Burke on the Couch


Psycho-history has finally laid siege to Edmund Burke. That the practitioners of Clio's newest fad should take aim at Burke is not surprising. Erik Erikson had already demonstrated to their satisfaction that a supernatural view of life—specifically, Luther's aweful vision of God—was chiefly a consequence of Luther's excremental difficulties. With the religious ideas of mankind thus reduced to neuroses that an anachronistic dose of Haley's M-O might have forestalled, the next logical targets for the Freud-inspired demythologizers were the secular ideas men live by. Edmund Burke is universally acknowledged as a powerful advocate for conservatism. It was thus attractive to psycho-historical reductionism, in its assault on the autonomy of the ideational, to explain how Burke's famous vision of order under attack and his prescription for preserving that order were only manifestations of his oedipal difficulties. Isaac Kramnick has produced the explanation. And, I must quickly add, as an example of this fashionable genre of historical literature it is not bad. Kramnick is usually cautious in his psycho-historical pronouncements and generally thoughtful in his examination of Burke's sexuality. In the final analysis therefore the book might have been far worse. But it remains doubly burdened: it is misconceived because psycho-history is itself wrong-headed, and it is misdirected because Kramnick chooses to write about the great expositor of conservatism without understanding what conservatism is.

The following summary of Kramnick's interpretation of Burke will allow the uninstructed reader to savor how psycho-history operates. (For those already initiated into such arcana no guidance is needed: they realize that the array of explanatory devices available to psycho-historians is limited, and they have learned to predict with general success what textual exegesis controlled by such devices will reveal.) Kramnick places Burke in an age of transition. The old régime, in which status is a consequence of ascription, is yielding to the modern age, in which status is a product of achievement. Burke embodies this transition. He simultaneously loves and hates the old order, and in his life and words he alternates between the subservience of the man who knows his place and the pushiness of the novus homo. This ambivalence Kramnick finds to be rooted in Burke's psychic structure. That structure comprehends a private ambivalence between masculinity and femininity, which itself is a consequence of the absence during the crucial childhood years of Burke's father. With unwonted directness Kramnick summarily states that "Burke's life was a set of variations on oedipal themes." Those readers who desire further detail about Burke's hang-ups are urged to peruse the book. All that needs to be established here is that Kramnick, in the richest tradition of psycho-history, accounts for the public man by reducing him to the private man. The wide stage of public affairs thus becomes only an arena for the playing out of private psychic impulses.

Even when regarded as traditional history this study has flaws. There is first of all the familiar one of the straw man. Kramnick begins with the de rigueur claim that earlier writers have misinterpreted the subject he now treats. Without such a claim a writer has no sound justification for treading upon oft-trodden ground. But the claim in this instance is largely false and certainly misleading. Kramnick is scarcely the first to have seen that Burke often criticized the aristocracy. He is scarcely the first to recognize that Burke's attitude toward status was ambivalent. In fact, if novelty be sought in this
study, it can be found only in Kramnick’s well-argued demonstration of Burke’s difficulties at establishing a sexual identity. For this insight we may be grateful. But if Kramnick thinks that he is broadly correcting a prevailing and simplistic vision of Burke, he reveals less about the Burke bibliography than about himself.

A second flaw is Kramnick’s clumsy handling of the natural law problem. He notes that many American scholars have accepted Peter Stanlis’ view that Burke adhered to a metaphysic grounded in natural law. He dissociates himself from that view, asserting that, textually, it is “based upon the meager evidence of Burke’s Indian speeches.” But he later draws upon two non-Indian writings, the *Vindication of Natural Society* and the *Tracts Relative to the Laws Against Popery in Ireland*, to extract quotations that express Burke’s faith in the dominion of natural law. Either Kramnick has not thought carefully about this matter or he has an imperfect notion of what natural law philosophers hold.

More fundamentally damaging to the study is Kramnick’s resort to the tools of psycho-history. It is a method of analysis and mode of explanation that departs radically from the nominalism and empiricism that traditionally distinguish history as a field of humanistic study. Psychohistorians are ready to embrace holistic theories of psychological development even when psychologists themselves are divided into a variety of diverse camps. And they are then prepared to let these highly speculative theories serve as *a priori* grounds for “reinterpreting” old evidence or, far worse, for postulating events for which there is no evidence. Such theories thus become mechanisms of distortion, with the power of speaking even where the evidence is silent.

Examples must suffice to show how Edmund Burke fares at Kramnick’s hands. Kramnick asserts that Burke’s need for his father’s love was uncommonly deep. His first bit of evidence is the fact that Burke, in bestowing the name Richard upon his son, chose the name borne by his father. Kramnick fails to include in this discussion the deflating fact that Richard was also the name of Edmund’s brother and apparently a common name for males of the Burke family. The second bit of evidence is a quotation from one of Burke’s letters in which the writer, having received a gift of £100 from his father through an intermediary, expresses the view that, though the money was useful, the assurance of his father’s love was more important to him. It is upon such conventional, even formulaic pronouncements that Kramnick builds his oedipal edifice. Kramnick also believes that Burke was wont to employ phallic imagery. As evidence Kramnick notes that Burke, when warning the House of Commons of the French threat in the 1790’s, once held a dagger aloft. Only a Freudian could confidently see phallic imagery in that action—indeed, only a Freudian who had forgotten the master’s remark about cigars.

Missing throughout much of the study is an awareness of the common practices of the era. Kramnick sees in Burke’s ties with William Hamilton and Lord Rockingham a longing for a dependent relationship with an older male. But how else was an unconnected young man to rise in a political world that took patronage as its matrix? Kramnick chooses to view Burke’s literary imagery as symptomatic of a preoccupation with the contrast between masculinity and femininity. But since the imagery was part of the intellectual *lingua franca* of the day—borrowed from the Bible, from Cicero, from Swift and Pope—why ascribe it to some idiosyncratic trait in Burke’s psyche? The difficulty in Kramnick’s method is clear. He sees as peculiar to Burke certain types of behavior which were common to many. And because they were common to many, they cannot be used to argue that the private controls the public.

Kramnick makes his greatest leap of
psycho-historical faith when assaying the so-called “missing years” of Burke’s life—the period from 1750 to 1756, for which surviving evidence is painfully scant. Paucity of documentation usually imposes an attitude of considerable caution upon historians. In Kramnick’s case it liberates the imagination. On the basis chiefly of a poem that Burke drafted in these years Kramnick states that he underwent an Eriksonian identity crisis. Three dilemmas defined the crisis: the needs to resolve status aspirations, to make a career choice, and to orient himself sexually. Burke ended the moratorium by acting upon certain options while neglecting others, but he never totally committed himself to one set of alternatives and remained thereafter characterized by fundamental ambivalences. The “missing years” thus become the fulcrum of Burke’s life. All of this analysis seems rather extravagant and perhaps irresponsible. It is extravagant because, however interesting a few poetic musings might be, they cannot compensate for the kind of epistolary and literary evidence we have for the other years of Burke’s post-childhood life. It borders on the irresponsible because it asks us to elevate the period about which we know the least into the period that means the most.

Kramnick might reply to these criticisms with the observation that all one can demand of a scholar is that she or he choose explanatory models which are consistent with the facts. In his preface he acknowledges that his interpretation is somewhat problematic. The difficulty with such a defense, in this instance at least, is that Kramnick has adopted an exceedingly malleable model. By choosing to give Burke’s psyche an antinomic structure, Kramnick creates a model for which all categorically relevant evidence may be construed as confirmatory. Because Burke’s psyche incorporates opposites, any germane action or expression, whatever its character, attests to the legitimacy of the model: if it doesn’t validate one pole of the ambivalence, it validates the other. The model can thus “account for” any action or expression of Burke’s. But a model that explains all conceivable categorically relevant phenomena really explains none. It is a model that cannot be empirically disconfirmed. We are thus led to this conclusion: Kramnick has not only turned to a dubious approach in his effort to understand Burke, he has supported that approach with a peculiarly hollow theory.

The Burke who emerges from Kramnick’s study is unquestionably, as the author states, an interesting figure. But he is also a figure whose ideas no longer command attention. By depicting Burkean conservatism as a product of the Burkean psychic economy Kramnick trivializes it. Equally depressing, he also distorts it. Three quotations must suffice to let the reader decide how fairly Kramnick has understood what he has sought to explain.

First there is his hint that Burke’s oedipal difficulties helped make him a conservative, “for as a political theory his conservatism offers a profound legitimization of repression.” Then there is the suggestion that Burke, whatever he and we may think he was doing, was not engaged in rational political theorizing, since he shares “the eternal longing of the conservative for the elimination of rational thought from politics.” Finally there is the assertion—explaining what replaces rational thought in the conservative’s political perspective—that “at the heart of conservatism is rage.”

The context of the present discussion tempts me to suggest that we could best account for this farrago of blinkered distortions by subjecting Kramnick to Eriksonian analysis. But since the whole essay is predicated on the assumption that thought is autonomous and free, I will conclude with a different observation. It is peculiar that a man who accuses conservatives of hostility to ideas in politics should embrace a view that reduces political ideas to the epiphenomenal trappings of psychic strategies. That Burke had his personal diffi-
culties we need not doubt. Most of us do. But to believe that Burke’s view of politics and society—or Plato’s, or Aquinas’, or Marx’s, for that matter—is best seen as a product of such difficulties is to accept a psychological superstition that is at once dehumanizing, inconsistent, and silly. Burke will survive the couch.

Reviewed by REED BROWNING

A Factious Diplomat

Prince Lichnowsky and the Great War,
by Harry F. Young, Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1977. 281 pp. $11.00.

The author, Harry F. Young, is a historian for the U.S. Department of State. His book is a very detailed account of the life and career of Imperial Germany’s last ambassador to London, Prince Karl Max Lichnowsky. It is an exhaustive scholarly study based on a variety of sources which reveal the wide reading and extensive research of the author. In fact, he seems to have left no stone unturned in ferreting out every reference to his subject and tracking down every bit of evidence, illuminating it from official unpublished documents, letters and private personal papers in German, Austrian, and British archives, through published collections of primary documents, memoirs, and secondary works, to the remnants of the prince’s archives in Prague, the prince’s own writings, and information from his children, the late Prince Wilhelm, Count Michael, and Countess Leonore Lichnowsky, to whom the author is especially indebted.

The book is furthermore an account of the family heritage as well as of the immediate family to the present, and because of the prince’s relationship to the history of the times and his connections with the events leading to the Great War of 1914-1918 and with the debate thereafter on its causes, the book is also a contribution to the study of World War I as well as to German history of the Wilhelminian and Weimar periods.

In the first chapter the author takes us from the birth of the future ambassador on 8 March 1860 to his entrance into the German foreign service in 1883. Mr. Young describes the boy’s parents, his childhood, his youth, his education, his character and personality, his graduation from a classical gymnasium in Dresden in 1880 at the age of twenty, his brief military service in a cavalry guards regiment soon after, and his being commandeered to the Foreign Ministry. Included in this opening chapter is a brief history of this family of the ancient landed nobility of Upper Silesia, revealing the splendid inheritance of aristocratic distinctions and vast estates accumulated since the sixteenth century, its manifold services and accomplishments throughout the centuries in Austria and Prussia, the activity and views of his father, the fifth Prince Lichnowsky, in the Prussian-German developments under Bismarck, and the nature and location of the Lichnowsky estates of Kreuzenort, Kuchelnau, and Grätz, in that border region which blended “industry and agriculture, Slav and German, Austria and Prussia.”

In the second chapter the author describes the social life, the intellectual development, and the diplomatic career of the young Price Karl Max from his first probationary assignment for a year as attaché at the German embassy in London to his resignation from the service in 1911, having lost hope of receiving an ambassadorship. Some of the important developments in this chapter may be cited here. From 1892 to 1895 he was second secretary at the German embassy in Vienna, then promoted to counsellor. On leave from January to July 1899 he took a trip around the world. In December 1899 he was reassigned to the

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