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From Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents

Edmund Burke

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EDMUND BURKE (1729–1797), a highly influential political philosopher and cultural interpreter now best known for his meditations on *The Sublime* and his writings on the French Revolution, was born in Dublin to a Roman Catholic mother and a father who embraced Anglicanism. He began his education at a Quaker school and went on to Trinity College, Dublin, from which he was graduated in 1748. After moving to London in 1750 to pursue a career in law, he abandoned that plan and with difficulty ultimately managed to establish himself as a consequential author and, eventually, a member of Parliament. Among his earliest important publications was *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), which he had begun writing at the age of nineteen; this extraordinarily suggestive work drew the admiration of Samuel Johnson, as well as major European intellectual figures including Diderot, Kant, and Lessing, and it continues to maintain its monumental status in the history of Western aesthetics.

Lacking a secure livelihood, Burke sought employment in government service and, in time, was drawn to politics. He first entered the House of Commons in 1765, and over the next thirty years came to represent three different regional constituencies. During this time, he gave many notable speeches and addressed many controversial issues—among them internecine constitutional conflicts in Britain and the not unrelated contentious situation of the American colonies. Two decades later, shocked by the excesses of the French Revolution, he produced what may be regarded as his most provocative work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which appeared in 1790. From this time on, the nature of Burke's legacy as a political thinker has been contested:

on the left, he has been judged as overly concerned with the violent disruption of the intricate interrelationships he saw as making up the social fabric; and on the right, he has been seen as insufficiently hostile to any radical change in the social order. Burke was very much aware of the difficulty of sustaining an independent perspective when passions demand an unconditional and indisputable stance, and in the intense political arguments that arose during his own time he was not inclined to serve as an entirely predictable source of comfort to any side. That said, William Hazlitt, who was one of his most emphatic critics, observed in 1808 that Burke's "stock of ideas did not consist of . . . half a dozen common-places tortured in a thousand different ways: but his mine of wealth was a profound understanding, inexhaustible as the human heart, and various as the sources of nature . . . I do not say that his arguments are conclusive: but they are profound and *true*, as far as they go."

Burke's complex views remain a perennial challenge to a host of unexamined presumptions. It is therefore not surprising that although he was opposed to slavery and in favor of representative government, and firmly against the British taxation that resulted in the Boston Tea Party, he has routinely been identified as a founding father of modern conservatism, notwithstanding the fact that many conservatives regard his evident liberal sympathies with considerable suspicion.

The selection that follows, which takes account of the increasing agitation in the American colonies, is drawn from *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*, a pamphlet published by Burke on April 23, 1770.

—Stephen Donadio

Edmund Burke

from *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents*

It is an undertaking of some degree of delicacy to examine into the cause of public disorders. If a man happens not to succeed in such an inquiry, he will be thought weak and visionary; if he touches the true grievance, there is a danger that he may come near to persons of weight and consequence, who will rather be exasperated at the discovery of their errors than thankful for the occasion of correcting them. If he should be obliged to blame the favourites of the people, he will be considered as the tool of power; if he censures those in power, he will be looked on as an instrument of faction. But in all exertions of duty something is to be hazarded. In cases of tumult and disorder, our law has invested every man, in some sort, with the authority of a magistrate. When the affairs of the nation are distracted, private people are, by the spirit of that law, justified in stepping a little out of their ordinary sphere. They enjoy a privilege of somewhat more dignity and effect than that of idle lamentation over the calamities of their country. They may look into them narrowly; they may reason upon them liberally; and if they should be so fortunate as to discover the true source of the mischief, and to suggest any probable method of removing it, though they may displease the rulers for the day, they are certainly of service to the cause of Government. Government is deeply interested in everything which, even through the medium of some temporary uneasiness, may tend finally to compose the minds of the subjects, and to conciliate their affections. I have nothing to do here with the abstract value of the voice of the people. But as long as reputation, the most precious possession of every individual, and as long as opinion, the great support of the State, depend entirely upon that voice, it can never be considered as a thing of little consequence either to individuals or to Government. Nations are not primarily ruled by laws; less by violence. Whatever original energy may be supposed either in force or regulation, the operation of both is, in truth, merely instrumental. Nations are governed by the same methods, and on the same principles, by which an individual without authority is often able to govern those who are his equals or his superiors, by a knowledge of their temper, and by a judicious management of it; I mean, when public affairs are steadily and quietly conducted; not when Government is nothing but a continued scuffle between the magistrate and the multitude, in which sometimes the one and sometimes the other is uppermost—in which they

alternately yield and prevail, in a series of contemptible victories and scandalous submissions. The temper of the people amongst whom he presides ought therefore to be the first study of a statesman. And the knowledge of this temper it is by no means impossible for him to attain, if he has not an interest in being ignorant of what it is his duty to learn.

To complain of the age we live in, to murmur at the present possessors of power, to lament the past, to conceive extravagant hopes of the future, are the common dispositions of the greater part of mankind—indeed, the necessary effects of the ignorance and levity of the vulgar. Such complaints and humours have existed in all times; yet as all times have *not* been alike, true political sagacity manifests itself, in distinguishing that complaint which only characterises the general infirmity of human nature from those which are symptoms of the particular distemperature of our own air and season.

Nobody, I believe, will consider it merely as the language of spleen or disappointment, if I say that there is something particularly alarming in the present conjuncture. There is hardly a man, in or out of power, who holds any other language. That Government is at once dreaded and contemned; that the laws are despoiled of all their respected and salutary terrors; that their inaction is a subject of ridicule, and their exertion of abhorrence; that rank, and office, and title, and all the solemn plausibilities of the world, have lost their reverence and effect; that our foreign politics are as much deranged as our domestic economy; that our dependencies are slackened in their affection, and loosened from their obedience; that we know neither how to yield nor how to enforce; that hardly anything above or below, abroad or at home, is sound and entire; but that disconnection and confusion, in offices, in parties, in families, in Parliament, in the nation, prevail beyond the disorders of any former time: these are facts universally admitted and lamented.

This state of things is the more extraordinary, because the great parties which formerly divided and agitated the kingdom are known to be in a manner entirely dissolved. No great external calamity has visited the nation; no pestilence or famine. We do not labour at present under any scheme of taxation new or oppressive in the quantity or in the mode. Nor are we engaged in unsuccessful war, in which our misfortunes might easily pervert our judgment, and our minds, sore from the loss of national glory, might feel every blow of fortune as a crime in Government.

It is impossible that the cause of this strange distemper should not sometimes become a subject of discourse. It is a compliment due, and which I willingly pay, to those who administer our affairs, to take notice in the first place of their speculation. Our Ministers are of opinion that the increase of our trade and manufactures, that our growth by colonisation and by conquest, have concurred to accumulate immense wealth in the hands of some individuals; and this again being dispersed amongst the people, has rendered them universally proud, ferocious, and ungovernable; that the insolence of some from their enormous wealth,

and the boldness of others from a guilty poverty, have rendered them capable of the most atrocious attempts; so that they have trampled upon all subordination, and violently borne down the unarmed laws of a free Government—barriers too feeble against the fury of a populace so fierce and licentious as ours. They contend that no adequate provocation has been given for so spreading a discontent, our affairs having been conducted throughout with remarkable temper and consummate wisdom. The wicked industry of some libellers, joined to the intrigues of a few disappointed politicians, have, in their opinion, been able to produce this unnatural ferment in the nation.

Nothing indeed can be more unnatural than the present convulsions of this country, if the above account be a true one. I confess I shall assent to it with great reluctance, and only on the compulsion of the clearest and firmest proofs; because their account resolves itself into this short but discouraging proposition, “That we have a very good Ministry, but that we are a very bad people”; that we set ourselves to bite the hand that feeds us; that with a malignant insanity we oppose the measures, and ungratefully vilify the persons, of those whose sole object is our own peace and prosperity. If a few puny libellers, acting under a knot of factious politicians, without virtue, parts, or character (such they are constantly represented by these gentlemen), are sufficient to excite this disturbance, very perverse must be the disposition of that people amongst whom such a disturbance can be excited by such means. It is besides no small aggravation of the public misfortune that the disease, on this hypothesis, appears to be without remedy. If the wealth of the nation be the cause of its turbulence, I imagine it is not proposed to introduce poverty as a constable to keep the peace. If our dominions abroad are the roots which feed all this rank luxuriance of sedition, it is not intended to cut them off in order to famish the fruit. If our liberty has enfeebled the executive power, there is no design, I hope, to call in the aid of despotism to fill up the deficiencies of law. Whatever may be intended, these things are not yet professed. We seem therefore to be driven to absolute despair, for we have no other materials to work upon but those out of which God has been pleased to form the inhabitants of this island. If these be radically and essentially vicious, all that can be said is that those men are very unhappy to whose fortune or duty it falls to administer the affairs of this untoward people. I hear it indeed sometimes asserted that a steady perseverance in the present measures, and a rigorous punishment of those who oppose them, will in course of time infallibly put an end to these disorders. But this, in my opinion, is said without much observation of our present disposition, and without any knowledge at all of the general nature of mankind. If the matter of which this nation is composed be so very fermentable as these gentlemen describe it, leaven never will be wanting to work it up, as long as discontent, revenge, and ambition have existence in the world. Particular punishments are the cure for accidental distempers in the State; they inflame rather than allay those heats which arise from the settled mismanagement of the Government, or from a natural ill

disposition in the people. It is of the utmost moment not to make mistakes in the use of strong measures, and firmness is then only a virtue when it accompanies the most perfect wisdom. In truth, inconstancy is a sort of natural corrective of folly and ignorance.

I am not one of those who think that the people are never in the wrong. They have been so, frequently and outrageously, both in other countries and in this. But I do say that in all disputes between them and their rulers the presumption is at least upon a par in favour of the people. Experience may perhaps justify me in going further. When popular discontents have been very prevalent, it may well be affirmed and supported that there has been generally something found amiss in the constitution or in the conduct of Government. The people have no interest in disorder. When they do wrong, it is their error, and not their crime. ■