
Edmund Burke's Political Economy

Ian Crowe

Belmont Abbey College

Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke's Political Economy by Gregory M. Collins. *New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 578 pp. \$49.99 cloth.*

The best works of scholarship may be said not only to change perspectives on familiar subjects but also to render familiar subjects unfamiliar by altering the questions asked about them. The recent cornucopia of weighty studies on Edmund Burke has made the former task daunting, with each of those publications offering something unexpected or more textured in our appreciation of Burke and his thought. The latter task is difficult, too, but for different reasons: the imperative toward relevance and the simplified lineage of terms that accompanies it; and a stubborn tendency to imprison a thinker in their later, or “mature”

IAN CROWE is Associate Professor of History at Belmont Abbey College, a Senior Fellow of the Russell Kirk Center, and executive editor of the journal *Studies in Burke and His Time*.

works. Those are the “best” studies, then, that require us to let go of much more than a familiar perspective: they also demand that we part with a familiar vocabulary of interrogation and of assessment.

In studies over the past few decades, scholars have elevated Burke's earlier publications such as the *Philosophical Enquiry* (1757) and, to a lesser extent, the *Vindication of Natural Society* (1756) to challenge the predominance of the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) as the touchstone of Burke's thought, while the “postcolonial” turn in the academy has served to shine fresh light on the coherence of Burke's approach to India, Ireland, and the Caribbean colonies of the British Empire, and has reopened the question of his approach to the slave

trade within his imperial mindset. Old polarities have crumbled, and a more complex Burke has emerged from the pens of scholars, one who speaks to the present more obliquely and who compels us, therefore, to consider whether we should not find fresh ways of interrogating and absorbing his legacy. Should we, for instance, still be asking “Was Burke consistent?” Or should we rather be investigating how he charted and signified his own consistency? Not “Whose philosophical or political ideas resemble his own?” but “What kind of mindset did he attempt to imitate?”

How, then, in over five hundred pages of thoroughly referenced and cross-referenced material, does Gregory M. Collins’ *Commerce and Manners in Edmund Burke’s Political Economy* measure up to that exacting “best”? Without doubt, Collins succeeds in constructing a robust analysis of Burke’s political economy that presents us simultaneously with a familiar and an unfamiliar portrait of its subject. That is a tremendous achievement in itself, given impetus, certainly, by the focus upon a relatively neglected aspect of Burke’s thought, but Collins’ book is most remarkable for its scope and the methodology employed. The work is structured intelligibly through key facets of Burke’s political economy and eschews all but the broadest chronological or biographical framework. There is a short biographical survey at the beginning of the study that appropriately, and while paying due attention to the danger of anach-

ronism, reconstructs Burke’s interest in the science of economics and his understanding of the requirements and application of political economy for the practicing politician. The five “parts” that follow deal, broadly, each with one of those key facets: the internal market; government fiscal policy and “economic reform”; overseas commerce; the East India Company and India; and the economic lessons of the French Revolution. They are bookended, as it were, by two products of Burke’s final decade, the *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* (1795) and the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), with the relationship of commerce and manners in Burke’s thought explored through comparative study of an absorbing variety of primary texts, notes, and communications from the full span of Burke’s career.

While there are evident dangers putting such weight upon a posthumously published work, *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, that was penned in the last years of its author’s life and in exceptionally fraught circumstances, the arrangement of this study turns out to be one of its considerable strengths: treated as a fresh touchstone, rather than a summation, of Burke’s approach to political economy, the *Thoughts and Details* illuminates and is illuminated by juxtaposition with less well-known texts and episodes in Burke’s parliamentary career, such as his involvement with the drafting of the Free Port Act of 1766 and with the *Ninth Report of Select Committee on Indian affairs* (1783), a method con-

tinued, *mutatis mutandis*, throughout the book. Collins argues his case painstakingly, cumulatively (with plenty of authorial exhortations to “Remember . . .,” “Listen . . .,” “Notice . . .,” and “Recall . . .”), with the result that familiar passages take on a fresh hue in unusual combinations, through a kind of tapestry of associations. Consider, by way of illustration, his striking treatment of Burke’s lengthy *Observations on a Late State of the Nation* (1769) and the *Third Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796) on the balance of trade theory and the relationship of war to commercial prosperity in Burke’s thought (513-16).

By the end of this book, Collins has exhibited to us a figure familiar for his skill in rhetoric and his culturally embedded politics, but equally accomplished with abstractions drawn from substantial tables of statistics. That famous “moral imagination” has been enhanced by a scientific imagination equal, at least, to foretelling Friedrich Hayek’s unintended consequences and more dexterous than Adam Smith’s invisible hand. We are presented, for example, with an extraordinary discernment (for his time) concerning the intersection of the processes of imperial colonization, wealth creation, and warfare, that could confound Dr. Johnson (whether he cared to acknowledge the fact or not), signified a complex understanding of the phenomenon of empire (quite beyond the capacity, it seems, of many of our contemporary intellectuals) and still has the penetration to challenge the macroeconomic systems

of modern capitalist and anti-capitalist thought. In confecting for us a sense of this powerful imagination, with its capacity to harmonize the worlds of commerce and manners, or to make compatible the insights of economics with the wisdom of statecraft, Collins rightly highlights a number of striking Burkean insights, from the apprehension that the value of labor lies in the consumer rather than the producer, and his accompanying respect for the “unarticulated knowledge transmitted by [much-maligned] middlemen—prerational, intuitive, and difficult to capture in words” (63), to a robust but supple defense of the inviolability of private property that, in extending to movable kinds of property beyond the great landed estates familiar from the pages of the *Reflections*, also exposed the real threat of speculative wealth, such as the *assignat*—“the financial avatar of the Revolution’s metaphysics” in Collins’ evocative words (485). Such points, Collins shows, inform Burke’s flexible conception of empire, combining the restless impulse toward migration and expansion with a fundamental, social drive to liberty of exchange that conjures a kind of imperial osmosis, a defense of empire as a natural phenomenon accountable to the laws of morality. One is persuaded forcefully here by the flow of Collins’ argument that the Free Port Act, upon which formerly obscure topic he places valuable emphasis, was more important in defining Burke’s imperial mindset than either the Declaratory

Act or the repeal of the Stamp Act, which took place in the same year. To Burke, the success of English colonial expansion was distinctive as an imperial project, as we see argued in the *Account of the European Settlements*, since, in Collins' words, it "blended [the Englishman's] instinct for business with a sober disposition and skill in agriculture, all moved by a knack for economy of energy and a love of liberty" (233). At the same time, this reading of British imperial power was a double-edged sword: in grounding that power in "love of liberty and genius for industry" (245) Burke forged the moral and ethical tools by which he later critically circumscribed British policy to the American colonies in the 1760s and 1770s and exposed systematically the failings of the East India Company's rule in India as a sort of national apostasy *avant la lettre*.

Finally, Collins rightly emphasizes time and again how Burke's political economy displays a rejection of zero-sum reasoning: "Because Burke did not perceive foreign trade to produce zero-sum effects," we are told, "an increase in affluence for the Americans promised an increase in affluence for the British" (297). Concerning the so-called "Burke Problem" and the "Burke-Smith Problem" through which the question of the relationship between commerce and manners has been articulated to date, such a key feature of Burke's thought clearly offers the path to a solution, since it militates against the "modern binary framework of either 'free trade' or 'mercantilism.'" But

there is also evident here a connection with Burke's broader method of thinking beyond the "either ... or" to the "both . . . and" that provides a powerful antidote to coupling Burke's name to any modern-day ideology.

It is, essentially, Burke's ability to see the "both ... and" in a situation that enables Collins to show us how to reconcile the imputed fissure between commerce and manners. "If markets were tempered by land and virtue," he explains, "they could be reconciled with existing institutions to promote prosperity without poisoning the character of civil society" (522). That statement also covers in large degree Collins' final question—that of Burke's relevance today, where the relationship between the liberty of global commerce and the virtues of community are a pressing concern underpinning the tension between elites and populists. Above all, though, Collins' book is further confirmation that, in Edmund Burke, we are repeatedly brought into an encounter with a figure of extraordinary talent—a figure who appears in these pages as familiarly unfamiliar.

In the process of resolving his questions on Burke's political economy, Collins certainly builds richly and sturdily upon terrain explored earlier, but in more limited fashion, by scholars such as Gertrude Hoffmann and Francis Canavan. Of equal interest, his researches largely substantiate and valuably expand upon insights made by Norman Barry in an excellent, short (and sadly neglected) piece entitled "The Po-

litical Economy of Edmund Burke," which appeared in a collection of essays marking the bicentennial of Burke's death in 1997. At the same time, the questions that have shaped this study are not, themselves, new. So, where might Collins' own impressive labors invite us to go further?

"From his perspective," Collins writes, summarizing a particular feature of Burke's political economy, "the foundations of civil order and civil progress were animated by powers that transcended the laws of supply and demand." Those powers, Collins continues, pointed to "a unique principle of cause and effect distinct from the political thought of other proponents of commercial liberty in the Enlightenment period ... Ancient virtue furnished the civil environment necessary for commercial virtue to blossom" (503). "Ancient virtue"! With this twitch upon the thread Collins is enabled to open up the science of political economy to the familiar concept of a "moral imagination," returning his audience by a fresh route to the question of Burke's genius and intellectual consistency in a way that, to my mind, impels us to reformulate the original question. What, we might ask now, was the source of those principles that instilled in him the conviction of his own consistency and integrity? And how did those principles contribute to the structuring of his understanding of political economy such that he could deploy it, at least in his own mind, with rhetorical and intellectual coherence in matters

both of commerce and manners? In a nutshell, what was the *acer spiritus ac vis* that underpinned Burke's political economy?

In the early pages of this book, Collins draws our attention to an apparent contradiction between Burke's pride in his achievements as a political economist (expressed in his *Letter to a Noble Lord*, in 1796), and his famous disparagement of "oeconomists and calculators" in the *Reflections*, penned just a few years earlier. Collins indicates that the equation could be balanced, as it were, by adding "Providence" to one side: "Even though Burke suggests that a complex market phenomenon could not be attributed to single human causes, he does connect the laws of supply and demand to the natural order of Providence" (49). Is the introduction of that slippery "P" word useful in this context? Put another way, does it help us determine how Burke intended the use of that word—as the veil marking the point where patterns of understanding reach the limit of human calculation and pass into the realm of conjecture, or, alternatively, as a signifier of Burke's investment in a direct link between the laws of commerce and economy on the one hand and the moral dictates of *lex naturae* on the other? Collins' extensive analysis of Burke's political economy in this book appears to steer us toward the latter, with its reference to a "*natural order of Providence*" (my italics); but, ultimately, Collins buries the matter somewhat awkwardly in his concluding list of Burke's principles

of political economy: “a providential force—Burke’s ‘benign and wise disposer of all things’—transforms individual self-interest into collective advantage” (528). How much further might we pursue the point with Collins’ own evidence?

I should like to complete this review by laying out just one such possible path. It begins in a cluster of letters Burke addressed to the *Public Advertiser* in or around 1768. These were edited by Paul Langford in the second volume of *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, and Collins draws from some of them in his discussion of Burke’s approach to private property rights and the *Nullum Tempus* affair of 1768, when the Rockingham Whigs joined in a parliamentary attempt to set a limit to the period of years in which the Crown could reassert its legal right to property (the principle of *nullum tempus occurrit regi* laying down no limit on such royal prerogative, even against prescriptive usage or ownership). Not all the letters in this collection were eventually published, and, taken as a group, they address a range of issues of imperial trade and commerce in the 1760s, including the Navigation Acts and taxation policy in relation to the American colonies. As vehicles of Rockingham party propaganda, though, they have something more than aspects of economic policy in common. In particular, in their criticism of government policy (whether of Grenville before 1765 or of Chatham’s administration in 1768), they may be said to engage repeatedly with the

virtue of prudence, by which Burke understands foresight, or the degree of restraint or boldness required by circumstances to progress toward a worthy goal—that is, the safety or ultimate flourishing of the commonwealth. The prudent politician (or political economist) possesses the wisdom to know that what is truly useful in any situation is what is honorable as being aimed squarely at the common good. That could mean, in relation to Grenville, the need to accommodate the “Temper and Opinions” of the people of the colonies within any “Scheme of a general Taxation”—a point revisited later when Collins quotes the sublime passage in the *Speech on Conciliation* (1775) where Burke argues that, as Britain grew to become an importer of grain, she would have experienced famine if the American colonies, “this child of your old age, with a true filial piety, with a Roman charity, had not put the full breast of its youthful exuberance to the mouth of its exhausted parent” (285). Or, in the *Nullum Tempus* affair, prudence would involve upholding “a sacred regard ... to property of whatever nature so ever, or in whatever hands it may be found” against the alluring argument of Chatham’s government that maintaining the Crown’s immemorial property rights would smooth the enclosure of waste lands for the public benefit. Decades later, in the *First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, while expounding a causal connection between “that great but ambiguous principle” public credit and the emerging imperial pre-eminence of

the British nation, Burke will reiterate the underlying principle that, “[C]ommonwealths are not physical but moral essences.” That such is providentially the case means that, to the prudent statesman, the State and empire are moral incorporations beyond their own historical or rational constitution—they are, to *all* intents and purposes, both natural and artificial. The paradox here lies behind Burke’s response to the legal principle of *Nullum Tempus* and to the Navigation Acts, and the evidence of Collins’ book suggests, excitingly, that it underpins consistently Burke’s attempts to reconcile the laws of commerce with the obligations of charity and chivalry through to the end of his life, including in the urgency of his assaults on a “Regicide Peace.” While there are passages in *Commerce and Manners* where Collins appears to attempt to sunder that which here appears fully integrated—at one point, for example, he writes of Burke marrying his “embrace of market freedom” with his “instinct for prudence” (366)—he hits the nail on the head in stating, in relation to the American colonies, that Burke’s “interpretation of the ‘constitution of the British Empire’ as opposed to the British constitution, held a nuanced position on the imperial authority to tax” (280).

It is hard to meditate on this constellation of providence, prudence, empire, and property without calling to mind the influence of Cicero on eighteenth-century politics in England, and, while Cicero is absent from the index here, the Ro-

man’s own world of imperium was propounded vividly and imaginatively in a diverse cluster of mid-eighteenth-century publications. It is intriguing to follow such intimations relating to imperial expansion, and interacting patterns of political organization and social cohesion, through the prism of economics and commerce in Collins’ own researches. We are, of course, already *familiar* with Burke’s Ciceronian self-identification as a *novus homo* and in the rhetorical posture that he adopted in the protracted impeachment of Warren Hastings, and Peter Stanlis expanded our sense of Cicero’s influence on Burke some decades ago, in his seminal study on *Edmund Burke and the Natural Law*. Perhaps most incisively (though also, unfortunately, briefly) Russell Kirk limned Cicero as “one of Burke’s exemplars,” coupling the two statesmen in an act of historical imagination as well as through a lineage of ideas. We may at the same time be aware that Burke’s contemporaries were divided as to the depth of his debt to Cicero; but, just as this examination of political economy begs a fresh exploration of providence and prudence in Burke’s vocabulary, so the materials Collins has excavated and sorted might offer rich material for a fresh investigation into how far *imitation* of Cicero became a consistent aspect of Burke’s reimagining of the Patriot legacy that he inherited and imbibed from his early days writing for Robert Dodsley under the sign of “Tully’s Head.” Collins, after all, provides a timely reminder in the

final pages of this book that “Burke was a man of letters before he was a political economist” (533), and such an analytical shift, besides moving us beyond the stubborn, sclerotic identification of eighteenth-century Patriotism with Bolingbroke or “proto-nationalism,” would require us, at a deeper level, to reconsider what was meant or intended by the art of *imitation* in Burke’s age. The Anglican bishop Richard Hurd, for example, in a publication of 1757, felt moved to warn against the “studious affectation of originality” by reminding his audience that “[t]he superiority of Homer and Shakespear [sic] to other poets doth not lie in their discovery of *new sentiments or images*, but in the forcible man-

ner, in which their sublime genius taught them to convey and impress *old ones*.” Imitation, as Hurd and many others saw it then, was a gift of imagination much closer to invention—and a sense of invention rather further from innovation—than such terms are generally understood nowadays.

If Gregory Collins arrives at conclusions in *Commerce and Manners* that do not deliberately take us to such unfamiliar places, the material he has arranged is at our fingertips, and the questions he appears emphatically to have resolved, provide us with a perfect opportunity to set out and do so. He deserves our abundant gratitude for this service.