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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Edmund Burke

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Keywords

Beautiful

Law

Manners

Morals

Passions

Social Contract

Sublime

Abstract

While Edmund Burke was a lifelong practitioner of sociability at all possible levels – familial, intellectual and political –, what is far more arresting are the gaps between his early theorising, in *Sublime and Beautiful*, and what happened with the French Revolution. The latter helped Burke show that ambition was now destructive of sociability, no longer just one of its components. Such contamination by ambition also suggested that, under the apparent rhetoric of hell let loose, new forms of self-defeating sociability pointed to what farcical order of things was coming to life on pretence of regeneration.

Edmund Burke (1730-1797) could have used the word sociability which appeared in the fifteenth century, but his first major publication, *A Vindication of Natural Society* (1756,

1757), takes a circuitous road to illustrate it. It ironically challenges those utilitarian views which, after purporting to extend the perceived advantages of familial society to an equally beneficial political society, end up lamenting the latter's nightmarish excrescences - religious fanaticism, wars and invasions, despotism, luxury, sedition, corruption, legal squabbles, exploitation - and advocating retreat into the unsullied bliss of some imaginary 'natural society.' To Burke, there is no overarching human design in either familial or political society, wisdom, implicitly, bears on the appropriate partner or constitutional arrangements alone, and social contract theories are sent up. Society, in both its interrelated forms, is the outgrowth of instinct, or, as he wrote the year after in *Sublime and Beautiful* (1757, 1759), of passions.

Some of them, coming under 'self-preservation,' 'turn chiefly on *pain* and *danger*' and 'are the most powerful of all the passions;' others, more properly belonging to society, fall into 'the society of the *sexes*, which answers the purpose of propagation,' and '*general society*, which we have with men and with other animals,' 'even...the inanimate world.'¹ That was his foundation for the two ideal types of the sublime and the beautiful, the former being potentially antagonistic to society, the other its buttress. He was, however, aware of some muddy middle ground. Definitely not listing ambition under the sublime as a potential cause of '*pain* and *danger*,' he resorted to a teleological argument where ambition was turned to the good of society:

'Although imitation is one of the great instruments used by providence in bringing our nature towards its perfection, yet if men gave themselves up to imitation entirely, and each followed the other, and so on in an eternal circle, it is easy to see that there never could be any improvement amongst them. Men must remain as brutes do, the same at the end that they are at this day, and that they were in the beginning of the world. To prevent this, God has planted in man a sense of ambition, and a satisfaction arising from the contemplation of his excelling his fellows in something deemed valuable amongst them' (*Sublime and Beautiful*, i, xvii, 96).

Obviously, one ought to differentiate between a legitimate, meliorating ambition and what merely pertains to self-promotion. If Burke suffered from that at all, little did it serve him. His political career was chequered at best; nor did his networks go a long way to further his interests. He joined two political clubs, Brooks's and the Whig Club, which he left when they endorsed the French Revolution; he was followed by forty-two members of the Whig Club² : divisive, not sociable Burke, one might suggest, and the same can apply to earlier moments at the Club which he had founded at Trinity College, Dublin.³ Little did Samuel Johnson, though otherwise admiring, think highly of his 'jocularly' at the time of his own Club.⁴ There were, of course, forms of rewarding social ambition (he was elected Lord Rector of the University of Glasgow for 1783-1785), lighter moments in his sociability, too, when he respectfully hosted the somewhat fussy Brahmin, Humund Rao,⁵ and his plans to make the slave trade so costly that it would have become unprofitable⁶ testified to a marked extension of sociability, but the family circle may well have been where he felt most comfortable. Of course, one also ought to take into account that other, anxiety-ridden home of his, namely

Ireland, as in the 1760s when he confessed that he could not do much for his objectionable Catholic cousin, Garrett Atty Nagle, who was in danger of his life after abducting a Protestant heiress (O'Brien, *Great Melody*, 50-51).

The whole fades before his response to the darker facet of ambition which emerged with the French Revolution. He related it to a new form of 'incorporation' where disaffected *literati* joined in the *Encyclopédie* project, aided and abetted by financiers and 'foreign princes' like Frederick the Great of Prussia, owing to their falling out of court favour 'since the decline of the life and greatness of Lewis the XIVth;' ⁷ other like-minded societies were emerging, such as the Bavarian *Illuminati* (*Reflections*, 265 and n.). Whether Burke was succumbing to conspiracy theories (which, to be fair, also attached to the other end of the political spectrum) is rather trivial, but downplaying whatever persecution attended the publications by the *Encyclopédistes* helped him highlight the laxness of the *Ancien Régime* faced with a novel ambition which was alien to society's welcome ingredients.

Stylistically and conceptually speaking, there is no self-evident continuity from *Sublime and Beautiful* to the revolutionary years.⁸ Tellingly enough, Marie-Antoinette's fate during the October Days of 1789 shows a contamination of the pure beautiful, which the queen naturally inhabited, by the grotesque sublime of 'horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies' (*Reflections*, 165). Burke hoped that she could escape by suicide so as not to suffer 'the last disgrace' (*Reflections*, 169). This recalls Lucretia, but the elevated classical allusion is undercut by that other one to hubristic Empedocles leaping into Etna (*Reflections*, 154). However, continuity between the earlier and later stages in Burke's career is exemplified by the mixed nature of the revolutionary *tabula rasa*, including as it does what Burke had termed, as if in passing, the 'merely odious' features of the sublime, like 'toads and spiders' (*Sublime and Beautiful*, ii, xxi, 126), and such deflation indirectly supports his reading of manners and laws:

'Manners are of more importance than laws. Upon them, in a great manner, the laws depend. The law touches us but here and there, and now and then. Manners are what vex or soothe, corrupt and purify, exalt or debase, barbarize or refine us, by a constant, steady, uniform, insensible operation, like that of the air we breathe in. They give their whole form and colour to our lives. According to their quality, they aid morals, they supply them, or they totally destroy them.'

Obviously, '[o]f this the new French legislators were aware,' altering even 'the fashion of a hat or a shoe' and turning into debauchery '[t]he noblest passions, the love of glory, the love of their country.'⁹ By manners Burke meant much the same as Montesquieu's '*manières*' which pertained to man's external conduct ('*moeurs*,' or morals, concerned internal conduct) while laws bore on 'the actions of the citizen.'¹⁰ An illustration of the pervasion of morals by remodelled laws and the ensuing manners was the surge in divorce (*Regicide Peace*, 210-211), all three concepts being subjected to the encompassing slime of the *novus ordo*

saeculorum of the Revolution.

It might be tempting to connect such points with Benjamin Constant's later *De la liberté des Anciens comparée à celle des Modernes* (1819) where modern freedom resides in institutional guarantees to private possession while ancient freedom was participation in politics. Burke's account of revolutionary ways is indeed one where public virtue on the ancient, Roman-republican pattern was going berserk owing to intrusive newfangled legislation, but it does not follow that he was a Constant *avant la lettre* hailing the rise of freedom as privacy.

Although he seems relieved that one rarely experiences direct contact with the law, plausibly in its repressive dimension, ordinary social conditions evince a subtle link between morals as privacy, manners as external conduct and the protective rule of law which does not exactly match Constant's identification of 'a part of human existence which remains, of necessity, individual and independent and which is, by rights, beyond any social competence.'¹¹

Where the line is exactly drawn Constant does not specify, and Burke would have raised no objection. Now, if ambition comes under the passions of society, not just those of the individual, Burke's rule of law covers the political and the private domain alike since the latter ties up with manners and their ultimately political dimension: no human being exists in isolation, even when not participating in the lawmaking process. Conversely, revolutionary ambition includes a ludicrous competition as to who, in a jumble of privacy and public conduct, is closest to Rousseau whose sociability, incidentally, did not extend to his own children ('The bear loves, licks, and forms her young; but bears are not philosophers').¹² Beyond its evident mockery of genuine morals, revolutionary competition defeats both the egalitarian, conversational sociability of Johnson's Club (say, the Constantian focus on privacy) and the harmonising purpose of the rule of law: Constant, in short, was throwing out the baby with the bathwater by bluntly pitting the one form of freedom against the other.

'Toads and spiders' again, no grand crossroads, anyway, in human outlooks on politics. Voltaire at least had talent in spite of his impiety, and Rousseau eloquence though 'not a little deranged in his intellects.'¹³ But Rousseau himself would have balked at being idolised by his revolutionary disciples (*Reflections*, 284). What such degrees in insanity point to is another version of Burke's somewhat clumsy articulation of two sides of the French Revolution. Most memorable is the apocalyptic sway of 'the revolutionary harpies of France' which, 'cuckoo-like, adulterously lay their eggs, and brood over, and hatch them in the nest of every neighbouring state'.¹⁴ But, precisely, cuckoo manners deflate revolutionary magnitude and, along this line, the sublime degenerates into farce and France into a 'tragicomic scene' (*Reflections*, 92). So does a comparison between the bestiary in *Sublime and Beautiful* (the wild ass, the horse, the bull, the wolf, the leviathan, much of it drawing from the Old Testament, mainly the Book of Job) and the later ambiguities of the harpies provide an additional insight: God's direct intervention, as 'supreme director of this great drama' (*Reflections*, 175), suggests how human boastfulness boils down to the ridiculous entropy of the revolutionary sublime and its mock sociability.

Practical circumstances were thus deflating the earlier ideal types or, rather, underlining the disappearance of the beautiful ? the mutual attraction of the sexes was replaced by the new

Moloch of devotion to the State (*Regicide Peace*, 208-209) ? and the reduction of the sublime to ‘toads and spiders.’ Attendants to a tragedy would desert it if a real execution was to take place round the corner (*Sublime and Beautiful*, i, xv, 93): now the Revolution purveyed its own drama which, far from granting sociability a greater variety of expression, reduced it to the unprecedented, humdrum prevalence of blood in a world of make-believe.

If Burke extolled the Glorious Revolution at the same time that he damned the French Revolution wholesale, it was not because the former, as such, had been conducive to sociability, not even its re-foundation. It deserved his praise simply because it confirmed a rule of law which had (supposedly) been threatened by James II, and such confirmation enabled Burke to work out diachronic aspects of sociability that *Sublime and Beautiful* had not considered: properly understood, the social contract is ‘a partnership...between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born’ (*Reflections*, 194-195). This ruled out Rousseau’s phoney form of ‘universal benevolence’ while it also made it possible, at a spatial, not temporal level this time, to envisage an ascent from the ‘little platoon we belong to in society’ to ‘a love of our country’ and, at the very apex, ‘mankind’ at large (*Reflections*, 135).

While *Sublime and Beautiful* had been content with, abundant indeed, quotations from its predecessors, Burke was now mapping sketches of his own trans-generational, intellectual sociability, as with Somers and other defunct architects of the Glorious Revolution (*Reflections*, 102-104) or the ‘old’ Whigs of the Sacheverell trial in 1710.¹⁵ Revisiting ‘old’ and ‘new’ Whig identities also constructed an imaginary sociability the better to establish his lifelong political consistency. Much the same can be said of his eulogium of Montesquieu (*Appeal*, 200): while oblivious of earlier strictures respecting the great voice’s historical method (see *An Abridgement of English History*, left unfinished in the 1760s), it offers what has come to be of far greater moment, a political Montesquieu for British admiration where intellectual sociability transcends borders as well as decades. The late Marquis of Rockingham Burke had served in government and in the Commons (*Appeal*, 80); as for Lord Keppel, also deceased and who benefited by his counsel when court marshalled in 1779, he supplies a patriotic sociability which his nephew, the Duke of Bedford, would be felicitous to emulate instead of yielding to revolutionary lure (*Noble Lord*, 146-151). Finally, the young men who volunteered to be Burke’s secretaries at the end of his life, after the death of his son Richard (Lock, *Edmund Burke*, II, 479), provide humbler notes where the most practical, day-to-day level mirrors the flights of eloquence of the trans-generational sociability of *Reflections*.

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 14. Burke, *Letter to a Noble Lord*, 1796, *Works*, vol. v, p. 120.
 15. Burke, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*, 1791, ed. Norbert Col (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1996), p. 82, 122-124, and Col's Postface, p. 254-261.
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Cite this article

COL Norbert, "Edmund Burke", *The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century* [online], ISSN 2803-2845, Accessed on 07/17/2024, URL: <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/edmund-burke.html>

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