of historical experience. I will argue that Burke used history in two ways. First, he saw history as a means of understanding society. With his conception of society as an evolving corporation, Burke found the form for expressing some of his most characteristic ideas. For example, that conception underlay his rejection of social con-

tract theory and his arguments on prescription and presumption. Moreover, it provided a dynamic element to his thought and, therefore, a means of conceptualizing and domesticating social and political change. Burke saw change, as such, as relatively neutral: some changes were good, but others were not. Those changes which benefited society were those which perfected the ongoing social order. Second, Burke's understanding of progress as a fragile but real process which could be controlled to some degree by men led him to the opinion that the essence of sound politics was the careful management of political reform so as to insure improvement while avoiding the pitfalls of radicalism. Thus, Burke used history to explain and defend his political party—the Rockingham Whigs. Burke claimed that the Whigs were the descendants and representatives of a traditional governing aristocratic class in English society, and, in his more directly political writings of the time, sought to show that the party, over the course of its one hundred or so years of involvement in British government, had always operated on a “correct” appreciation of the historical process.

Chapter 4 considers Burke's position on the British political institutions of his time. Burke's adoption of the model of society as a corporation which develops through time, of course, had important consequences for his theory of politics. He saw British government as both a product of historical evolution, therefore deserving of defense on the basis of prescription, and as a set of institutions which served to facilitate further reform. As to its forms, Burke held that English government was not, in fact, a mixed government but rather a limited monarchy, whose chief virtue was the preservation of the rule of law. Thus, he saw the king as the effective focus of government, but also thought it essential that the power of the king be checked in two ways: by the participation in administration and in the House of Lords of the aristocracy, and by the negative requirement that royal policy not be rejected by the people as represented in the House of Commons. Finally, Burke's conception of history also provided the basis of his defense of a Church establishment. That defense was couched in the same language of prescription and reform as his ideas on state and society. Burke saw important social and political reasons for an established church. In his view, a religious establishment served as a major repository of culture, an important educator, and a civilizer of manners. However, along with his support for a religious establishment, Burke also was willing to recognize the right of the individual to form his own relationship with God. Thus, he also followed the more advanced currents of

his time in accepting a broad degree of religious toleration. In fact, following John Locke, the only limitations Burke would place on religious expression flowed from political rather than religious considerations. Chapter 5 will round out the discussion of the formation and nature of Burke's theoretical system with a consideration of Burke's views on the role of government in society. In light of the broad agreement among Burke's contemporaries that government could, and indeed should, play only a very limited role in society, I will ask whether Burke believed that the state had adequate authority to carry out the kind of reform he thought necessary. I believe that he did. In my opinion, Burke was prepared to accept a broad range of governmental action and was, in fact, neither a laissez-faire ideologue nor an advocate of natural-rights limitations on the state. Rather, he took a position quite close to that of his friend, Adam Smith; that is to say, that while Burke usually favored free trade and limited government involvement in the economy, he did so as a matter of policy choice and not of principle. Burke believed that governmental social and economic policy should be based on pragmatic and prudential considerations and not on some concept of economic "laws."

Chapters 6 and 7 form the pivot of my argument as a whole. In chapter 6 I will suggest that Burke's theory of trusteeship is the cornerstone of his thought, for it was meant to link together the Whig aristocrats and politicians and the public as a whole in a reformist political party. I will maintain that Burke's theory, which I describe as a form of defensive trusteeship, was intended to promote freedom for the representative to pursue responsible reform from above, while also providing a measure of popular control of that representative. A representative, Burke held, was to give all his talent and experience to his constituents' service and interest, and therefore, to act on the basis of his own judgment rather than their instructions when the two conflicted. Still, Burke believed that the question of whether the representative was performing his role effectively was one for the electorate to decide. While the voters should give the representative broad leeway in the performance of his responsibility, it was, he said, in the final analysis, their right to remove him for any reason they felt sufficient. However, I will also hold that, because Burke's theory of trusteeship sought to combine effective and responsible government with limitations on the people's right to participate in politics and to control the party, that theory contained a serious internal contradiction. In chapter 7, I will claim that Burke's contradiction became manifest in internal

politics when he attempted to apply his theory of party to the affairs of the 1780s. I will first detail Burke's attempts to frame a consistent theory of political party as a force to unify men of goodwill. Burke was not the first thinker to attempt to justify parties. Rather, his contribution was to provide a theoretical defense of party as a permanent institution which is neither part of administration nor of the opposition, but which moves from one to the other, to examine the consequences of the acceptance of party—that is, to see party as an instrument for accomplishing political purposes, to analyze some of the tools and tactics which could be employed to make party effective, and, through his association with a party, to bring the theory and practice of party into a balanced consistency. I will conclude the chapter with an examination of Burke's attempts to forge an alliance between the Rockingham Whigs and various other reform groups in the period near the end of the American Revolution and just after. I will argue that those efforts failed because the Whigs were willing to act for the people but not with them or their more radical leaders. In my view, this refusal deprived the Whigs of the popular support which would have been necessary to counterbalance the power of the Crown and its allies.

Chapters 8 through 10 will trace the breakdown of Burke's conception of politics. In chapter 8, I will consider a relatively successful example of Burkean politics. I will follow the development of Burke's position on American affairs from the Stamp Tax Crisis, which the Rockingham Whigs sought to end by combining the repeal of the tax with the passage of the Declaratory Act, to his support for American independence some fifteen years later. In my opinion, contrary to the claims of many of the students of his thought, Burke did have a coherent theory of the Empire. As his speeches on American Taxation and Conciliation with the Colonies make clear, that view was essentially federalist.<sup>51</sup> Burke argued that the English Parliament was both the local Parliament of England and the governing body of the Empire. However, he believed that its imperial powers should be exercised only sparingly and that, for most purposes, the more mature branches of the Empire, such as the American Colonies, should be allowed to govern themselves through their local assemblies. Burke's initial theory of the Empire proved inadequate, for he could not reconcile his vindication of the sovereignty of the English Parliament with the need to conciliate the Americans. Nonetheless, Burke persevered. He reformulated his position, and eventually came to believe that only American independence could end the struggle. While Burke's approach to the American is-



sue was a success at the political level, for the Rockingham Whigs found allies, rose to power in coalition with Shelburne, and ended the war, it raised serious questions about the internal consistency of his political thought. With the end of the war and the death of Rockingham, the Whigs were unable to hold their coalition together. They broke with Shelburne and his supporters and allied with Lord North. This move allowed them to regain power but otherwise cost them dearly, for it alienated them from the radicals without reconciling them with the King. Consequently, the opposition of the King to their Indian policy prevented the Whigs from winning within the existing parliamentary system, and the election of 1784, highlighted by Pitt's smashing victory, showed that they were both unwilling and unable to go outside it.

Chapter 9 will examine Burke's response to the French Revolution. Once again, Burke sought to rally the English people behind a reformist Whig party, but in this far more dangerous case it was the leadership, the trustees of the people, who failed him. In Burke's view, the Revolution required a new political understanding and a new form of politics. He believed that the key to that understanding was a recognition that the revolution demanded responses at three levels: within France, where it threatened the destruction of the old regime; in the whole of Europe, where the spread of French ideas endangered modern civilization, itself; and, finally, in England, where France might serve as an example for the English radicals. Burke's reply, therefore, was equally multi-faceted. First, he believed that the defense of European culture required that the as yet uncontaminated nations of the continent form an anti-revolutionary coalition. Second, Burke argued that those nations should then launch a crusade to destroy revolutionary France, and to restore a reformed constitutional monarchy at the center of the continent. Finally, he undertook a campaign to discredit radicalism in England, and to build national unity on a patriotic basis. Burke's basic message was that the Old Whig faith of reform in detail combined with stability in essence was still valid. However, while he found that most of the English people were willing to support the counter-revolutionary cause, the split in the Whig party between radical and conservative elements, the indecisiveness of the Pitt Administration, and the efforts of demagogues like Paine frustrated his campaign. In the end the country was unified, but in a common resistance to all reform: the leaders would not propose it, and the people would not accept it. Moreover, Burke's campaign destroyed the Whig party, his chosen vehicle of progress. All of his best efforts

to recreate it, to build a new third force, or to form a coalition of all the parties failed.

Chapter 10 will deal with the consequences of that failure, and with the deep pessimism that it introduced into Burke's thought. Indeed, Burke's efforts to deal with Ireland offer both a counterpoint and a confirmation to his reflections on French politics. Ireland offers a counterpoint because, while the French Revolution accelerated and hardened Burke's opposition to reform in England, it seems to have had the opposite effect on his views on Irish politics. From the early 1770s to the mid-1790s, Burke argued a consistent reformist position in regard to Ireland. He insisted that Ireland's problems originated in Ireland and not in England, and maintained that the primary issue was the social and economic one of the exclusion of the Catholic majority from participation in government. The solution, therefore, was the incorporation of the native Irish into the political community of the nation and of the British Empire. A central part of this solution was the vote, and Burke soon found himself advocating reforms in Ireland which he rejected in England. Burke's Irish writings of the mid-1790s reveal a sense that he was in a race against time, for Burke believed that Ireland had to be reformed before repression led to the radicalization of the Irish masses and consequent civil war. It is here that Burke's thought on Ireland represents a confirmation of his thought on America and France: the same internal contradiction in his theory of trusteeship which plagued his attempts to generate reform in those situations led him to failure in Ireland. In all three cases, Burke was unable to combine strong aristocratic leadership, reform, and popular support.