



Teaching Modern Political Philosophy

with Joshua Gibbs

Lesson 6: Reflections
on the Revolution in
France by Edmund
Burke, Pt. 1

Outline:

Edmund Burke's Reflections on the Revolution in France

- Burke was an Irish-English statesman who wrote Reflections on the Revolution in France when the revolution in France was barely underway.
- Reflections by Burke is a difficult read. It is not divided up neatly, making it difficult to teach. Burke is not systematic. The whole book is a letter. Burke's Reflections is more par for the course.
- Be willing to go slow and have some sympathy for your students in reading this. Read this to your students, do not assign Burke for homework.
- Tell your students you have a hard time reading the book.
- Your own intuition might not prove up to the task of reading and understanding the work. Give students Strauss's essay to read together.

Conservatism as a discrete set of beliefs is a reaction to the Enlightenment.

- Conservative philosophy is largely based on common sense.
- It comes into existence to counter the non-common sense claims of progressives.
- Conservatives are interested in what has worked and progressives are interested in what might work better.
- The conservative perspective is generally toward the past. Progressives are oriented towards the future.
- Reflections is a letter written by Burke to someone in the French government.
- The member of the French revolution wrote to Burke for an endorsement of the revolution. Burke had stood up for the American Revolution. It was not an endorsement of democracy, but a matter of common sense.
- Respect for the French Revolution was existent but not common.

Burke's Reflections

- Three chief rights of the English people:
 - To choose our own governors.
 - To judge them for misconduct.
 - To frame a government for ourselves.
- Rousseau would agree to these.



- The English have done something like the French Revolution in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Burke argues that these revolutions are absolutely nothing alike.
 - One of these was conducted very carefully and the other was done with a lot of bloodshed.
 - Even if Burke is wrong and the Glorious Revolution is a lot like the French Revolution, Burke's Reflections contains a number of profound statements about the nature of political right which are worthy of our attention.
- Rousseau would not consent to a special case. For Rousseau the principles of government need to be stated in such a way that there is no room for argument or a need for commentary. Rousseau rules out common sense or nature as a way of establishing the law.
 - Nature is largely concerned with the way that things tend to work.
 - Some deviations are possible in nature. If you turn from the past and look only with the realm of absolute possibility and require all laws to be stated, you have to say that a human being a creature which usually has one head. This makes it hard to live according to nature and to appeal to nature.
 - Nature can no longer provide the framework for the law because nature never always works a certain way.
 - We move toward laws governed by ideal speculation instead of nature.
 - Nature allows for unusual cases and occasional aberrations.
 - You don't make a law based on an aberration.
- Burke draws distinctions about the case of William being placed on the throne that make the entire issue of James intrusion to the throne to seem more unusual.
- Common sense suspension of normal rules:
 - Men let ladies leave the room first. In a fire drill or a fire, the rule is suspended.
 - Progressives do not like the idea of special cases, which require careful distinctions, which lead to disputes, which lead to violence.
 - Common sense dictates that special circumstances call for a suspension of the rules.
 - Burke argues that at the time of the Glorious Revolution it looked like civil war would occur, a slight deviation was made.
- Burke is arguing for a careful evaluation of the past whenever it is discovered that something from the past will not hold in the present.
 - The past is either a thing that they have to completely accept or completely reject for the progressive.
 - Progressives don't get pinned with any sin of the past because they deny the value of everything in the past and orient themselves toward the future which hasn't happened yet.
 - Conservatives tend to bear the weight of history. Unless you have a good reason to dismiss something from the past you retain it.



- If something survives the devouring mouth of time you should study that thing and respect it because almost nothing lasts.
- Burke makes a case for a particular vision of political rights.
 - What are rights?
 - Are rights metaphysical or solid objects (Burke argues for this)?
 - For progressives a right a thing which a man discovers. Political rights have always been there, inherent in the world. Rights come from God.
 - Burke thinks of rights as solid objects, not as principles. A political right comes to you from your ancestors. They give it to you. You owe them thanks for it.
 - Rights are concrete things that can be observed in the same way that nature can be observed.
 - The transmission of rights is important for Burke so far as the proper use of freedom is concerned. You need to look to the past to see how freedoms ought to be treated.