

A Note on Burke's Vindication of the Natural Society

by Murray N. Rothbard^{*}

In 1756 Edmund Burke published his first work: *Vindication of Natural Society*. Curiously enough it has been almost completely ignored in the current Burke revival. This work contrasts sharply with Burke's other writings, for it is hardly in keeping with the current image of the Father of the New Conservatism. A less conservative work could hardly be imagined; in fact, Burke's *Vindication* was perhaps the first modern expression of rationalistic and individualistic anarchism.

It is well known that Burke spent the rest of his career battling for views diametrically opposite to those of his *Vindication*. His own belated explanation was that the *Vindication* was a satire on the views of rationalist Deists like Lord Bolingbroke, demonstrating that a devotion to reason and an attack on revealed religion can logically eventuate in a subversive attack on the principle of government itself. Burke's host of biographers and followers have tended to adopt his explanation uncritically. Yet they hurry on and rarely mention his *Vindication* in their discussions of Burke, and with good reason. For the work is a most embarrassing one. Careful reading reveals hardly a trace of irony or satire. In fact, it is a very sober and earnest treatise, written in his characteristic style. Indeed, Burke's biographers have commented on the failure of the work as irony, without raising the fundamental question whether it was really meant to be irony at all.

Burke's own explanation, in fact, is not a very plausible one. He was not given to satire, and rarely attempted such writing in later years. The *Vindication* was published anonymously when Burke was 27 years old. Nine years later, after his authorship had been discovered, Burke found himself about to embark on his famous Parliamentary career. To admit that he had seriously held such views in earlier years would have been politically disastrous. His only way out was to brush it off as a satire, thereby vindicating himself as an eternal enemy of rationalism and subversion.

Burke begins the *Vindication* by establishing the aim of his inquiry: to investigate with the light of truth the general nature of political institutions or "political society." He rejects at the outset the typically conservative reluctance to tamper with prevalent beliefs and ancient traditions. He upholds that noble tenet of eighteenth-century rationalism: that happiness, in the long run, rests on truth and truth alone. And that truth is the natural law of human activity and human relations. Positive law imposed by the State injures man

^{*} *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 19, Number 1 (January 1958), pp. 114-118.

whenever it strays from the path that we know to be the law of man's nature. How is the natural law to be discovered? Not by Revelation, but by the use of man's reason.

It is characteristic of Burke that he develops his examination of the State through historical inquiry. First, there are the *external* relations among States. He finds the typical relation is *war*. War is practically the only external face of the State; and Burke points out that Machiavelli's emphasis on war for the study of his Prince applies to all forms of States and not just to monarchies. Burke, in obvious disgust, goes on to chronicle some of the notable "butcheries" in which States have indulged. "All empires have been cemented in blood" and in mutual attempts at destruction. And Burke wittily deduces that Hobbes' appalling view of mankind in the state of nature was derived, not from Hobbes' observations of ordinary human action, but from his study of the actions of men when banded together into states.

The catalog of murders is impressive enough; and Burke estimates that, from ancient times, thirty-six million people have been slaughtered by governments. But Burke is not content to stop there. Why, he asks, why does evil center in States? He finds the answer in the nature of the State itself. All "political society" rests on subordination on the one hand, and tyranny on the other.

Burke examines the nature of the State. He points to the familiar fact that governments do things "for reasons of state" which individuals could not justly do. But he adds that these injustices are grounded on the very nature of the State itself, i.e., on the fact that the State is necessarily supported by violence:

To prove that these sorts of political societies are a violation offered to nature, and a constraint upon the human mind, it needs only to look upon the sanguinary measures, and instruments of violence, which are everywhere used to support them. Let us take a review of the dungeons, whips, chains, racks, gibbets, with which every society is abundantly stored . . . I acknowledge, indeed, the necessity of such a proceeding in such institutions; but I must have a very mean opinion of institutions where such proceedings are necessary.¹

Burke proceeds to a discussion of the famous Aristotelian types of government: despotism, aristocracy, democracy. Each is taken up, examined, and found wanting. Despotism is obviously evil; but aristocracy is not better. In fact, an aristocracy is apt to be worse, since its rule is more permanent and does not depend on the whims of one man. And what of democracy? Here Burke draws on his store of knowledge of ancient Greece. Democracy is not only tyrannical, but bound to succumb to hatred of superior individuals. The rule of the people tends to be warlike and despotic, and to make heavy use of taxes and subsidies.

Finally, Burke takes up the "mixed" form of government, the form particularly admired by republican theorists in modern times. By a division and balance of powers,

¹ Edmund Burke, *Works* (London, 1900), I, 21.

republican government is supposed to blend all three of these forms, so that each can check and balance the excesses of the other. Burke, confessing a former adherence to this system, plunges into an analysis of it, pursuing truth wherever it may lead. First, he says this intricate balance must necessarily be very delicate, and easily upset by one power or another. Second, overlapping spheres of powers create a constant source of confusion and argument. Third, the effect of the conflict between the various powers is that first one, and then the other, segment achieves dominant power in the endless struggle, and alternately tyrannizes over the people. Whichever party achieves power, tyranny is the result:

. . . the balance is overset, now upon one side, now upon the other. The government is, one day, arbitrary power in a single person; another, a juggling confederacy of a few to cheat the prince, and enslave the people, and the third, a frantic and unmanageable democracy. The great instrument of all these changes . . . is party . . . ; the spirit which actuates all parties is the same; the spirit of ambition, of self-interest, of oppression, and treachery.²

The *Vindication* contains much rhetoric about inequality between the rich and the poor. Close examination reveals, however, that Burke is writing not about social classes but about social castes, i.e., he is referring to the artificial inequalities of wealth resulting from state actions and not to the inequalities resulting from free action. Burke is denouncing the slavery, poverty, and vices introduced by "political society."

It should be clear from this work that by "political society," Burke did not signify "society" in general. This is no Rousseauian call for a return to the jungle, either earnestly or satirically. Burke's attack is levelled not against *society* – the framework of peaceful human interrelations and exchanges, but against *States* – those uniquely coercive elements: in human relations. His argument rests on a belief that when we observe the nature of man, we find that States are *anti-social* institutions.

"Anarchism" is an extreme term, but no other can adequately describe Burke's thesis. Again and again, he emphatically denounces *any and all* government, and not just specific, forms of government. Summing up his views on government, he declares:

The several species of government vie with each other in the absurdity of their constitutions, and the oppression which they make their subjects endure. Take them under what form you please, they are in effect but a despotism

Parties in religion and politics make sufficient discoveries concerning each other, to give a sober man proper caution against them all. The monarchist, and aristocratical, and popular partisans have been jointly laying their axes to the root of all government, and have in their turns proved each other absurd and inconvenient. In vain you tell me

² *Ibid.* 35.

that artificial government is good, but that I fall out only with the abuse. The thing! The thing itself is the abuse!³

All government, Burke adds, is founded on one "grand error." It was observed that men sometimes commit violence against one another, and that it is therefore necessary to guard against such violence. As a result, men appoint governors among them. But who is to defend the people against the governors?

The anarchism of Burke's *Vindication* is negative, rather than positive. It consists of an attack on the State rather than a positive blueprint of the type of society which Burke would regard as ideal. Consequently, both the communist and the individualist wings of anarchism have drawn sustenance from this work. William Godwin, the late eighteenth-century English founder of communist anarchism, hailed the *Vindication* as a precursor of his own viewpoint. On the other hand, an English disciple of Josiah Warren's individualist anarchism reprinted the *Vindication* in 1858, with appropriate marginal comment, and it was highly praised and reprinted by Benjamin R. Tucker in *Liberty* in 1885. On balance, it would be fair, though inconclusive, to place the *Vindication* in the individualist camp, since there is no sign of enmity to private property as such in this work.

There are many internal indications that this is a sober work by Burke, and not a satire. In the first place, there is his treatment of reason. One of Burke's most characteristic views in his later years, and one that particularly endears him to the New Conservatives, is his distrust of reason. In particular, the rationalists who wish to plan the lives of people in the way an engineer builds a machine, are contrasted with conservatives who rely on spontaneous and unplanned change. It would seem, therefore, that Burke's reliance on reason in the *Vindication* is simply a satire on these rationalist views. But this is not the case at all. In upholding reason as the bulwark of his extreme libertarian views, Burke also attacks those rationalists who wish to plan and tyrannize over society. But he attacks them not *because* they are rationalists, but precisely because they are false to reason. They are not rationalist enough to realize the rationality of liberty. They engage in "artificial reason" instead of "natural reason":

During the course of my inquiry you may have observed a very material difference between my manner of reasoning and that which is in use among the abettors of artificial society. They form their plans upon what seems most eligible to their imaginations, for the ordering of mankind. I discover the mistakes in those plans, from the real known consequences which have resulted from them. They have enlisted reason to fight against itself . . . in proportion as we have deviated from the plain rule of our nature, and turned our reason against itself, in that proportion have we increased the follies and miseries of mankind.⁴

³ Ibid., p. 46. 32-33

⁴ Ibid., 37.

Secondly, if Burke had meant to impugn Bolingbroke's Deist views, he would have denounced "artificial religion" equally or more than he denounces government. But, on the contrary, Burke explicitly states that government is a far greater evil.⁵

Another piece of evidence for the seriousness of the *Vindication* is its bitter denunciation of lawyers and legal procedures. We know that Burke, in this period, was an unhappy law student, fed up with law and eagerly turning to literature and literary companions. His bitter passages on Law in the *Vindication* fit perfectly with what we know of his feelings in this period.⁶ But if these passages are faithful to Burke's genuine opinions, why not the rest of the work as well?

Historians have stressed that the *Vindication* was written in imitation of the style of the recently dead Bolingbroke, and have taken this as proof of its satiric bent. Yet these same biographers of Burke admit that, in his later writings, he continued to write in a similar style! Is it, in fact, surprising that young Burke should try to imitate the style of the man universally acknowledged as the greatest stylist and orator of his day? Burke's elaborate efforts: to shield his identity from the public, to give the impression that this was a posthumous work of Bolingbroke's, hint at a different explanation. This is his realization that the kind of views expressed in the *Vindication* would be bitterly reviled and denounced. Let us remember that this work was the first expression of anarchism, perhaps the most "radical," the least "conservative" of creeds. The whole tone of the *Vindication*, indeed, is that of a man who fears the personal consequences of publishing his views, who even attempts to hold them back, but is impelled onwards by the force of his conviction that a new and great truth has been discovered. Burke discloses:

These and many more points, I am far from spreading to their full extent. You are sensible that I do not put forth half my strength; and you cannot be at a loss for the reason. A man is allowed sufficient freedom of thought, provided he knows how to choose his subjects properly. You may criticize freely upon the Chinese constitution, and observe with as much severity as you please upon the absurd tricks or destructive bigotry of the bonzees. But the scene is changed as you come homeward, and atheism or treason may be names given in Britain, to what would be reason and truth if asserted of China.⁷

The following passage is particularly striking:

When the world is in a fitter temper than it is at present to hear truth, or when I shall be more indifferent about its temper, my thoughts may become more public. In the meantime, let them repose in my own bosom, and in the bosoms of such men as are fit to be initiated in the sober mysteries of truth and reason.⁸

⁵ Ibid., 46-47

⁶ Ibid., 38-41

⁷ Ibid., 36

⁸ Ibid., 32

Perhaps these words provide the clue to the mystery of the *Vindication*. If the work were really a satire, why only proclaim it as such when a rising political career was at stake? Why not announce it shortly after publication? And if the Burke of *Vindication* was in deadly earnest, did he really change his earlier views, or did this great advocate of prudence bow prudently to the public temper?