

Burke's Conservative Ideas: Following the path of David Hume

My goal in this short paper is to examine the similar path Burke and David Hume took on their conservative approach to political reform.

In his speech on Parliament, Burke describes the Revolution of 1688 by asserting, I quote:

What we did was in truth and substance, and in a constitutional light, a revolution, not made, but prevented. We took solid securities; we settled doubtful questions; we corrected anomalies in our law. In the stable fundamental parts of our constitution we made no revolution; no, nor any alteration at all. We did not impair the monarchy. Perhaps it might be shewn that we strengthened it very considerably”¹.

Following the English tradition, Burke wants to emphasize, in the conservative profile that he ascribes to this revolution, the effort to change only the necessary to provide for a solution to a problem, maintaining the line of succession in the same family, albeit with “a small deviation”, as he calls it, adding the requirement that future sovereigns be faithful to the Anglican religion, Parliament has greater autonomy and judges are independent of the king, thus achieving greater stability in English society.

Later on, referring to the period of revolutionary instability, Burke again insists on the wisdom shown by the English, contrasting it with the attitude of the French people during the French Revolution:

“(…) when England found itself without a king (….) the nation had lost the bond of union **of** their ancient edifice: they did not, however, dissolve the whole fabric. On the contrary, in both cases they regenerated the deficient part of the old Constitution through the parts which were not impaired. They kept these old parts exactly as they were, that the part recovered might be suited to them. They acted by the ancient organized states in the shape of their old organization, and not by the organic *moleculae* of a disbanded people”².

In Burke's mind, States should be reformed “with the same care with which you would treat the wounds of an elderly father,” a thought which approximates him to David Hume's ideas. In fact, Hume states, in *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth*, that one should not act in relation to governments in the same way as one acts in relation to other human inventions, in which a device can be replaced by another, more modern and efficient, even when one is not sure of its success. With governments the opposite should be done, because an already established government has an enormous advantage by the simple fact that it is established;

for men do not obey reason, but authority, and are more inclined to recognize authority in what is ancient.

Burke favors reforms and considers them necessary to avoid ruptures, which would compromise continuity between generations. In the passing on of baton from one generation to the next each step lightens the next, so that one walks from light into light. If, due to pride, this transmission of knowledge between generations is made impossible, humanity is no better than “the flies of a summer”, I quote:

“By this unprincipled facility of changing the state as often and as much and in as many ways as there are floating fancies or fashions, the whole chain and continuity of the commonwealth would be broken; no one generation could link with the other; men would become little better than the flies of a summer”.³

This same wise attitude guarantees the preservation of the intergenerational contract that Burke argues for, making him abhor the spirit of the French Revolution, where, by abstract and centralized design, not confirmed by practice, the revolutionaries reject the reforming of institutions and choose instead to tear them down, clearing the ground for a new building.

Here, again, we find great similarity with David Hume, who argues that each generation must take advantage of the wisdom accumulated by its ancestors, for to do otherwise is to put to waste all the work done before and to lose what has been learned. If we insist on destroying our heritage, the advantages of looking ahead 'on the shoulders of giants' is lost. Continuity is possible only if successive generations follow the Constitution previously established by their ancestors, I quote David Hume:

“Did one generation of men go off the stage at once, and another succeed, as is the case with silk-worms and butterflies, the new race, if they had sense enough to choose their government, which surely is never the case with men, might voluntarily, and by general consent, establish their own form of civil polity, without any regard to the laws or precedents, which prevailed among their ancestors. But as human society is in perpetual flux, one man every hour going out of the world, another coming into it, it is necessary, in order to preserve stability in government, that the new brood should conform themselves to the established constitution, and nearly follow the path which their fathers, treading in the footsteps of theirs, had marked out to them”.⁴

The profound similarity between Burke and David Hume on the conservative approach to the preservation of the inheritance continues on the views of both thinkers about state reform.

Burke's defense of the stability of the contract and the necessary caution when reforming the State cannot be interpreted as blind fidelity to a certain status quo, since he also declares that “A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation”.⁵ But

changes carefully planned are those that best adapt to “the design of the building”, preserving the received legacy, and these are made through reformation, and not the demolition of the entire structure of the State.

This does not mean that societies can crystallize into whatever form is good, and maintain institutions just because they were once useful, for institutions that have lost their meaning and purpose should not be kept in existence: “(...) when the reason of old establishments is gone, it is absurd to preserve nothing but the burden of them”⁶. Therefore, Burke’s conservatism, because it is so, must be perpetually reforming and renewing itself.

Change is necessary, to adapt reality to new circumstances, but there is a world of difference between revolutionary change and reform, and that is precisely what Burke highlights in his view of the Revolution of 1688: it preserved what was worth preserving, changing only what needed to be changed. Revolutions, particularly in the sense emphasized by the French Revolution, alter the substance of things and destroy what good may still exist in institutions, as they tend to consider existing structures essentially bad. For Burke, evil is accidental and good essential in an organization that has served its purpose for several generations with positive results, adequately promoting the prosperity of a society. As such, reform addresses the problem and eliminates only what is inadequate to the new circumstances, I quote:

“(…) that is a marked distinction between change and reformation. The former alters the substance of the objects themselves (...) gets rid of all their essential good as well as of the accidental evil annexed to them(...) Reform is not a change in the substance (...) but a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained of (...). *‘to innovate is not to reform’*”⁷.

This is again in line with David Hume, who also argues for the need to carry out “peaceful innovations”, which must necessarily happen in all human institutions; there is a happy circumstance when changes are aligned in the right way, namely on the side of reason, liberty, and justice, I quote David Hume:

“(…)violent innovations no individual is entitled to make: they are even dangerous to be attempted by the legislature: more ill than good is ever to be expected from them”⁸.

Both authors recognize the need for these peaceful adaptations, judging them of crucial importance to avoid the great tensions that lead to Revolutions, which both reject.

The preservation of institutions is fundamental to guarantee political intervention in harmony with the inherited traditions, but alert to the circumstances of each time.

It is this kind of wise action, attentive to political circumstances and inspired by tradition, be it political and institutional or theoretical, already present in the authors of the Scottish Enlightenment such as David Hume, that Burke brilliantly contrasts with the radical and revolutionary spirit of the French Revolution.

Towards the end of his *Reflections*, Burke describes how he sailed under various circumstances and different winds, in order to preserve his primitive and honorable course:

“(…) [F]rom one who wishes to preserve consistency, but who would preserve consistency by varying his means to secure the unity of his end, and, when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails may be endangered by overloading it upon one side, is desirous of carrying the small weight of his reasons to that which may preserve its equipoise”⁹.

Burkean principles of governance, used to fight both revolutionary outbursts and national authoritarianism, were viewed by some as conservative, by others as liberal, but they were just British principles of moderation and wisdom, also promoted by other philosophers of the same period, namely David Hume.

¹ Substance of The Speech in The debate on The Army Estimates in The House Of Commons, On Tuesday, February 9, 1790, Comprehending a Discussion of The Present Situation of Affairs in France. *Works*, III, p. 226.

² Burke (1865), *RRF*, *Works*, III, p. 259.

³ Burke (1865), *RRF*, *Works*, III, p. 357.

⁴ David Hume (1964), “Of the Original Contract”, *Philosophical Works, Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Vol. III, p. 452.

⁵ Burke (1865), *RRF*, *Works*, III, p. 259.

⁶ Burke (1865), *SER*, *Works*, II, p. 305.

⁷ Burke (1866), “Letter to a Noble Lord”, *Works*, V, pp. 186-7.

⁸ David Hume (1964), “Of the Original Contract”, *Philosophical Works, Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, Vol. III, p. 452.

⁹ Burke (1865), *RRF*, *Works* III, p. 563.