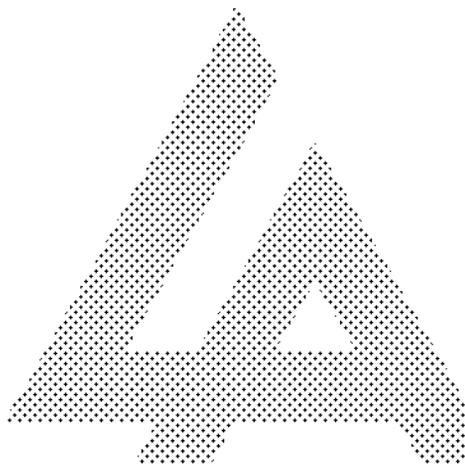


FRANCIS CANAVAN ON EDMUND BURKE AND PROPERTY:

A CRITIQUE

PAUL MARKS



Francis Canavan

*The Political Economy of Edmund Burke:
The Role of Property in His Thought*

Fordham University Press, New York, 1995, 185pp.
£26.95, ISBN 0 8232 15903 (hardback)
£16.50, ISBN 0 8232 15911 (paperback)

Francis Canavan is trapped in a stage theory of history. This is unfortunate as Burke did not believe in this type of history. The problem is not that Canavan believes different things to Burke but that he is unable

sufficiently to understand Burke's position and therefore cannot explain it to others.

The problem is certainly not one of bad faith. Canavan wishes to understand Burke and is as open as he can be about where he thinks his own views differ from those of Burke. For example Canavan states:

Descended as I am from a long line of Irish peasants, I have no nostalgia for the days when the British aristocracy not only ruled but owned the land. But it is the views of Burke, who loved the aristocratic social order of his time, not mine, that are of interest here. (p. ix)

Libertarian Heritage No. 18

ISSN 0959-566X ISBN 1 85637 366 5

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance, 25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
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This review article was first published in *History of Political Thought*, Volume XVII, Issue 1, Spring 1996.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of its author, and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee, Advisory Council or subscribers.

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However this in some ways just shows up the problem with Canavan's work. Canavan assumes that it is natural for an Irish peasant to resent not just the misgovernment of Ireland but the fact of land ownership by people of British descent. Burke would not have agreed that such a feeling was natural, he would have held it to be unnatural — the product of a false philosophy. To Burke the natural emotion is to support the owners of property — however the ancestors came by that property.

Now Burke may be quite wrong (about this and all other things) but unless it is constantly borne in mind that Burke regarded such opinions not just as his "views" but as the natural moral feelings of mankind, then any study of Burke is imperiled.

In this work Canavan fails to make the leap of imagination necessary to attempt to see through Burke's eyes. No attempt at this will ever be fully successful (the gap between our time and that of Burke is a large one, and no man can ever fully see through another man's eyes in any case), but the attempt must be made and it entails trying to free oneself from modern fashions and writing as if the views of the person one is studying might actually be true. Again this is never fully possible but by uncritically accepting certain modern doctrines Canavan has made the task more difficult for himself and his readers.

THE MYTH OF A COMFORTABLE PRE-CAPITALIST WORLD

The stage theory of history that Canavan assumes to be correct is (basically) that once upon a time there was a moral economy where prices and wages were not determined by supply and demand but by what was thought just. This moral economy was overthrown by something called 'capitalism' which led to the decline of living standards for those who lived by wage labour, and made necessary an increased role for the state to combat this increasing poverty.

For example we are told that Burke "ignored the phenomenon of unemployment and underpaid employment which was to become acute as a result of the Industrial Revolution", and Burke did not see "the welfare function that the Industrial Revolution would eventually thrust upon government". Burke believed in a "traditional rural order in which a paternalistic aristocracy" looked after people and failed to see that the "Industrial Revolution ... spelled the end" of this (pp. 142-3).

The trouble with this is that, to Burke, life (whilst hardly pleasant) was getting better and had been worse in the past. Burke's vision of history is a dark one where the material conditions of life for most people were not only bad and could only be gradually improved through hard effort over time but had always

been bad. The vision of a comfortable precapitalist population that is Canavan's interpretation of Laslett's 'world we have lost' (p. 23),¹ simply does not exist for Burke. This can be seen from Burke's writings. Whether it is Burke's dark vision of the past in his 1750s *An Abridgement of English History*, or his view that modern life was grim (though improving) and that there were no quick or easy cures for poverty. This is the line that is shot through his works as late as the 1790s; such as the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* (things are grim, but they always have been and we are stronger now than when we had to fight the long wars of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries) or, of course, the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* — things are bad but you are not going to improve them with more state action, you are just going to make them worse.

The tragedy is that Canavan understands a lot of this. He notes Burke's consistency over property generally and is not misled either by Burke's student *Reformer* or by his satirical *A Vindication of Natural Society* (pp. 142-3). Canavan also examines such works as the *Thoughts* at length (Chapter 6, "Burke's Economics"). However, Canavan cannot free himself from his preconceptions. We are given an examination of the history of Burke's time and before, in which Canavan admits that living standards had been rising from the seventeenth century and that what Canavan calls 'capitalism' may have been around since the early middle ages (pp. 6-7 and 9-10). But such concessions are forgotten almost as soon as they are made. The general temper just *assumes* that the rise of 'capitalism' must mean the increase of poverty, just as it assumes there was something before 'capitalism'.

Now both these doctrines may be quite correct, but Burke never believed in either of them. Burke may have believed nonsense, but to understand what he believed (nonsense or not) one must open one's mind to it — at least for a little while.

Burke did not believe that there had been a time when things (or labour) were worth more than someone was prepared to pay for them. Certainly human history was full of savage crimes — plundering, rapine, slavery and serfdom. But all this is about giving people less not more than the market price for their goods or services. In short, that the 'moral economy' that Canavan *assumes* had existed was, for Burke, not so much 'the world we have lost' as the world that had never been.

Burke was not opposed to charity — quite the opposite, as Canavan points out (p. 140). As a good Anglican² Burke did not deny that love of God might organize an entire community — a monastic community. But the idea that a whole society could, now or in the past, be a monastery would have struck him as quite absurd.

THE JUST PRICE IS THE MARKET PRICE

Burke's vision of the 'just price' is much the same as that of the old scholastic thinkers of the school of Salamanca. The 'just price' is the price at which a seller will sell and a buyer will buy without a man with a club looking on — i.e. the 'just price' is the market price, as much in ancient Babylon (the failure of Hammurabi's price controls would not have come as a great shock to Burke) as in eighteenth-century England. Burke's view of the past is much the same as M. M. Postan's or Alan Macfarlane's view of the middle ages — i.e. when the swords and clubs were not about market prices held sway.³ So it is rather pointless to examine Burke for his reaction to the decline of the moral economy and rise of the market economy (over whatever time period) as he did not believe in any such process.

It was not that Burke regarded the desire for trade and personal enrichment as a sufficient basis to build civil society (as some figures in the 'Scottish Enlightenment' may have done), far from it. Burke regarded *honour* — being prepared to fight and die to defend the persons and possessions of *others* — as vital for building and maintaining civil society against the forces of evil (even in the best of times such forces are always there to Burke). But none of this has anything to do with the organisation of production or anything of that sort.

INDUSTRIALISATION OR MASS STARVATION

It is the same with the 'industrial revolution' (i.e. the use of new technology and methods in industry). Burke did not have the faith in unlimited progress that, say, Josiah Tucker had, but he could see no reason why new machines and methods of organization (such new methods as there were) would have reduced the standard of living of most people — rather the reverse. Again Burke may be utterly wrong, but to understand it is necessary to accept that a man could believe such a thing. To read Canavan is to get one side of a debate on the 'industrial revolution'. Such writers as Eric Hobsbawm are rightly mentioned (p. 23), but the 'horrors of the industrial revolution' case has been under attack for fifty years on the grounds that any overall rise of poverty (if there was one) was nothing to do with changes in industry but rather with rising population and war, and that without the new methods there would simply have been mass starvation. Writers such as T. S. Ashton never appear in this work.⁴ Such writers may be wrong, but such a view of these matters must be part of someone's mental universe if they are to understand Edmund Burke.

We are left with a general impression of Burke as a man in love with a passing order of the world and incapable of understanding the changing historical stage. This is not a strict Marxist view but it does hold that different basic principles are suitable for different

years — and that any reasonable man would know this. This view may be correct but it needs to be defended rather than just assumed. Just assuming such a view (without examining it) makes it difficult to understand people who do not hold this view — people like Edmund Burke.

BURKE OPPOSED POLITICAL CORRUPTION — NOT TRADE

I must not exaggerate this sort of thing in Canavan. It is rarely as odd as when (for example) he refers to the Marquis of Rockingham as lounging in his "mini-Versailles in the fields of Yorkshire" (p. 106) in order to avoid serious political work in London, this of the nerve centre of one of the most important agricultural enterprises of England and headquarters of one of the most enterprising estate managers.⁵ However the notion of traditional aristocrats not much interested in money being replaced by greedy capitalists (over whatever time period) is like a running sore in the book — rarely out in the open but always there, and it is not exactly an incontestable picture.

When Burke condemns the "monied interest" he is not condemning factory owners; he is attacking the men of charge alley — the speculators in the national debt. It was not that these men made their money from finance rather than from land that made Burke hostile to them,⁶ it was that they depended on political patronage such as the money borrowed to pay for (often unjust) wars. Pocock if anything underplays this element in Burke's thought.⁷ It is not an Aristotelian (or Ciceronian) disdain for men who make money by working with money (rather than land) that is the basic element in Burke's attitude, it is their *political* connections. Whether it is supporting wars for trade under Pitt the Elder or the crushing of the Americans or the wars of the East India Company or the confiscation of Church and other land to try to maintain payments on the French national debt — Burke was always going to be on the opposite side to them. The only time it was ever to be different was in Burke's support for the wars against revolutionary France in the 1790s, the monied-ministry interest (from Pitt the Younger on down) was dubious about these wars but that did not stop them profiting from them. However living off and encouraging ever higher taxation (to pay for loans) is hardly 'capitalism' (if this word means anything) it is more like the opposite.

Canavan's writing on the national debt is odd. He quotes Burke in defence of the existence of the national debt but (just as Pocock does) he mistakes a political argument for an economic one (p. 158). This is strange as Canavan is an American (and a learned one) and therefore must be aware of Alexander Hamilton's argument that a national debt is a good thing as it binds men of property to the constitutional government and therefore makes civil disorder less of a threat.

Burke's attitude to the *economic* affects of the national debt (especially if it got out of control) was much the same as that of Hume or Smith.⁸

THE MEANING OF REGULATION

Canavan is clearly a very learned man who has studied Burke's times in depth (although with some preconceived ideas that I have argued are not helpful), which makes one error rather hard to understand. Canavan uses the word "regulation" in its *modern* sense — as in rules and regulations.⁹ However Burke used the word "regulation" to mean 'ordered' — he was referring to the laws of contract, inheritance and so forth.¹⁰ In Canavan's definition of the term "regulation" Burke is a great deregulator — throughout his life Burke sought to reduce the number and scope of government rules infringing freedom of trade and contract. This element of Burke (the *civil use* as well as the *secure possession* of property) is of great importance.

STATE ACTION IN A CRISIS

Canavan does sometimes highlight some important point about Burke that might easily be missed. One that occurs to me is his point that Burke favoured the East India Company repairing the reservoirs that Hyder Ali had damaged.¹¹ Now (without going into the endless complexity of Indian matters) this is *partly* to be seen as part of Burke's war with the East India Company — however Canavan has a valid point. In a time of *crisis* Burke is not in favour of just sitting down and waiting for the Indians to develop the practice of private financing of reservoirs. Canavan makes the same point (state action in a crisis) concerning his guess (which I agree with) that Burke would have recommended state action during the great Irish famine of the late 1840s, although

Canavan spoils his point somewhat by repeating the old exaggerations of state inaction in the period.¹² Centuries of British misrule had left the Irish vulnerable to potato blight and perhaps more should have been done to help, but around twenty million pounds was spent — and private aid came as well.

SOUND IN PARTS

I have concentrated on the vices of Canavan's work, and it is perhaps inevitable that a man (such as myself) who has been obsessed for some time with Burke and property would tend to see the flaws and not the strengths of a general work on the matter. However I should stress the virtues of the work. It is short and clear — free of the absurd academic jargon that disfigures many works. No person with only a general knowledge of Burke could leave this work without learning something. Furthermore, some parts of the work are very sound. For example the account of Burke's attitude towards the French Revolution (Chapter 7) — Burke's opposition to the Revolution being

based on his seeing it as a threat to property, rather than his being in love with Marie Antoinette or whatever — is generally first rate and clearly shows the influence of the work of men like Pocock.

However I am very aware whilst reading this work of the fact that Canavan is a profoundly learned and intelligent man. I am also aware of the excellence of his previous works.¹³ This means his present work must be judged by the highest standards and I do not think it really explains Burke's beliefs about property and how they affect his political views. Canavan says on the very first page of his preface: "I am not sure that I have satisfactorily answered it [the question of Burke and property] here." Canavan is a brave man to say that. I just wish I could disagree with him.

NOTES

1. I am not claiming anything about the views of Peter Laslett, only about the meaning that Canavan puts to his phrase. Canavan does not explain this vision in any depth so I am having to judge by what he *implies*.
2. Or Roman Catholic, as Connor Cruise O'Brien might argue. See O'Brien, *The Great Melody: Thematic Biography of Edmund Burke*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1992.
3. See M. M. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1972, and Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1978. Canavan mentions several historians of the middle ages but these two are conspicuous by their absence.
4. I could understand Canavan missing recent work, but works like T. S. Ashton's *Industrial Revolution*, Oxford University Press, London, 1948, or F. A. Hayek's *Capitalism and the Historians*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1954?
5. See J. S. Hoffman, *The Marquis: A Study of Lord Rockingham*, Fordham University Press, New York, 1969.
6. Canavan actually quotes Burke's general attitude to lending money for interest in the last paragraph of p. 158: "Money is a productive thing; and when the usual time of its demand can be tolerably calculated, it may, with prudence, be safely laid out to the profit of the holder."
7. Canavan refers to J. G. A. Pocock's argument on p. 17. Pocock's work, *Virtue, Commerce, and History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985 is, of course, a very important work for those interested in the history of political thought in the eighteenth century.
8. Ironically Canavan quotes Burke's attitude to an out-of-control national debt on the very next page (p. 159) — but in relation to France. But Britain was not an exception. If Britain's national debt interest had taken up half its revenue in the 1780s Burke would have been just as horrified.
9. For example p. 175: "Where the line between liberty and regulation should be drawn in any particular set of historical circumstances is, of course, a matter of continuing political debate."
10. Canavan half seems to understand this — see p. 50.
11. Pp. 139-40. Other writers note Burke's support for public works in India (or at least his attack on the East India Company's preference for taking tax money home to Britain instead) but such works are sometimes so deeply in error on other matters that it is not worth going through them. One example is Paul Hindson and Tim Gray's *Burke's Dramatic Theory of Politics*, Gower Publishing, Aldershot, 1988, which holds that Burke's understanding of politics was based on the theatre.